

SIGMA TAU DELTA JOURNALS
INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH HONOR SOCIETY

SIGMA TAU DELTA
RECTANGLE

Journal of Creative Writing

VOLUME 95, 2020



SIGMA TAU DELTA
REVIEW
Journal of Critical Writing

VOLUME 17, 2020

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2019–20 WRITING AWARDS
FOR SIGMA TAU DELTA REVIEW
AND SIGMA TAU DELTA RECTANGLE

Frederic Fadner Critical Essay Award

Ashley Walker: “It Drives Me Crazy: Childhood and
Madness in J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*”

Eleanor B. North Poetry Award

Sydney Roslin: “Evolution”

E. Nelson James Poetry Award

Ryan Drendel: “I will not kick my brother in the head.”

Herbert Hughes Short Story Award

James Braun: “Clay”

Elizabeth Holtze Creative Non-Fiction Award

Hannah Rogers: “After the Stroke: Feeling for Her”

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SIGMA
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RECTANGLE

POETRY

Evolution

Sydney Roslin

The air wasn't safe to breathe,
so I decided to stop breathing.

It took time. I've been breathing
my entire life, so I trained myself
to ignore my chest screaming
in protest until it stopped burning.
Until one day it forgot to care.

You can't yawn without breathing,
which I discovered when I started
falling asleep in broad daylight.
I guess my brain liked the extra air,
but the sleeping wasn't too bad.
Waking up was harder, pulling
myself back from the pitch-black
tar sticking to my consciousness,
hovering at the edges of my vision.

The government found out
and sent me to NASA to talk

to astronauts and scientists
and bigwigs with deep suit pockets,
but I couldn't speak. My vocal cords
had grown stiff and slow and my lips
had fused together, so I stood mute
as they checked my lack of pulse,
took x-rays and scans and marveled
at my stillness.

They said, choking on the smog
that had settled into the earth,
that I am what humanity could be.

They said I am our future.

I will not kick my brother in the head.

Ryan Drendel

A love poem for the grown man who threw an empty fifth of Fireball at me from his Chevy as I biked down Newman Road at nine in the morning.

I know I look like I don't know anything
about anything. Too young to have had to commute
the morning after lighting your loved ones to death.
To have ever noticed the glass that seared them
staring back, aching and empty in the passenger seat,
the same second you turned the ignition. I know

I looked pretentious riding my fixie next to traffic,
occupying the right half of the shoulder, making you
feel older and wonder whether you should shift lanes
to allow me some safe space. I saw you react
to wonder with violence. Rolling the passenger window
down, you decided I was just another libtard judging
your MAGA bumper sticker and godawful, stenciled flames.

I know I look furious now that I've found you stuck in
your ugly pickup, begging the light above you to flick green.

Your chaser has pedaled here at breakneck speed to tell you:
Roll that window back down. Face me like a real man.

I want to tell you why I love my old man.
My dad will happily rant with you on politics,
ask you where you got your hot paint job done.
He'll wonder if flames would look good
on a '34 Ford Tudor, and whether you'd
know someone who can sell him the past.

I can't imagine kicking my best friend in the notch
of the back of his skull for snatching a tennis ball
from me—but I know that I did this. My dad made me
remember it one-thousand times. *I will not react.*
I will not react. He made me write, *I will not react,*
hoping he might raise me a new man.

I say *It's like Mexico's Grand Canyon* when we see it

Ryan Drendel

but Hernán and I aren't looking while taking selfies
with the birds of el Cañón del Sumidero. We record them
flaring into their belvedere-nests below. We wonder if birds
ever feel transcendental, whether they also imagine the canyon
to be immaculate. I gawk down the green shelf, gaping
at how roots can cling into limestone set so steep.
(When it still lived here, the Harpy Eagle saw everything
as it was. It could fly clutching prey half its weight, flee faster
than eighty kilometers an hour.) Hernán captures a panorama.
He grins. *The Grand Cañon was Mexico's Grand Canyon.*
I drop my head to squint at what must be a motorboat.
The speck soars upriver, cuts the water clean, leaves a V.

I cannot hear our tour guide narrate over the motor,
but I can follow his finger, pointing at the spider monkey
families who hide up the green shelf. He delivers us to a
famous pink alcove where man has glued a cast figurine
of the Virgin Mother. Soon after, the guide must silence
his engine. We lower our apertures as the boat stalls into
an island of disposed water bottles and sealed garbage
can liners. We only see the things that can float.

(My iPhone died during the drive down to the dock; now I stare.) My throat chokes. A Snowy Egret is walking up the current with us, like it's standing on solid earth. I look at its murky ankles, picture the plastic oar bobbing underfoot. I make myself look before I ask Hernán to borrow his camera.

Prayer book 9.4.17

Isabella Higgins

[How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.]

You sit in nostalgic mahogany pews, where the finish
clings to your bare legs, in skirts that are so tight they nearly drag
you to your knees. Cherry lipped, and cheeks full
of stained-glass words that have begun
to color you red you think, perhaps it's time to part
your lips and let them cascade to your feet. Perhaps
it's with an amazing grace that you've held them
this long. You sit

on the idea that your father,
the sun, and his holy spirit have left
charred handprints on the inside of your throat. The kind
that makes you believe in twisted miracles and haphazard
touches. You confess the ash and the glass
on a Tuesday where it rains in one half
of town, the other half left sickly
and dry. Your father questions
your *Amen*. You can tell him

that this sanctuary is too big
to comfort just one. To put you in a cage
thinned by water, but only the holy variety,
to have mercy
dance around your head like the song you keep
singing, singing,
singing, *Isn't it amazing*
how my hallelujah bled

Try a Little Tenderness

Isabella Higgins

I'm told I look ethereal
on a Wednesday by a stranger dancing two finger lengths away
from me, in a heavily dampened living room
where the walls are adorned with thick,
lucid black scrawl. I think
I'd like to leave my handprint on it. Cram five fingers, and some skin
between muddied letters, like a signature no one can read.
I laugh in techni-
color, biting on acrid beer tabs,
coat draped along my forearms *you know she's waiting, just*
anticipating

It's a remix,
but loose-lipped I paint
the original with my arms, hips rolling with trumpets
that should be playing. I can see my hair curling and maybe
it's the weighted breaths in the room, or maybe it's the memory
of your fingers, tinged with the opaque light of blues. *But when*
she gets weary and thick emerald light is splashed
across my face, in a way that tastes
like Summer, I swear I hear you singing.

Try a little tenderness

I'm reminded of the weight of your car, two years ago
when you still had your car and hands
to drive, how it smelled like the shop
of a gas station, smooth air, cleaning
products, wrapped packs of Marlboros and all of you. You laughed
in a way that quieted my hunger, rasping
"I can't wait to see you
grow older."

It's a beautifully nauseating mix of missing you and always wanting you
gone. I see you, paper thin, in the faces of people
I don't know. I turn to you and whisper, "it sounds like you
could live forever"—and that's just the thing, you'd say.
"I could."

Meanwhile in Trafalgar Square

Brianna Morris

And on the walls of the National Gallery,
Jesus Christ is dead.
Spat on and betrayed,
retouched and remastered.

And on the walls of the National Gallery,
virgin mother and holy child are immortalized,
pursed nipple feeding blessed mouth,
the domestic prologue to all tragedy,
and so many angels.

And on the walls of the National Gallery,
Christ is still freshly dipped into holy water,
John the Baptist beaming above him, overflowing with brotherly softness.

Here are rippling muscles. Here is the virgin's bare breast.
Here are sacred flecks of light, glimmering from the halo
of the resurrected son of God in Mary Magdalene's garden.
And how the right hues can bring a dead man back to life,
hurtling forward through time, immortalized in a perimeter of gold.

Having Breakfast with My Anxiety in Morninglight

Brianna Morris

I tend to my anxiety like a sick dog, infected with midsummer,
whimpering sudden thunderstorms to a dusk that swoons over the day.

The night hardens as it wishes upon dripping candle wax to be soft.
I make the same wish under my breath. We both want the same morning.
One that is perfectly orange and sudden. A sluggish hue dragged across
the sky.

At breakfast, I wade to the edge of the tablecloth,
calling out to some vague unknown.

Make me your patient. Rearrange me in any way you want.
While I'm anesthetized and open, tell me a good story. It doesn't matter
if it's true.
Sometimes we just need something to do with our moody hands, our
throats.

The dining room contracts in a fit of haunting
as my anxiety leans back in its old wooden chair.

Now's the time when it's too late to have just woken up;
especially considering the creaking apparitions, dancing.
Their evaporated blood, like a feeling long past,
the stale meal occupying our table. A worsening rot,
steeped in morning-dew and disappointment.

The Flood

Abby N. Lewis

Once, the lake was over-watered;
it stretched like a cat into yards,

rubbed against back porches, made
docks strain like dogs at their leash.

My two sisters and I
waded through grass

as pleasurable as silk
against our calloused soles.

We climbed atop the picnic table
bobbing in the water

and into the branches of the tree above.
There, we pretended we'd been stranded,

perching on limbs like herons.
I rested low in the tree, let my legs

embrace the water, felt the liquid
brush of a bluegill's greeting,

its excitement moving, electric, up my leg.

Trout Fishing

Abby N. Lewis

She sits across from him at the small coffee shop,
gazes out the window speckled with rain.
She can see their reflections—the sudden,
sharp fish hook of her jaw, his long fingers
curled around the saucer of coffee between them—
so many things that can snare a person.

He looks at her, notices the soft seams of her sweater,
how the wide neck leaves ample room for her to maneuver,
snug and free as the trout that slipped away from his fine hook
last summer at Watauga Lake. The sudden glint of steel
off sunlight, the slight jerk of his hand on the rod in anticipation.
He could feel the hook claw harmless at the scales even then.

Macbeth, Visited by Three Witches

Madison Rodak

Yesterday, Hecate called me a God.
I felt Her power in the dead of night,
Too soon for Earth to listen, to thaw.

Why do they whisper? Sleek iron talons prod
At the back of my skull. Jaws locked, they bite
My heels. They watch me with gold eyes, broad-

Toothed smiles. Hecate named me a flaw,
A curse. She cried when I showed her my spite.
When a Goddess cries, she cries rubies, claws

At the earth, makes it tremble. This: my facade,
My armor. Can they not see that I am slight?
That I move in mortal skins, spewing words of fraud.

Why do they scream at the sky? I would awe
At their violence if it weren't for the light
Of the moon. I can see my hands, lauded

With blood. I can see the stars, unflawed as Gods
Above my head. As real as the frostbite
In my toes. I bend my knees, prepare to trod.
But it is too soon for Earth to listen, to thaw.

Early Onset

Sarah Anne Pfitzer

You pursued me in sock feet,
hardwoods groaning
under singsong
“ready or not,
here I—”

What’s the word?
“—home.”
I think I lost it—
an object
deep in my drawers or pockets.

I’m losing weight—
waiting—
made hostile
by that hollow soul
staring holes through the wall.

Are you still seeking,
or did you leave me
hunched and sucking

on bottle caps
I forgot were not for eating?

Losing farther, losing faster—
I'm sterile noise and
rooms of plaster.
Count to ten
and then start over.

I can't play this game much longer.

Orange Peels

Maya Grubner

The walls of my mother's house
taught my stomach to build a home
inside the corners of my throat.

She doesn't know how hard it is
to breathe after I swallow my tongue,
how sour my lungs taste
stuffed with esophagus
and fingernails—how hard it is
to peel an orange without them.

She doesn't know how heavy I am,
leaping through hoops with spite
crushing my own spine
in hopes that hers will bend.

She doesn't know that I fucked
the second boy I thought I loved
the second I thought I loved him.

I couldn't hear him moan
over the shrieks of Freud
laughing with my father,
while I made the love
they'd taught me to.

After he had fallen asleep,
I washed him off my hands
and the citrus suds whispered
that it didn't matter
if his were still clean.

Multnomah Dreams

Sara Perkins

There's a Pacific Bigfoot and an Appalachian one,
depending on who you ask. Mine takes my hand
and leads me through the Smokies, across
fallen dogwoods and blankets of ash. "Oh look,
the mountain is out today," he says, pointing further
than my eyes can follow.

The Watauga River connects to the Willamette
if you squint your eyes, turn the map
on its side, take a few liberties. I'm sure
that's how Lewis and Clark got there,
through wistful thinking and dumb luck.
We follow their ancient path out West,
hiding during the day and fearfully running
in the night.

In the end, my Appalachian Bigfoot looks at me
full of sorrow, delivers me to Pacific Bigfoot
like a refugee mother would her child to safety.
He glances over his hairy shoulder on his way out,

doesn't need to say a word. I know that
I will miss him too.

Pacific Bigfoot leads me to our new home,
far beyond the falls, across beds of pine
and blankets of moss. We find a man lost
along his journey, jittery and itchy and beaten
down. Bigfoot extends a kindness to the man,
gives him water when he asks. Looks him
in the eyes and says, "I'm sorry.
I wish I could do more."

W.C.T.U., c. 1530

Zachary Erickson

He walked home drunk in the moon's sight, and the moon reached the
roots of life's slightly steady center in moon rocks cast out of his and
everyone's shoes;

Guarding his walk, his dance with the moon to delight him with the sea
and its sighs

Was a feathered shield with many eyes

A red-breasted solitary marching bird, marching in the sea-filled skies.

The mating bird walked and talked on the clouds

As the moon does and the man does when swooning in the moon's
wooing,

Shepherded by the path blessing and shaping all ages there,

Water mixed with blood to dignify the mud,

Where a cloaked cock crows and the Rood is lifted

And the sky is gathered under the roof of that Rood

Violence engendered in the chicks gathered under its wings to
form its brood

While the man walked on conscious of the dark and dirty
evils huddled and spent in the flask locked in the sight of
the moon, the serpents and devils it caused, with him, they
swooned; and his eyes were washed in the sky's sea-filled rays
of that bright spring sing-song screen

Winter Poem

Sean Cho A.

It's been three weeks since
a sparrow watched her brown
speckled egg fall to the ground
and I watched her look away.



My reward is at the alcove
skipping stones I'll say never
found the bedrock. My reward
is jumping into dimebags
without guilt.

Oh, now I'm primal.

Water never freezing leaves
never turning back into
earth.

Oh, this is how I can love this body.



That woman downstream
could be my mother.



Guilt: three rocks growing
algae, picking egg yolk
off the hard January soot.



The sparrow died for no one
then I closed my eyes
and he never died at all.

When a Warrior Becomes a Horse

Brooke Stanish

The warrior sleeps pinched between
the fingers of the moon, unwilling
to conceive of his (wrapped in silence)

smallness

as a saddle drips over his back and
he is told not to attack the
handful of dust in his fist;

the warrior's skin glazes bronze as
his head grows long and his fingers fall off;
the moon lends her smile to the warrior,
blows sleep through his mane and cradles
him down to earth again;

when a warrior becomes a horse,
transfiguration in a tomb,
all that remains divert:
porcelain hooves
earthen dirt.

Photograph of L'Arc de Triomphe, 1981

Shea McCollum

I keep it hanging above my desk,
the slightly yellowed photograph
of that famous arch. It's an unexceptional
picture, really. Its exact mirror has been made
into a thousand variations of the same postcard
and sits in grungy tourist shops throughout the city—
only this picture hanging above my desk
was taken by my mother in Paris at only nineteen.

I suppose I could've chosen a photo
of her face, one from our many family albums.
I probably could have even found
one of her squinting at the camera,
all gangly limbs and clouds of dark hair,
likely holding up one hand to shield
her eyes from the sun, as a friend
worked from behind the lens
to balance the Eiffel Tower
just over her left shoulder.

But the girl in those photos
isn't my mother, not yet at least,
and the more I look at her
the less I see the resemblance
between us.

In this photo of the arch, though,
taken from the streets slightly askew
I think of how like the pattern of our DNA
repeating itself, I happened to trace
her same path unwittingly,
thirty-five years later.

Both nineteen, we walked
the same cobblestone streets,
wondering at the city that looked still
freshly rendered, like we had accidentally
gotten too close to a piece in the Louvre
and wandered beyond the frame.
We bought loaves of bread
from the same bakers
who looked at us with barely
concealed smiles, politely correcting
our broken high-school French.
Such naïve young Americans,
we had our wallets stolen
on the same overcrowded subway.

Now, when she calls to ask how things are
with a quiet voice that knows already
the distance we have put between us
with every step we've taken along
different paths into nearly unrelated people,
I can look up at this photograph
and think of how it's really a picture
of the both of us, standing side by side,

admiring the beauty of the same city,
for just one moment,
separated only by time.

wu wei

Tyler Steinsdorfer

god came to me in the woods
as a skateboarder on acid—
i accepted the role as protector
until the voices would stop
telling him to kill himself.

god imparted me with a fable:

“a man created a painting
that all the seraphim claimed
to be the pinnacle of modern art.
god himself came down to earth
and was stunned—
he realized that with all his power
he couldn't make something
half as beautiful if he tried.
the man bared a toothy grin
and doused the painting
in gasoline and burned it.

the world was torn.
all the scholars and wannabe artists
made a pilgrimage to find the man
and ask him why he did it.
they found him kneeling in his hut
and staring at the north-facing wall
with a smile smeared across his face.

he died thereafter—
he never ate or drank again.

on the day of his funeral three men
volunteered to carry his remains
from his home to the ground,
where the world would then forever
share in the gift of his body and mind.

they found nothing.
all of his possessions had vanished
and his body dissipated into nothingness.

the three men panicked.
they realized they needed to produce a body
to bury so that his death could be accounted for.
they murdered each other
and buried themselves in his place.

now this next part i can't confirm,
since i've heard it told differently
for millennia, but they say that there
was a feeling of uneasiness
that swam through the air
and drowned the people in it."

i was mesmerized by god's message.
i produced for my god
a pen and a wad of paper and pleaded
that he write it down for all to hear.

god kneeled down upon a lotus flower
and shook his head from side to side.
"i already forgot it."

i left god there in a winding meadow
as he stared into himself.
he brought his hands to his face
and spoke proverbs none would read
and sang melodies none would hear.

he is content.

Elegy for Unclaimed Bodies

Courtney DuChene

The bodies whose arms lace track
marks and whose eyes leak
fentanyl have requiems
folded in coroners' trash cans
and unmarked tombs in trailer parks.

They rot unclaimed in cadaver
vans. A few of them have family
members gather their crumpled bodies.

A brother says,
*She cried at the sight
of two gulls fighting over
a boardwalk french fry.*

A grandmother remarks,
*He had cities sprouting in
the folds of his brain.*

As for the rest, their ashes are scattered
over nowhere by some high schooler

working the night shift. He takes a dusty
pickup filled with urns to the outskirts
of town and unleashes them into the wind.

He watches as the breeze carries them back
to the families who couldn't afford
to carve a tombstone for someone
who lived their life by crushing
death between their fingertips and
swallowing it whole.

Feast

Pacey Ham

A red Mercedes convertible looms behind my Thanksgiving festival.
Take me back six months, when my mashed heart yearned
for the hours in a bus listening to the time and the you
I only now connect with a long ago Austrian countryside.

A night meant for surprise, I lust over the way
the wind owns your hair and how your smile sings
this is the way you remember me. Your blond shag
becomes my sun, and your teeth are its beams.
I watch in awe as your pumpkin-pie eyes shift to me.

I lift your hand resting on my cranberry thigh and place it on my stuffed
cheek,

feel me, see me, please,
stop wanting me, please, just need me.

I love you back but I don't know how much
until I look up at you sinking your rays into my
eyes and my thighs and every platter in between.

You took my true love waits and replaced it with nothing
but joy and sweet potatoes and what I thought might be love,
until I realized you wouldn't, couldn't wait for love, even if I
asked you to, so this is how I must remember you.

I'm still shocked it was you, and not me,
who poured the gravy boat of tears
onto my leather seats. I never knew that human hearts
will break in two the same way we eagerly pull
on wishbones, thinking it might make us the lucky one,
the one who leaves unscathed.

do you fear the jellyfish dancing in the night

Madison Bradley

do you fear me
like grizzlies
and hot crystal
because my body is
soapsalt underneath

do you fear me
because i'm
neon that won't
go out

slickfish and
pinkblue

do you hate me
when i snake underwater
and i'm warm from
volcanic stonewall

when old life forms
around me

and i'm an uglyfish
happy
with cryptid
fingertips with
pearls on wristbands

i did not understand your obsession
with womanhood

i did not know of treasure
or morsecode
there's too much binary to break

i'd rather swim
strobelights
and starfish
and curl
inside a shell

i knew of warmth
and rainbowfishes
and waving flags
undercurrent

pinkblues beating
like the sealevel shifting
hello i'm here and i'm queer
and

and why do you fear me
why do you split me
open?

i must not care
i must not

oh

im a jellyfish dancing in the night.

CREATIVE NON-FICTION

After the Stroke: Feeling for Her

Hannah Rogers

Auditory Agnosia

The inability to hear or understand music or music-like sounds. Usually caused by damage to the auditory center of the brain, it can also be caused by damage to the amygdala, the emotional center of the brain. This is far less common and more difficult to recover from since the brain is unable to re-create neural pathways for emotions when it can't remember what it was like to experience them.

Broken Brain

Euphemisms are often constructed to distract from the reality of a difficult thing. For example, "death" is scarier than "kick the bucket." Similarly, "severe brain damage caused by a blood clot" is less frightening than "broken brain," or "bb" for short.

Chicken Salad

Hospital-cafeteria chicken salad is a superior form of chicken salad

appreciated even by those who do not typically enjoy the dish. However, malfunctioning tastebuds render even superior chicken salad—and most other foods—unpalatable. The resulting loss of appetite can result in dramatic weight loss and malnutrition.

Duggar, Michelle

The mother of 19, Michelle Duggar is renowned for her ability to discipline her kids without ever shouting or growing angry. However, Michelle herself said in an interview, “I have a temper from time to time. I admit it . . . I have learned to communicate my anger in a healthier manner because the last thing we want our children to remember is mama’s temper, right?”

Embolism

The lodging of a blockage-causing material inside a blood vessel. The blood travels to places it doesn’t belong—usually the lungs—picks up gunk that thickens the blood, and then is pumped into other regions of the body where it may get stuck and cause a clot.

Fiery

Once, my mother confronted a college-aged boy who was swearing loudly at a table in a restaurant where she was eating with her five youngest children. Furious, she marched over to him to ask if he would talk like that in front of his mother, if he would talk like that in front of his siblings, if he would talk like that in front of Jesus. She pointed to her kids and warned him to watch his tongue. Five minutes later, the boy left his friends and came to sit with my mom at her table. He wept and told her that life had been hard; told her that he missed church and missed his family and missed accountability.

Gifts

No matter how many times I take the spiritual-gifts test, my number one result is always faith.

Holy Spirit

My experiences with the Spirit have been sporadic at best, unlooked-for moments of guidance or comfort often long after the moments I needed it most. Because of this, I never feel like I can rely on the Holy Spirit in times of crisis. It doesn't feel safe.

Ischemic

A stroke caused by lack of blood flow to the brain. Often results in the permanent shutdown of large sections of the brain, resulting in memory loss, personality changes, impaired movement, reduced sensory input, and difficulty speaking. These symptoms, it turns out, may not manifest immediately after the stroke, instead revealing themselves over time.

Jokes

Humor is a coping mechanism employed by the emotionally underdeveloped.

Kids

There are ten kids in my family. I am the oldest. When my parents wrote their will, they expressed the wish that, if anything should happen to them, all underage children left in their household would fall under my guardianship.

Lobsters

Lobsters mate for life. This fact appears on the TV show *Friends* in the 1996 episode “The One with the Prom Video,” in which Ross and Rachel finally get together. A year after this episode aired, my parents were married. Every holiday, my dad buys flowers for my mom and signs the tag, “To My Lobster.”

Million Dreams, A

My mom used to describe this song from the soundtrack of *The Greatest Showman* as the perfect summary of her relationship with my dad. Damage to the amygdala, while it does not necessarily prevent recognizing lyrics, often severs all emotional connection to music.

Newborn

A four-month-old child technically is not considered a newborn any longer, because they are, at that age, capable of neck support and facial recognition. This is also the age at which they begin to laugh, smile, and more fully experience separation anxiety, because they are capable of recognizing their mother’s facial features and, therefore, can no longer be fooled into thinking they are with their mother when an older sibling with similar sized breasts and a similar voice picks them up.

Occupational Therapy

Inpatient therapy is recommended for patients who have experienced severe strokes, but outpatient therapy can be arranged if necessary. Patients who choose the latter usually have longer recovery times and, consequently, may never fully recover their faculties.

Proverbs 3:5

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.”

Questions of Faith

In his book *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis writes: “Talk to me about the truth of religion, and I’ll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion, and I’ll listen submissively. But don’t come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don’t understand.”

Recovery

Only 33% of stroke patients fully recover their physical and cognitive abilities. Almost 64% of those who suffer a severe stroke die within a year.

Spirit (Revisited)

My mom had a nurse named Nancy who checked on her at night. On the third night of her hospital stay, my mom told Nancy that her Heavenly Papa was so proud of her (“Papa” because my mom still couldn’t say words that start with F). Nancy wept and asked my mom to pray for her.

Thrombosis

A fancy way of saying blood clot. A meaningless word to hide a scary one. A term that took four days to unknot enough to understand it. An idea given shape and definition in the way mom’s face went slack and her

cheeks grew thin and her words tumbled out in a rush until they slowed and stuck in her throat.

Umbilical

I think there may be a spiritual umbilical cord between all mothers and their children. As long as it's not knotted, twisted, or shriveled; as long as neither of you let it get wrapped around your neck to slowly choke the air from your lungs, it continues to nourish you.

Visual Impairment

1. She sees invisible shadows all the time and they scare her. 2. She can't tell time. 3. She can't make out symbols on electronic devices. 4. Colors overwhelm her. 5. If she looks away from you for too long, she forgets you exist.

Wedding

It was the first thing she wanted to know if I was going to be taken care of. She asked me every time we talked. She asked me even after I was sure her cognitive abilities were normal even if everything else wasn't. Was I going to be taken care of? There were moments when that question was scarier than wondering if my mom would ever be able to function on her own again—a reminder that I didn't know the answer. I don't have any answers.

X-Ray

You'd think that in eleven days in the hospital, someone would have noticed that her arm was bruised, swollen, broken. Instead, she forfeited her first real date with my dad on the first Saturday afternoon she felt well enough to walk to go have it x-rayed.

Youth

Your parents are young until the day they're not.

Zero

The number of days I've gone without having to stop myself from weeping. The number of times my mom has lost her positive, hopeful attitude. The number of times I've been honest about everything I'm feeling. The number of prayers I've said that haven't ended with "What are you doing with us?"

Bite Down

Kymerlin Bush

I sit and stare at the IKEA print of an oak tree on the wall of the warmly lit room. I am curled in around myself in a plastic chair with green cushions, and a drop of sweat rolls from my armpit down into the waist of my jeans. I sit in a circle of four other students and a therapist. When I first entered this room in my college's counseling center, I was eighteen, and the print was the first thing I noticed, because my mom hung the same one above the couch in our living room the summer before.

Today I am only four months away from my nineteenth birthday, and a group member named Ibis talks about her sexual assault. I wince at her description. I feel like vomiting when she tells us that she cuddled with him after, because she needed to be comforted so badly.

I want to ask exactly how she was assaulted. The part of my brain that likes true-crime podcasts and horror movies wants to know every detail, but I don't ask, so I lean back in my chair and look at the print before saying anything. I tell her I'm sorry it happened.

"I fucking hate him," Ibis whispers through her tears. She sits next to me in the circle. I look at the ground to keep from staring or making eye contact with the other group members who are watching her cry. I reach out as she puts her head in her hands and something in my stomach clamps down. My hand lands on her shaking shoulder and we stay like that. I hate him too.

I look back at the print on the wall. Time slips and drags at my body, pulling at my skin.

I am staring at the same IKEA print in my living room. The counseling center is gone, Ibis is gone, and I've finally stopped sweating. My cat meows from behind me and I turn away. I cross the hardwood floor of my mom's house to rest a foot on the carpeted stairs. I don't put all of my weight on that foot yet. I don't want to go up the stairs, because I know what I'll find there. I know who waits for me.

A week after Ibis tells us about her assault, she admits she's demisexual. She doesn't feel sexual attraction unless she has a long-term emotional connection with someone. I want to ask if she thinks this is because of the assault, but I don't. I look up the term when I get back to my room. I don't know if it applies to me, because I have been in the same relationship since I was fourteen. This is the first time I realize I have never known anything but my boyfriend. I don't know anyone other than him.

I tell Ibis and my group that I think something is missing in my brain, that there must be something not wired correctly. I tell them that I've explained to my boyfriend for months and then years that I am not ready to have sex—that I don't want it—but he never understands.

On my living-room couch, he told me I was biologically wrong, because I didn't want to have sex. I agreed vehemently, because it alleviated some of my guilt. I was broken. It was that simple. It wasn't my fault that I was born this way; I couldn't be blamed. I don't tell my group this.

I push open the bathroom door at the top of the stairs. My fingers melt into the silver door knob and white wood. As the door swings open, they come free with a sucking noise.

It's dark in here, and it always smells like my sister's cotton-candy perfume and drugstore waterproof mascara. I know from experience that I can sit on the toilet, have water running on my hand, and lean far enough into

the bathtub to throw up all at the same time. My cat likes to sit next to my feet and watch me pee, which shouldn't make me uncomfortable, but it does. I force the gentle-close lid shut when I'm done so she can't jump in after the swirling water. She drinks the water out of the tub and the sink when I wash my hands even though her water dish is full downstairs.

I shift my eyes to look at my bedroom door. I hear voices on the other side. What day will it be in there?

I twist the silver handle and walk into my light-teal bedroom. My queen-sized bed is the center of everything. My clothes are strewn about the floor; I have to shove the door to get it fully open. My lamp is on and I can hear rain.

I was expecting it, but I'm still surprised to see myself in the bed. A younger version of me lies there and doesn't look up as I stand in the doorway.

She is facing away from him; he is sleeping on his back and snoring softly. The girl can't be more than sixteen. This is probably one of the first nights he slept over.

I shift my gaze to the sleeping boy. I stare at his hands, folded onto his chest, hands that slid up the backs of my legs and under my shirt to wrap around my throat. Shame covers my head like a hood.

The younger me in the bed reaches over to the nightstand to turn out the light. I am relieved when the darkness washes him away.

Before I can fully recover, the light turns back on, illuminating a different night.

Now she is curled into him, her right leg thrown over his hips, her shoulder shoved into his armpit, her head on his chest. He leans down to kiss her hair.

"I love you," he whispers.

"Can I keep the light on?" she asks quietly. He nods and falls asleep.

I move to the end of my bed and sit down. As I settle in, things begin to move on their own around us.

Things are packed, unpacked, hung up, taken down. Books are read, journals are filled, music pours from the record player. I watch myself sleep there night after night.

She gets older each time she comes through our bedroom door, but some nights she's younger. I suppose time isn't linear in this house of memories. Each time the light turns on, a different me waits in my room.

Each time the light turns off, that night ends and I never see it—or that version of me—again.

The light turns off, the light turns on, he leaves early for work, snow falls, there is a thunderstorm. Days and then months pass.

I grew up surrounded by boys. All of them know the lesson my dad taught when he caught us fighting. He would walk in on one of us kicking or punching the other while the target tried to get away and screamed “STOP,” and he would quickly grab the offender by the shoulder. We would pant and whine as he tightened his grip on our bony frames. Then he would start hitting us enough to hurt, but not enough to make us stop laughing. “Tell me to stop,” he would say. We would.

But he wouldn’t stop; he would just slow down. “Is this stopping? Am I stopping?” We would laugh, but sometimes be near crying from embarrassment.

“The definition of ‘stop’ is the cessation of all movement. Not slowing down, not hitting lighter, not switching to pinching instead. It means stop.” Then he would let us go to try and continue whatever game we had been playing.

We met my boyfriend’s family when I was seven. He and his brothers received this lesson on several occasions.

The light turns on.

“Stop,” she says again, and turns over onto her side. He scoots closer.

His hands come back to me and they grow a body to match. I can feel his hot breath on the back of my neck, his erection against the small of my back, his fingertips digging into the skin above my hip. He moves closer to the girl on the bed.

“Why not? Give me one good reason,” he huffs into her hair.

“Because I don’t want to.” His hands continue moving down her body when there is a scratching at the door. He ignores it, but eventually it becomes too insistent. My cat sits in the now open doorway; he tries to kick her, but she jumps away.

When he returns to bed, he isn’t in the mood anymore.

The light turns off.

I hear the word “asexual” for the first time when I am eighteen and learn about coercion when I am nineteen.

We agreed that I always took more persuading than him. Hours of it sometimes, until it was late at night, I was freezing and tired, and I had said “sorry” so much that it was my only answer. “Sorry, no. No, stop. Stop, sorry.”

It was always late at night.

Late at night with his hands in my hair, pleading, begging, threatening, guiltig, sheets against my skin, hands held tight, squeezing the smaller bones together, pouting, prodding, pulling at my clothes, at my skin, at my hair, at my mouth, the sounds of silence from the house, my quiet sobbing. He couldn't see me cry if he kept his light off.

Sometimes he saw my tears anyway, but it didn't stop him.

“I look at other girls a lot more than I want to because you won't do anything. I don't want to, but I can't help it,” he whispers into her downturned face. She's crying. They're in bed again. The girl pushes him away and looks him in the eyes. I want to reach my hand out to steady her heaving chest.

“Fuck. You,” she whispers through gritted teeth. He pulls her to him and holds tight when she begins to thrash.

“Calm the fuck down; calm down,” he hisses as she digs her nails into his arms.

Hot breath pumps behind my clenched teeth. I can't tell if she bites him on this night or if that comes later.

When it does happen, she pulls her retainer out and sinks her teeth into his neck while he fumbles at her underwear. She leaves a circular bruise pattern that he brags about to his friends, but I know it is the closest he has ever come to hitting her.

The light turns off.

The light turns on.

For the first time, the girl is alone. I inhale. My room doesn't smell like him anymore. I smell nothing but the stale air.

I feel nothing.

Not his hands, not his breath. I fall to my knees next to the bed and choke on his absence. I gasp his name into the void left by the five years torn from my chest. I pant to keep from puking.

He's gone and it's my fault. I ended it. My fault. He's gone. It's all over. What do I do without him? Who am I without him? My fault. The promise ring on my finger throbs, and I dig my nails into the carpet. Gone. He's gone.

He's been gone for months now, but not to the girl in the bed. He's been gone for seconds to the girl in the bed. Her emotions rip through me. On the bed, she sobs into a T-shirt she found in the bottom of her closet. Gone. He's gone. I've ruined my own life. The best part of my life is gone. He is gone.

My cat jumps onto the mattress and scares the younger me out of her tears. She pulls her face away from the shirt and rolls to face the large, furry mass.

My cat rubs up against the girl's wet face before licking her tears away. I'd like to think she's comforting her, but she probably does it for the same reason she drinks the shower and sink water.

From the floor, I reach out and turn off the light.

Ibis hates the man who assaulted her, but I cannot hate the man—the boy—who assaulted me.

I watch my family support Brett Kavanaugh during his hearing and discuss the tragedy of false accusations ruining men's lives. I have a mental list of people I can never tell.

Because I did it anyways, because we were dating, because it was just foreplay, because I did want it sometimes, because it was never sex, because it wasn't always violent, because it didn't leave a mark, because I couldn't walk into a police station and have physical evidence of it, because it was what I owed him, because if I didn't do it, someone else would.

I watched his eyes follow other girls. Near the end, he only told me I was beautiful after I had given in, when I had cum drying on my skin and saliva in my hair.

I'm just different. I am a woman. I just need more assistance.

But I am biologically wrong, because humans are animals and we are wired to reproduce; so if I don't feel that urge, I'm defective.

No doesn't mean no, it doesn't mean stop; it means Convince Me. I am coy, I play hard to get, I am a tease, I am a challenge. Convince Me.

My boyfriend tells me that if we get back together, we are having sex. I don't have a choice in that decision.

I still feel the shame.

When it overwhelms me, I imagine slamming my fingers in a car door, I ask for bleach on my scalp, I get tattoos on my ears, shin, spine, I lift weights until I collapse, I write until I can't see the screen, some nights I end up gritting my teeth and running to my room to bite a leather belt because towels make me gag too easily.

I drag my nails down the wall of my bedroom and scream in an empty house. When the shame envelops me, I consider shoving my hand into a pot of boiling water. Sometimes I hover my foot over the sliding glass door track and imagine slamming it shut.

But the good days are starting to outnumber the bad.

So I continue to sit in group therapy and tell them everything. I march, I stay loud, I move forward from what happened, but I keep it in my mind to remember who I am fighting for.

I see that girl in my bed, sobbing into a brown Taco Bell T-shirt, and I remember how far I have come. I feel his hands on my shoulders and his ring on my finger and I shake them off, even when the light is on.

And I get better.

Why I Stopped Introducing Myself as “Amber”

Ambar Grullon

My parents are Dominican immigrants. Both came from towns that, in the nighttime, disappeared in the inky darkness, and that visitors only drove through to reach resorts and glittering cities. Both had families that were directly affected by the Trujillo regime (one family experienced loss; the other faced forced recruitment). Both moved to the United States in their childhood, learning to love the New York smog as much as the island’s *plátano* smell.

They argued over my name for weeks, until my father suggested *ámbar*, the witchy resin found in abundance in the Dominican Republic. I’ve received countless gifts of Dominican amber, a particularly honeyed resin known for its transparency. Although I do not speak Spanish, I’ve learned to hear the musical lilt in its pronunciation, appreciate the hard syllable ending with a suggestive rolling *r*. There is something particularly special in being named for something so close to my heritage. This is a sentiment I hadn’t grasped until last year.

From elementary to high school, my name was always butchered. I’ve been called Am-barre, Umber, and Ombré (thank you, 8th-grade D.A.R.E. officer) so many times I grew tired of correcting those mistakes. Even if my name was best (and correctly) spoken with an accent, those two syllables couldn’t possibly have been that difficult to say. If someone asked me to repeat myself (“My name is *Ahm-barr*”), I would, but with the added note

that they could address me by the easiest moniker. By high school, I started introducing myself as Am-barre, because if Ambar was going to be mispronounced anyway, at least I could claim some control over that decision.

But, like any pushover soon recognizes, I grew tired of the illusion of control. In the first semester of my freshman year at college, I introduced myself as Amber. It wasn't really untrue, I reasoned; there was one letter difference and the meaning behind the English translation was the same as the Spanish. I felt myself change as I made this switch; first meetings were less awkward, the fumbling between language and my frustrating desire to be less of a burden no longer existed. I could hear a friend call me Amber without cringing. By being called Amber, however, I didn't simply allow others to mispronounce my name. I started to believe that my name was *meant* to be malleable. By being called Amber, I ignored my parents' purposeful decision to keep the Spanish translation alive. I allowed others to ignore that part of myself; I chose to ignore that part of myself.

While adolescent insecurity and anxiety certainly played a role in choosing not to be firm about my name, it was fear of differentiation that was the true hindrance. I grew up in schools where the majority of students had English names: Emily, Emma, Abigail, Jessica, Elizabeth, among others. If spelled untraditionally, their names were immediately made note of by teachers. In high school, a swim coach, who had known me for many years, misspelled my name on every lineup and award, *despite* having my information on file. She frequently joked about stereotypical Latino families naming their kids ridiculously long and laborious names, *despite* overseeing a mostly Latinx team. Clearly, there was no regard for names that were not deemed "classic"—which is to say, that were not English. I do not intend to condemn these names, but rather condemn the cultural ignorance that Others anything outside the designated canon.

The following semester at college, I started introducing myself as Ambar in classes. I settled into being Ambar rather nicely; when I was Amber, I was merely a shadow of my truest self. The only space in which "Ambar" existed prior to college was at home, where I was loud and dramatic and assertive. When I created a space to be that Ambar in college, the dynamic I established as student and friend changed. I raised my hand in class more often, spoke more about my family and culture with friends, read literature by Latinx writers, and gave myself permission to *be* loud and dramatic and assertive. One of my professors consistently strove to execute that

pronunciation, consciously legitimizing it as right and valid. Names are our identities and, while it should go unspoken that they are respected and used, it is up to us to validate ourselves.

I didn't realize the switch until my friends and classmates asked if they had been mispronouncing my name all this time. Some apologized; others shared their shock. All expressed that they wanted to say my name. I still found myself apologetic—it was so embarrassing to feel I made a big deal out of nothing, as if I had been caught in a lie, to be revealed for the squirmy coward I was—by clarifying that I had introduced myself by a different name, explaining how easy it was to have a name that no one would question. Of course, the real message was that it was easy for everyone else but me. I told them that, since I had introduced myself as Amber, they could continue to call me that. There are friends that still call me Amber. There are many others that call me Ambar, or at least try their best to say it right. I regret granting that permission to still be known as Amber now; I think I was still afraid of the commitment to my name. I know now that I should not have seen this so-called commitment as a nuisance. No one should ever be made to feel like their identity—whether in name, color, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, age, or disability—is a liability.

Part of me feels relieved finally writing this, like I have finally uncovered a long-burrowed secret of the past. Another part feels this is unnecessary and desires to retract every statement here, as if I have always been comfortable existing in liminal discomfort. A mispronounced name, in retrospect, does not appear to deserve the opinion of being a burden. It is simple and has a straightforward solution: to be used and honored. My parents named me Ambar because they thought it was beautiful, and wanted me to feel that way, too. I'm still learning how to wipe away the apology that threatens to spill every time I introduce myself. What I *do* know is that I am conscious of how full I felt—and feel—as Ambar. I'll do anything to stay that way forever.

Some Kind of Permanent

Kyle Riper

There are two sets of footsteps coming up the stairwell—boots, probably; the snow is starting to melt in earnest outside. Two women—a mother and a daughter, probably—walk into a tattoo shop in Minneapolis. Defying stereotypes, it's the older woman who wants a tattoo; she isn't being dragged along by her daughter for some tattoo on a whim. This is premeditated. They've thought it through. When the receptionist asks her what she's looking for, she replies, "I want one of those breast cancer ribbons on the inside of my pointer finger." From my corner, I can hear her Midwest accent.

The receptionist winces and explains that a lot of the tattooists in the shop don't like tattooing fingers. They don't last very long, the receptionist explains. There's an expectation of permanence connected to tattoos. But they can't stay vibrant—hold—forever. Depending on how well the tattooed takes care of their skin (moisturizing, applying sunscreen, and general healthcare), tattoos can hold for more than fifteen years without any touchups. With regular touchups, tattoos can last indefinitely.

The shop is on the second floor—right above a coffee shop where the water tastes slightly off. It's a ten-minute walk from my Airbnb. It'd only take five minutes normally, but the sidewalks are still coated in a heavy layer of ice. The floor of the shop is faux-wood laminate, more gray than brown. The waiting-area chairs aren't completely comfortable, but they also

aren't all-the-way uncomfortable. The walls are spotted with framed art—the inspirations behind somebody's body art, maybe. A flash book or two rest on a side table, unopened, undisturbed. I sit in the corner, headphones on, but no music playing; it's easier to hear them this way. The headphones act as a kind of mask, hiding my attention.

A tattoo artist works in the background; I can hear the whirring of his machine. It sounds almost exactly like a sewing machine, just louder, a little bit more intimidating. Or maybe like a swarm of bees. A girl is getting tattooed with her sister. Or maybe her girlfriend. I hear the sound of their voices, but not the words. I imagine the one not getting tattooed is offering words of encouragement. I imagine the one getting tattooed wincing at particularly painful strokes of the needles. I'll be under that machine soon enough.

The mother glances at her daughter, some silent agreement passes between them; the mom looks back at the receptionist and provides a resolute nod. A nod that would look more natural in some high government office. She points to the outside of her left arm and asks if that placement would be better. The receptionist relaxes slightly—it's so much easier to work with customers who don't argue against the advice they're given. That's the thing about tattooing and being tattooed: both parties have to trust each other; this ink is about as permanent as things get on the body. The receptionist relaxes and tells the pair that arm tattoos always hold for a lot longer.

There's something in the act of an ink-dipped needle piercing the upper layers of skin thousands of times per minute that demands longevity. Maybe it's the physical trauma the body's put through in the process—people expect something that lasts forever. Logically, most of them know that tattoos—much like the memories that possibly inspired them—will fade in time. But is art ever *truly* logical?

When it's finally my turn—I showed up here on walk-in day; a day dedicated, as the name suggests, to walk-in tattoos (tattoo sessions with no prior consultation or appointment)—I find out the girl in front of me got a rainbow. The other woman probably is her girlfriend. I tell the artist what I want.

“An owl? From a medieval manuscript?” I hear the skepticism in his

voice. Can't really blame him, either. It isn't the usual tattoo fare, if there is a usual tattoo fare. Stereotypes suggest the usual tattoo fare is things like hearts with the word "mom" inside them. Or maybe tribal armbands. Or maybe a butterfly. Not an owl from a 16th-century German "creature book." But he does it. And, if I might say so myself, he does it well. That's the thing about tattoo artists: they are actually artists. They learn how to make the art fit this skin; they know where these tattoos belong. They know how to distort the stencil to conform to the contours of the body.

A week later and two thousand miles away, in Seattle, a friend is getting a dead language tattooed on their arm. *Hwæt*. Old English. It translates to something like "YO, GATHER ROUND!" Usually yelled by storytellers in taverns before they weave their tales. There's something important here, too. There's something important in reviving a word from a dead language. Giving it new life. A new canvas. Ellen Bass, in her poem "Indigo," compares the tattooed body to one that has been "marked up like a book, underlin[ed], highlight[ed], writ[ten on] in the margins." And she's right. Bass also talks about how tattoos are a kind of reclamation of a body; about how they indicate that someone *wanted* to live in their body. The margins of my friend's body have been marked up. They've had inscribed on them a word from a language that goes, for the vast majority of the population, unspoken and unread. I also am getting a dead language tattooed on my arm. Greek. *μυθόπλοιος*. Anne Carson translates it as "mythweaver," Google translates it as "mythological." I prefer Carson's.

This shop is clean, but feels lived-in. There are tapestries and posters and paintings hanging on the walls, the floor is hardwood, and the shop is in a well-to-do part of town. Heidi, our artist, has tattoos covering most of her visible skin. She has two full sleeves—tattoo coverage of her entire arm with a generally cohesive theme—of floral and steampunk designs and some more floral art on her collarbone. No tattoos above her collarbone, though.

I ask Heidi about the process of becoming a tattoo artist, about how long it takes, what she had to do to get to where she is now: tattooing two college kids in Seattle. Heidi tells me she had to apprentice under a more experienced artist. "Took me two years of apprenticing to get licensed." When I ask her how she became an apprentice, she tells me about how she had to hang around a shop for a while. "I got a bunch of tattoos from this one dude, and then after a while I showed him my drawings and he took me on." Even here, trust is vital. She had to trust the person teaching her.

She had to trust that he knew what he was doing. In turn, he had to trust her. Heidi talks about how she started tattooing on pigs' skin. "It smells like shit, but it's the closest we can get to human skin."

We talk about shifting demographics—both in the shop and out on the streets. Heidi talks about how, in her eleven years tattooing on Capitol Hill, her average client has shifted from drunk barflies to what it is now: two flannel-wearing college-aged kids getting tattoos of dead languages on their arms. "It's interesting," Heidi explains, "how much gentrification has changed the area. Good for business, I guess. I just can't help but feel like we've lost something along the way."

I understand what she means. On my way to the nearest ATM to grab some cash to pay for my Greek—most tattooists only take cash; easier for tax purposes, I suppose—I look around at the other pedestrians. They're almost all white, primarily college-aged. Part of this makes sense: the shop's just down the road from Seattle University, a Jesuit school in Capitol Hill. That the area's filled with white kids isn't a surprise. But Heidi tells me about how *white* her customer base is now. I can't help but acknowledge that I'm complicit in this.

I ask her what she thinks about the trend of Instagram-ready tattoos. She's not quite sure what I'm talking about until I clarify. "The really small, super intricate ones that go viral online, you know?"

"Ahh, yeah, those." I can hear the derision in her voice. Heidi goes on to tell me she really doesn't like them. "They just don't last very long, you know?" And she's right. They really don't last very long. She says they have to get the tattoos touched up all the time. It's a constant process. The thing Heidi—and, I guess, most tattoo artists—keeps coming back to is lasting. They all want their art to hold for as long as possible. Even, maybe especially, on skin.

In my college town, I visit a tattoo school—a place where new tattooists are born (or maybe the better word would be "created")—to learn more about the process of learning how to tattoo. If, in the process, I get another tattoo, then so be it (for the record, I did: a door, this time).

Kristen talks about how she became a tattoo student. Her friend started tattooing straight out of high school, while Kristen went to a community college. Kristen eventually got an associate degree in general art, and her friend became a relatively successful tattooist. Her friend's mom also, apparently, tattoos people for a living. It's a family thing with them.

Austin Powers is playing on a TV in the background. We occasionally take breaks to watch; sometimes Kristen quotes the movie. We talk for a minute about stereotypes in tattoo shops, about how a lot of people think the shops are always super scary and intimidating. I don't know if I really agree with that, from what I've seen. All the shops I've been to have their own little quirks and eccentricities. One waiting room had broken, but quaint, movie-theater chairs as the seats. Another had comic-book art hanging on the walls. This shop has a life-sized Star Wars stormtrooper in its lobby. It also has *Dragon Ball Z* fan art hanging above a tattoo station.

After an extended period of unhappiness and lack of self-fulfillment, Kristen decided to follow in her friend's footsteps. She started hanging around tattoo shops in her area and was eventually guided to the tattoo shop in my college town. At the tattoo school, students are required to take over 200 hours of theory-related courses (think, for example, color theory, machine upkeep and maintenance, state laws and guidelines, how to prevent infection and keep clients safe) and 150 hours of practical application, which is where I come in. Kristen's nearing the end of her time at the school; only a few weeks left at this point. She's been through about seven months of schooling, four days a week, on top of a full-time job. She's committed to this. I trust her.

I ask her what drew her to use human skin as her canvas, and she tells me it's always been about life for her. That is to say, she likes that the artwork she provides—she calls herself a “tracer,” a vessel for what we, as customers, want done—takes on a new life on someone's skin. She likes how the person can come up with new stories and new significances for each person they show it to. I think I like that, too.

When my dad saw the first of my tattoos, the first thing he asked me was, “Is it permanent?”

I stuttered for a moment, and then replied, “I hope so.”

My Haunting

Sarah Bliss

My town only has one ghost story. Off of Highway 1 there's a small ma-and-pop restaurant that looks like a villager's house from *Beauty and the Beast*. It perches alone on the side of the road and the food is apparently nothing to write home about, but it still holds a morbid fascination—in the eyes of the community—powerful enough to keep them coming back. Years ago—far enough in the past that the details blur together, but recently enough for passersby to recycle into conversation as they drive past—the restaurant hosted a murder. The victim: a teenage girl caught and murdered by her boyfriend in what is now the women's bathroom. Supposedly people still see a pair of legs just visible inside an empty stall or hear barely-audible shrieks. Despite hearing the ghost stories retold every time my family and I drove past, I've only ever set foot inside once.

Last summer, my younger sister surprised my family by somehow getting a part-time job working with police detectives in an underage drinking investigation. They would send her into gas stations or bars with twenty bucks in her pocket and instructions to try to buy some kind of alcohol. A detective would slip in inconspicuously a few minutes after her and watch to see if the proprietors would check her ID, or if they would sell to a sixteen-year-old girl. Nine times out of ten, the grizzled old man behind the counter of a 7-Eleven or the jaded bartender at a touristy beach club asked for my sister's ID and told her—more or less politely—to leave. She

would offer a small smile and mumbled apology and slip out the door, the detective on her heels and the employees totally oblivious to what could've happened. It was an easy job with just enough risk to make it exciting, and from the beginning I was completely fascinated. The drama, the deception, the crusade of it captured my imagination. It wasn't long before I got in on it too.

My sister has always been a better liar than me, and, despite telling myself I could do it if she could, I chattered and shifted nervously in the detective's car as she pulled out of my driveway on my first day. "The only place I really need you to go today is that old restaurant up on 1. You know it?" the detective, a kind black woman, said with traces of a Southern accent. "But we'll make a stop first, so you can get some practice." Fifteen minutes later, I found myself walking in the front door of a Wawa and braving the refrigerated section labeled "Alcohol" for the first time.

That first buy, I agonized in the back of the store for what felt like twenty minutes over what kind of alcohol I should try to purchase. "Try to grab something fruity, like a margarita in a can," the detective's partner instructed me. "Girls usually go for the fruity drinks." Great advice, but what qualified as fruity? I didn't see any margaritas in cans; all I saw were different kinds of beer. Which was fruitier: Miller or Bud Light? *I am so not cut out for this*, I thought as I grabbed a can at random and bolted for the front counter. Despite my attempts to play it cool, as soon as I passed my beverage of choice across the counter, the acne-covered employee carded me. As I left, it occurred to me I had never asked what would happen if any of the places we went actually sold me something.

On the way to our main stop, the detectives told me if I succeeded in buying anything, I was supposed to slip quietly out the door and wait in the car while the detective shadowing me approached whoever sold to me and spoke with their manager. Apparently, the unfortunate employee would receive a court date, on top of whatever punishment their boss decided to dole out. At the time, the punishments seemed to fit the crime. I remember feeling excited and a little bit like the heroine of a spy movie as I wandered with forced casualness into the infamous haunted restaurant for the first time and took a seat at the bar.

The restaurant looked like any other small-town diner, with dim lighting, cheap red-leather barstools, and an overabundance of black-and-white pictures and signs about fishing. In my periphery, I could see one of the

detectives walk in behind me and pretend to peruse the menu at a nearby booth. He looked painfully obvious to me, but not as much as I must have, an eighteen-year-old girl sitting alone at a bar at 11:00 in the morning. The bartender was a strawberry-blond woman in a denim jacket whose faint Southern drawl and smile edged with laugh lines instantly reminded me of my mom. Maybe that's why her friendly greeting and offer to get me something made me feel so at home. It was like wandering downstairs in the morning to find my mom in the process of making me breakfast. Just with an added undercover-espionage twist.

"Just a beer, please," I said, parroting the directions the detectives had given me. Sure enough, she asked to check my ID. Resigned, but also grateful, I pulled out my driver's license and passed it across the bar, simultaneously picking up my purse and half-sliding off the barstool in anticipation of her next question. But it didn't come. Instead, she held my ID close to her face, squinted at the small print of my birthday, then passed it back to me. "Sorry, I have to check; you look really young," she said as she opened a fridge, pulled out a bottle, and set it on the bar in front of me. "Yeah, I—I get that a lot," I stammered, a little stunned, but also appreciating the irony of the situation.

The detective quietly stepped up beside me and told me I could leave. Eager to escape the aftermath, I hurriedly vacated my barstool and retreated outside, where I sent the other detective to join her partner and climbed into the now-empty car to wait. I passed my first five minutes of solitude by replaying the drama of my first buy over and over in my mind. But the longer I sifted through my memories, the more I started to notice different details. I focused less on my witty response to the bartender's comment about my age and more on the detective's grim face as he told me to wait outside. My unquestionable espionage skills suddenly seemed to pale before the embarrassment and potential hardship awaiting the bartender with my mom's laugh lines. *Oh my gosh, what if she's fired? Did I just cost someone her job?*

I sat in the car for about fifteen minutes before I saw her again. The lady who had served me beer trudged past, purse over her shoulder and tears on her cheeks. I had to suppress the urge to duck in my seat to make sure she wouldn't see me. *I'm sorry*, I thought as I watched her climb, sobbing, into her car. *I didn't really think this would happen.* The detectives rejoined me a few minutes later, and I listened to them talk about the stupidity of the

bartender and wonder aloud how she could've looked at my ID and not figured out my age. As they talked, I peeked at the report they had filled out and tossed haphazardly into the backseat. I don't remember the bartender's name, but I do remember she was the same age as my mom.

I told myself I was overreacting and dragging myself down an unnecessary spiral of guilt. I had done the right thing. But if it was the right thing, shouldn't I just feel satisfied, not confused and a little guilty? In my imagination, the greasy-fingered, cigarette-smoking degenerate who first sold me alcohol would be unrepentant and uncaring—totally deserving of civil punishment. Real life had proven significantly more complicated. I had never imagined the families or lives of the people I would expose as criminals, and I wasn't prepared to be partially responsible for the humiliation of a smiling, strawberry-blond-haired woman. I felt hollow, as if it was my mom I had gotten fired instead of a total stranger.

I didn't ever go back out with the detectives; I couldn't scrape up a sense of justification in the face of the bartender's tears. I felt personally responsible, as if what would happen to her—a trial and possibly unemployment—was my fault. It turns out even things like underage drinking aren't as black-and-white as I thought, and doing the right thing isn't either. Did I even do the right thing? I'm still not sure.

I haven't gone back to that restaurant since then. I'm not sure I ever will. I still shiver when I drive past, but now it has less to do with the faint screams of a murdered girl in a first-floor bathroom than the conflicting tumult of memories from my short-lived crusade against underage drinking.

Cardboard Chemotherapy

Rebecca Mear

Cardboard Mansions

I sat on the kitchen floor at Grandma's house, the brown tiles underneath my criss-cross-applesauced legs more sticky than cold. Perched in my hands was a pair of purple safety scissors, inefficient for cutting cardboard as they were. But what else was a girl of my age to use for building my biodegradable mansion?

The cream-colored refrigerator, tastefully decorated in an array of home-made magnets, served as a mechanism to keep me from tipping right over. My back ached, sore from my bent-over posture of complete concentration. The ticking clock above my head served as a metronomic keeper of sanity, or perhaps insanity. *Tick, tick, tick*, as time passed, ever so slowly. I continued cutting the same piece of cardboard, my progress deathly slow. Stupid safety scissors and their rounded tips. I hacked away at the thick cardboard, trying so hard to cut straight along my Sharpie lines. My future cardboard homeowners certainly wouldn't want a crooked bed or a lopsided couch. They expected better craftsmanship than that.

If only Elmer's Glue—supposedly the number-one glue brand for teachers—dried faster and didn't get caught in the cardboard's corrugated ridges.

And if only I didn't believe myself to be dying of an illness I diagnosed

myself. For I, being a child with no notion of how cancer worked, believed myself to be one cardboard home away from death.

As I cut through cardboard, I found myself praying, *Dear Lord, take away the dizzies, the pain, the cancer*, the cancer being the very-real lung cancer my grandfather was dying of and the faux cancer I somehow convinced myself I had.

In fact, before bed each night, I subjected myself to what I thought were my prayer-chemo sessions, the hum of the air cleaner serving as background to my prayer. I even thought the flashes of light scattering across the room were the angels coming to rescue me, to cure me. I'd lay in bed, blanket splayed across my body, praying. *Dear Lord, please take away the cancer*, I pleaded, for my perception of God was that of a miracle healer, prayer being the way to reach the healer.

Save me, take away the cancer, I'd repeat until I would eventually fall asleep, my body no more cancer-ridden than when my prayer started.

As I began filling rough cardboard ridges with enough Elmer's glue to make teachers of the dot-dot-not-a-lot motto scowl over my misuse of their favorite glue brand, I contemplated the facts filling my brain at the time. After all, my only notion of cancer stemmed from *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* and visits to my grandfather, dying of cancer in a nursing home.

My glue bottle emptied as I thought about Sadako's dizzy spells, which the book told me so much about. She was always dizzy. "The dizzies," she called it. Unfocused. Unaware. Out of it. Feelings I experienced all too often.

Every time we read about Sadako and her many paper cranes in class, my mind wandered, pulling out details. Dizziness. Cancer. Death. That's all I thought there was to it, really, and in that order. Just thinking about it, holding the book in my hands, made me queasy.

Even as I built my cardboard home, I felt dizzy. I was like the cardboard's corrugation: empty; no amount of glue able to fill hollow insides. No matter how many teachers recommended the glue to me, there was no hiding the fact that it would always drip down the sides before having a chance to dry.

And there was my poor grandfather, cancer-ridden. Was he dizzy, too? Did he have anyone to make paper cranes for him? I was certainly too terrible at origami to try. Cardboard homes would have to do. Sure, the cardboard dividing the rooms of my cardboard mansion threatened to

collapse at any moment, but as long as I didn't collapse with it, we'd be okay.

Cardboard Conversations

My cardboard home never went on the market. Instead, my private nook in Grandma's kitchen was replaced with belongings I never knew Grandpa had, nor ever really thought about. Here's his laundry hamper. Box of clothes. Resin bird figurines. Cheaply-made recliner just big enough to fit his skeletal frame. No, we can't throw anything away. Yes, we need the napkins scribbled on with Bic pens, the half-empty box of plastic spoons, the scratched-off lottery tickets. This stuff is important, you know. But it could be contagious. Fine. Contagious. Fine. Contagious. Contagious?

And so my cardboard mansion, once the project I devoted all my after-school time to, became an afterthought, ended up in my basement.

And no, I could not continue my project at home. It was too messy, too much. It's fine in the basement. The basement, where my beautiful mansion went to live with the boring boxes filled with old computer games, the boxes a little girl did not spend hours covering in glue. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, basement to basement.

It was not long before my mansion went missing altogether. I wonder when it was tossed onto the deck, to become rain-soaked and useless, crooked beds and all.

Maybe I should have tried for paper cranes instead. They take up less space.

Cardboard Family

If Mom was a cardboard person, she would be one who fell into a puddle: even after drying, there is a certain limpness remaining, a mildewy smell that reminds you something changed, even if you can't put your finger on it. Sure, cardboard is sturdy and hard to cut, but dunk it in a puddle, leave it out on the deck during a rainstorm, and it eventually turns to mush.

That's the condition my mother was in: soaked in water, though it was unclear whether the water came from the tears she thought she could hide

from us or the tears of God. Why did He let this happen? Allow my cardboard family to be drenched? Everyone knows that a wet cardboard box cannot stand upright, even once dry. Its limpness makes you forget for a moment that not long ago it was impenetrable to the dull blades of safety scissors, impervious to the streams of glue you tried to fill its corrugation with. Once soaked, it seems to retreat. Cut me, fill me with glue, for all I care. What's another rainstorm anyway?

I didn't think my cardboard family could take another rainstorm, for fear of disintegrating into mush.

Cardboard Prayers

"Pray to Grandpa. He's listening. Talk to God. He's there for you." Pray to Grandpa, pray for Grandpa, pray to God. But what should I say to Grandpa, to my grandfather I could never really have a conversation with because of the barrier in understanding—his garbled tones and my childhood shyness? Pray to Grandpa, pray to God. "Hi Grandpa. Hi God. It's me, Rebecca." Rebecca, cardboard person, just a little soggy.

Pray for Grandpa, but what about pray for Mom? "Please help Mom. She's really sad. She misses you." Cardboard mother and cardboard daughter and cardboard mansions put onto the deck when cardboard daughter wasn't looking. Cardboard mother, inconsolable, braving another rainstorm.

"I hope you're doing good in heaven. And are reunited with your kitty." Are cardboard mothers allergic to cardboard kitties? "I hope there's baseball and cats in heaven for you. Did you like the picture I made you of cats playing baseball? Anyway, I miss you." Maybe I should make cardboard kitties for my future cardboard homeowners.

"Mom, where's my cardboard house?"

Unfinished

Amanda Tolvaia

I sit in my normal spot at the table, the back of my chair facing the separator between the kitchen and the family room. My legs dangle from the chair; at six or seven years old, I'm not quite tall enough to reach the ground. We're conversing in spurts, but I can see my mom glancing at the TV, distracted. I hear Dr. Phil, which means Mom or Dad forgot to change the channel for the 5:00 news. I've never seen Mom invested in Dr. Phil before, so I strain my ears. I hear the doctor's deep drawl and a woman's quavering voice. Although I hear them clearly, I cannot comprehend the topic. My curiosity bests my appetite and I turn around to watch.

Facing the TV, I lose the ability to hear for a moment. A picture of plastic bags filled with vomit overtakes our TV. This woman's daughter is puking on purpose. Dr. Phil talks, but I stare at the plastic bags still displayed on the screen behind him. They lie beneath bushes, and I wonder why the daughter would place them where anyone could find them.

The plastic bags vanish after a few more minutes. The show spares us from any more images for a while, maybe until after the next commercial break. The next picture to arrive fascinates me. My stomach stirs while my brain imprints the image: the daughter's torso, clad in only a bra. Trenches border each rib and her collarbone dips deep as a canyon. I remember sickly skin—either white as bone or yellow as hay—with bright blue veins that seemed to jump off the screen.

“Bulimia,” I hear. Eventually, I cobble together a definition. Bulimia, noun: a thing that makes this girl throw up so she can be skinny. My mom says something like, “How can she do that?” No one tries to answer. She changes the channel.

I cannot wait to graduate from St. Dot’s. After nine years of the same dull hallways and loud classmates, I need to escape. The confines press against my 5’7” body. I loom over my female classmates and many of the males, as well, but I urge my body to grow further. I want to stand six-feet tall, at least. Best-case scenario, I reach 6’5” like Dad.

In the fall, I visit the doctor for my annual checkup. I adopt the perfect posture when they measure my height. In my mind, I will the nurse to hurry. I want to know how many inches I’ve gained.

One eternity later, the doctor enters. On a computer, she shows graphs that measure my height and weight over my lifetime. I droop when she shares my height: only a quarter of an inch taller than last year. She directs her next sentence at my mom, lowering her volume.

“She weighs 140 pounds,” the doctor says. “She’s on the higher end of what she should weigh at this height. She shouldn’t keep gaining weight like this.”

I stop breathing. I thought I was healthy, thin. I thought I could eat deserts. Now I’d have to be careful? Could I still have seconds? What about chocolate?

Some weeks later, the dread dissipates. I slather a bagel with Nutella and sprinkle banana slices on top for a nighttime snack. When Mom sees the plate, she says, “You can’t keep eating like that.”

I eat it anyway, just to spite her. I labor to chew it, though. I fear I will choke with every swallow. It tastes like ash, but I persist. I feel the need to prove her wrong welling in my chest, alongside the shame of insisting upon being bad, being unhealthy. I can’t stop. I chew and swallow, chew and swallow. The taste of regret lingers long after my last bite.

That night, I recite the doctor’s words until I file them into my long-term memory beside Dr. Phil.

Late December, about halfway through my freshman year of high

school, I have a thought: *I should eat 1500 calories for a day, just to see if I can do it.*

I can. It feels empowering to take care of my body while exercising my will. *Let's see if I can do it another day.*

Another success. I decide to see how long I can go before I revert to my old habits.

On Christmas, I receive a pack of different flavored hot chocolates. My grin glows as I thank my parents. As I carry the box to the kitchen, one thought reverberates: *How am I going to get rid of these without drinking them?*

Emotions become distant, a relic of childhood. I don't feel again until I drop to 1000 calories a day. Control becomes me. My stomach fills with inordinate pride, and I cling to the feeling. I eat meals of deceptive wealth. One sandwich, 245 calories; no one says a word.

My lunch table consists of five or six girls, but today only three sit and eat. Only two speak.

"Yeah, in eighth grade, I just wouldn't eat my sandwich," one of them starts. "My dad noticed and talked to me about it, you know."

"I would notice if someone was doing that," says the other girl. "It's obvious."

I nearly spit all over the table, nearly soak my half-eaten sandwich. I want to smile; I want to challenge her. Instead I eat another quarter of my sandwich, then leave early for class.

Sleep becomes a rarity with the passing weeks. My usual hour of wakefulness compounds into two, three, even four hours. I use this newfound time to calculate. I re-add my numbers for the day and plan my intake for the next. When my focus wanes completely, I start to plead for sleep. It feels cruel to be kept awake and thinking. It feels like punishment.

"We're going out today," Mom says.

"Where?" I ask.

"I told you yesterday."

"I don't remember." I shrug, effecting an air of nonchalance. My memory has always been spotty, I tell myself. I think I believe it.

Mom uses my iPad, sees my search history.

I'm in danger I'm in danger she'll try to stop me I can still pull it off I lied I said I would stop she'll believe me right right I can keep doing this maybe have seconds

tonight oh God oh God no no seconds it's fine tomorrow I'll only eat half my sandwich so I can have a full dinner and still stay under 1000 oh my God did I overeat today I think I added wrong I need to add again ok breakfast a packet of oatmeal 120 plus wheat bread 120 plus turkey 60 probably less but I'll round up just in case ok I'm at 300 what else . . .

My mom drags me to the pediatrician a few weeks later. She sees disease on my body. I do too, but apparently we disagree on the definition.

It's our second visit concerning my issue. Last week the doctor instructed me to drink at least six sports drinks a day. I obliged, chugging Powerade Zeros until my stomach swelled like a blood-filled mosquito. Now the sweet scent makes me gag. I hope the doctor lets me stop. Surely I've consumed enough electrolytes to power my heart for sixty more years.

A nurse wheels in a blood pressure machine, and as she wraps the band around my upper arm, she says, "Pick a song, I'll put it on the computer. This'll take a few minutes."

I dig through my brain, trying to think of an acceptable song. The nurse is waiting, so I settle on "Best Day of My Life." I glance at Mom, then flick my eyes away. Her face jumps in my periphery though, lips stretched, eyes drawn.

The cuff releases, the nurse leaves, and, after several years, the doctor enters. I notice her brown curls, a soft frame for a strained face. Her smile conveys peace and her skin lies smooth across her skull. However, her eyes hold baggage. Her eyes make my heartbeat quicken, though maybe it falters. I can't tell the difference.

"You lost some weight," she says, looking at my mom. "It's not surprising. We couldn't have expected it to get better."

I refuse to look at Mom's face, but my eyes can't resist the pull of her nod.

The doctor faces both of us now. "Your heart rate is too low," she continues. "You need to go to the ER. You could have a heart attack at any moment."

The news falls with a dull thump in my chest. I focus on my yearning stomach instead. I haven't prepared for that symptom. I thought I had escaped it, like I have all the others. I thought I would just die.

Within a half hour, Mom and I wait outside the ER, surrounded by primary colors.

“Do you feel dizzy or lightheaded?”

“No.”

“Do you see dark spots when you stand?”

“No.”

The doctor squints, scribbles notes. I slouch while she diverts her attention. Her glasses do nothing to ease her aggressive eye contact. She wants to see deception or guilt, but my eyes can't fake emotions.

She asks too many more questions, to which I give unsatisfactory answers. She does not like my truths, or she doubts them. I don't believe I can deceive, though, or else I would have escaped admittance.

She leaves me with a sitter once she's done. I need to go to the bathroom, so I swing my legs over the side of the bed. As I stand, I am struck blind. I blink, blink harder, gripping the mattress. My vision returns in chunks. Dark spots pepper the air like sprinkles on soft serve. I contain my laughter so as not to confuse the sitter. I did not realize how proficient I had become at trickery.

The next morning two nurses take my vitals and weigh me, back turned to the number, of course. However, I hear one whisper, “111 pounds.”

My heart swells. *That's four pounds less than I thought! God I can't believe I'm so low, I did so well it doesn't matter now though, I'm going to bulge I'm going to get fat again all my progress gone it'll take me so long to get back down I'll have to be more subtle this time probably can't go below 1000 or else I'll get caught but 1500 is so much I can't do it oh my God it's going to take months to get back down what if I can't stop eating I can't start I won't stop . . .*

The doctor enters with another round of questions. I feed her answers, thoughts rattling in the background.

The next eight days pass without distinction. I converse with my sitters, largely pleasant talks, though any conversation looking life in the eyes discomfits me. I marathon HGTV and read *Anna Karenina* in between interrogations and instructions. On the evening of the final day, they bag my pizza dinner and release me to house arrest. Another week later, I get parole and return to school part-time. After a few months, I am trusted

enough to determine my own meals and eat without an audience. I look cured, and, after many years, I feel less disordered.

Except when I look at a meal, the calorie count still flashes in my mind. I find myself adding numbers and avoiding certain foods and drinks. Restaurant menus cut my breath, and if the conversation turns to diets my mind leaves the room. I recover from these moments, but my hum of disordered thoughts persists. I seem to hold the power, but I can never ease my guard. So I practice caution and persist alongside my disease.

Trembling Hope

Shaun Anderson

The pile of warm dog shit baked under the window. My nose registered the scent before my mind could comprehend the mess I found in the bedroom.

Hope—the Rottweiler my roommate had rescued from the Humane Society a month earlier—cowered over her first in-home shit storm. My roommate had gone to work again without walking or feeding her dog.

Not my dog.

Hope shied away as I approached.

Not my dog. Not my dog. Not my dog.

She knew I would hit her before I did, flinching away from my open palm. She didn't yelp, just stumbled back, tried to escape the slap. *Not my dog.* I caught her across the muzzle before my other hand snagged her collar and shoved her down, turned her to face her shit.

“Bad dog!”

I hit her again.

Not my dog.

I straddled her, felt the power, held her down to a pile of her own shit.

“Most abusers have been abused,” my therapist said, years before I lived with Hope. “But not all people who have been abused become abusers.”

I nodded like I understood why she told me this.

I had just snagged a boyfriend by exploiting the fact I had been abused. We sat in McDonald's and ate chicken sandwiches from the Dollar Menu, while we told each other our histories. He was the first gay man I had met, and I needed to know if all gay men in Utah were as fucked up as I was. I dropped the word "molested;" he responded with a story about being raped in Seattle.

A month later he shoved me down on his living-room couch. My boyfriend's hands slid up my body like the hands from my childhood. They slipped under my shirt, feeling skin. My boyfriend's mouth climbed my neck and sealed around my mouth, His tongue flicking between my teeth. My boyfriend's legs wrapped around my waist as His hands slipped back down my torso to grab the hem of my shirt. I felt like the six year old again, pushed down on coarse brown carpet, while He pulled away my pajamas. I tried not to choke on my boyfriend's tongue; tried to feel my boyfriend's hands on my flesh. All I could feel was the touch of His hands. The touch of my abuser.

Hope's body quivered beneath mine. She didn't struggle. She didn't whine. My strength subdued her. I held her, my hands pinning her head in its position, unable to withdraw until I pulled away. I was power.

When Hope came home from the shelter, we speculated about her past. Hope wheezed in corners for a month as we snuck kennel-cough pills into her treats. Her nipples hung six inches away from her stomach, signs of recent pregnancy.

Hope had curled at my feet that first night, heaving with illness, and I stroked her head.

"I think she might have been abused," my roommate said. "She's so sweet."

I had promised to love her, because I assumed she understood me. Abuse had connected us.

She did understand me, curled under my weight. She understood. Laid still. No attempt to struggle.

I pulled myself off her and stumbled across the bedroom. I turned back at the door. Hope lay where I left her. We stared one another down. Trembling.

SHORT FICTION

Clay

James Braun

For the second time this year, we mistake Cecilia for the birds. The first time Joey heard the knock on our front door he slipped out the back to get a shovel from our father's tool shed. I was sprawled out on the living-room floor watching Cartoon Network, watching Joey in the reflection of the TV screen. When he came back inside with the shovel over his shoulder, he opened the door expecting a bird to be lying dead on our front porch, but what he got instead was our older cousin Cecilia standing there sopping wet with two waterlogged duffel bags at her feet. She pushed past Joey and joined me on the carpet, and we spent the day watching Cartoon Network together. Same thing this time, the second time.

Bird, shovel, Cartoon Network. Joey brings in Cecilia's bags and puts them in my room. Cecilia tells us her house is underwater again. She says her part of the canal is where the waterline rises above the seawall; Cecilia waking this morning to sunfish swimming in her basement. We spray cheese in a can over crackers in the kitchen and I ask her if she'd ever bought that sump pump our father told her to get. Pshaw, she says, with what money? 'Sides, that's my landlord's job. He's out there right now with a bucket and the Shop-Vac.

Joey and I love it when Cecilia's house floods. Our parents do not. Our mother comes in from the garden and grabs Cecilia by the neck, bending her over one of our kitchen stools with her gardening gloves still on. You

think this is a goddamn hotel? she says. You think you can just stay here when your life's in the shitter?

Cecilia, hair hanging in her face, says, Aw, Aunt June, don't be like that.

What our father says when he comes home from a carpeting job in town and sees Cecilia is, You again?

A family meeting is called. We sit at the dining-room table, a lit candle dripping wax in the center, Easter decorations next to it—Peter Rabbit, red, yellow, purple eggs. *Wheel of Fortune* plays instead of Cartoon Network on the living room TV, and Joey cranes his neck toward it. Our mother sets the ground rules. No making food at 4:00 a.m.; no bringing the neighbors' cats inside the house; no smoking, getting high, or getting drunk. No boys, no girls. Or whatever Cecilia's into these days.

Cecilia says, You got it boss.

Joey and I help blow up the air mattress in my bedroom. The pump is broke, so Joey and I take turns with our lips, switching when our faces turn too red. Our parents are in full argument from the other room, our father saying, It's only for a couple days, she needs a place to stay, be reasonable. Our mother says, A week. Tops.

By the time we get the air mattress pumped, Cecilia's asleep in my bed, my race car covers pulled over her head. Joey's off to his own room for the night. I lie on the mattress, but cannot sleep with the sound of air escaping from a hole in it, and I'm still awake when Cecilia wakes at 4:00 a.m, my bed long gone flat.



When I walk sleep-faced into the kitchen the next morning, Cecilia's sitting at the dining-room table making cutouts of crows and owls with pages from our father's home improvement magazines. This was the last thing she did the last time she stayed with us; now the first thing. She draws outlines with a Sharpie, scissors following the lines. She is wearing a still-wet sweater, wears long sleeves year-round, even now in April. After the magazine is turned to scraps she gathers up the cutouts and tapes them to the dining-room windows. She tapes them to the box window in the kitchen. She's in the den, taping. Jesus, you people never heard of *blinds* before? she says, taping. I turn on Cartoon Network. Joey wakes up and joins me on the floor. Our father walks out of his bedroom, going for the coffee maker, but stops when he sees the cutouts, his magazines in shreds. He doesn't

say anything. He pulls out the Folgers from the lazy Susan. Our mother is working the day shift at the hospital, already gone, and the television is turned on low. A bird slams into the window of the dining room, trying to fly into our house. This time I go to the window to look. Joey goes for the shovel. But Cecilia is already outside, scooping up the robin and cradling it in her sweater, bringing it into the house. She sets the bird on the counter and throws open drawers and cabinets, looking for something to mend its broken wings. The bird's breast doesn't rise with a beating heart. We have to save this one, she says, tearing gauze into strips with her teeth. She's special, can't you see? She had wanted to do it.

Our mother won't give us a ride into town, so we walk down Jeddo to the secondhand store, where only maybe half the clothes are safe to wear. Inside, I steer Cecilia away from the aisles of dime and quarter clothes, leading her toward the back. Joey heads for the toy section. The cash register lady eyes us in the mirror hooked into the upper corner like a camera. I watch her watching us. Cecilia gives her the finger, indirectly.

These are the ones you want, I say, running my hand along the dollar clothes rack.

Cecilia unhooks a sweatshirt from its coat hanger. What's wrong with the other ones? she asks, and I turn her around and show her a bed bug the size of birdseed nesting in a dime and quarter hoodie.

Gotcha, she says.

Cecilia picks out two sweatshirts, a pair of sweatpants, and what we came here for, a bathing suit, a one-piece with green and white stripes. Joey finds himself a Lincoln Logs can, six Hot Wheels cars, a train track without the train, a grass-stained baseball mitt, green army men with parachutes, and he sets the toys on the checkout counter, but he doesn't have money for any of it so he puts them all back. Cecilia pays for her new used clothes with a few water-cracked dollar bills, handing them over to the cash-register lady.

When we make it back to our house, Joey and I change into shorts to go swimming. Cecilia changes into her bathing suit in the bathroom. In the back of our house is a pond, one our father had paid to put fish in. Sunfish, trout, a few bass. He'd installed a rope swing for Joey and me, though the rope's end is frayed and the wood platform has gone to rot, now filled with bees.

I open my bedroom door about the same time Joey does, his room across the hall from mine, the two of us standing there bare-chested, the bathroom between us. Joey knocks on the bathroom door and says, Cecilia, we're waiting on you. You coming?

I need a minute, she says.

We walk through the kitchen and slide open the back screen-door, heading outside. The sun is out; no April showers today. We pass the many smoothed-over graves next to the house. From the tool shed I grab a handful of fish feed from the silver can and Joey does the same, cupping the pellets with both hands as I hold the lid open for him. He says, Bet I beat you to the pond! and he runs off, pellets dropping to the grass to be run over later by our father's lawnmower.

Joey's out of pellets by the time he gets to the pond. When I get there I give him mine, and he throws up a spray of fish feed, flashes of shiny lips popping up hummingbird fast as they surface and swim away with their snack.

Our mother is asleep tanning on a lawn chair next to the pond, horseflies and mosquitos landing on her face and arms. Her rules are posted on a sign next to the rope swing: NO backflips, NO diving, NO eating on the rope swing. NO drowning. And in small print: Failure to follow these rules will result in immediate banning of rope-swinging thereafter. Joey and I avoid the rope swing because of the bees. Our father is out today on a carpeting job.

Joey and I wade into the water. I stay shallow, sitting stomach-high-wet near shore, chasing tadpoles with my hands. Joey heads farther out, reaching down and pulling up fistfuls of mud and clay, slapping muck on his shoulders and chest. I say, Joey, quit stirring up the mud, I can't see the tadpoles.

In the center of the pond, the filter like a fountain bubbles and gurgles. The water is cold; doesn't matter how hot it gets in Michigan summer. From here Joey and I see Cecilia stepping out onto our back porch, walking down the steps and into the grass, coming for us along the dirt and gravel path to the pond.

When the fish finish their feeding, Joey finds a trout to chase. There aren't many left. The sunfish and bass can't be caught by anything other than bait and hook, but the trout swim slow and are easily grabbed. We've learned from our father that when a human hand touches their gills wrong,

they become diseased and die, washing up on shore to be eaten by the birds.

Hey, leave them fish alone! Cecilia calls from the pond's edge. Joey quits his chasing, but I've already seen him touch the trout.

Cecilia wades in, the water rippling out from her waist. The bathing suit is a size too small, the shoulder straps pinched tight against her skin. Her arms are wrist-to-elbow covered in Band-Aids, and she holds them out, fingertips brushing against the surface, getting a feel for the water. Joey plugs his nose and goes underwater, popping up behind her and slapping a handful of clay and mud onto her back.

You little shit, Cecilia says.

Cecilia reaches into the water and comes up with her own fistful of muck, throwing it at Joey and hitting him square in the chest, pebbles falling and mud dripping down his stomach. The three of us are kicking and splashing, dunking each other's heads, throwing muck at each other. A few of Cecilia's Band-Aids fall off on one side, flapping against red lines underneath. The hell you think you're all doing? our mother says, awakened by the splashing, and we all turn to her with our bodies covered in mud and clay.

Just playing, Momma, Joey says.

Well knock it off.

Our mother falls back asleep, the horseflies at her again.

Cecilia gets out of the water, walking out onto the pond shore with water and mud falling from her. She heads over to the rope swing, unafraid of the bees, and climbs the ladder onto the rotten platform. Joey and I stop to watch. She unwraps the rope from the pole and takes it in both hands, twisting the bottom, mending the fray into a knot. Bringing the rope up high, she wraps it around her neck and lolls her head to the side, playing dead.

Joey and I clap at her acting.

Cecilia gets the call two days later. Her landlord says it's safe to come back, though the canal's waters have warped the walls worse than before and mold grows where water has touched it. Joey brings out her bags and sets them by the front door. Our mother and father stand in the kitchen waiting for her to leave. It's about damn time, our mother says, our father

saying, Be respectful. Cecilia walks out of my bedroom wearing her dollar sweatshirt. We give our goodbye hugs, Cecilia leaving with a wave and a walk down our gravel drive; Joey and I watching from the cracked glass window, hoping soon for another flood.

Wild, Wondrous

Kieron Walquist

I'm still haunted by what the lobster said.

About a month ago, I begged my boyfriend, Ezra, to go out for dinner. Seafood, and in the Midwest, that left us Red Lobster. I promised to order pasta, though, and to even split the bill. I wanted us to sit down, somewhere—out of the apartment. That way, we could talk. He could take me back. It was unlikely, after what I'd done, but I had to try.

I was willing, then, to fight for hope. You, my child, would have what I did not. A family. A stable home. Love.

It had been raining. A kind of weather that could slice through clothes. We rushed the doors and, once inside, Ezra helped to peel off my coat. Touched me, reluctantly, as if the act were a chore. That's when the lobster saw my belly, I'm sure. Knew, somehow, that I was expecting. It told me from across the lobby, "You hold a wonder."

As the host looked for our reservation, I waddled over—my ankles already swollen, sore, in my second trimester. The lobster scuttled along the bottom of a bathwater-blue tank. Its claws were caught by thick, white rubber bands. When it spoke, bubbles like champagne froth rose to the surface, fizzled. "Be happy."

"Happy?" I asked, more to myself. Was I supposed to be *happy*? I knocked on the glass with a knuckle, angry at this cockroach of the sea. "What do you know? You're a lobster!"

At that, others began to stare. Look up from menus, put down drinks. A boy asked his mother what I was doing, only to cross his arms and pout when warned to *behave*. Uneasy, I went to find Ezra, who by then had left my side. He was always disappearing.

It was you, little one, who brought the English language to animals. Gave them all a human voice. Before you, the sounds of wildlife were just noise. Barks, brays, and birdsong only meant what I imagined. Hunger, anger, lust, fear. Indifference. But once you struck into existence—a flake of fire thrown by flint and steel—I could *hear* them. The cardinal that was excited for spring, the turtle who mourned for her mate. Squirrels that gossiped in oak trees. My cat that yowled for food and called me *hopeless*.

You made me straitjacket-crazy.

When I found Ezra, he had already claimed a table and temper. He moaned, a birthing Jersey cow, throughout the meal. I picked at a biscuit, dimpled the dough with greasy fingertips, and listened.

“Hayley, you slept with him!” He wrung his cloth napkin, threw it down. He trembled—kept at his curly nest of auburn hair, combed and clutched it with shaky hands. His cognac-colored eyes were runny and red behind wire-rimmed glasses.

“I know. But please, Ezra, I need—”

“Am I the father? Or is Andy, your ex?”

I looked out the window, more at the rain than anything else. That night was a mistake. New Year’s Eve, a few drinks, loud music. Andy was familiar. There for me. It was easy to fall out of my body, into an old habit. How I tugged on a belt loop of Levi jeans, towed Andy into his art room. Stripped off our clothes, tossed them aside. Tangled ourselves in drop cloths splattered in psychedelic paint, later washed up in a slop sink full of gray water.

“That’s not fair—”

“Do you love me? Do you even *like* my poetry?”

I’d gone to several of his readings. Ezra was an MFA candidate at UMSL—we met in his freshman Composition class, continued to grab coffee afterward. Studied together late at night, soon made love in his sticker-shellacked Subaru. Eventually moved into an apartment together, off campus. I thought he was the *one*. And so I went along with him to these readings where writers in bulky scarfs whispered poetry. I ate whatever plate of cheese and stale crackers they offered, but was always bored, dog-tired. Once, while reading a piece—about fly-fishing or

something—Ezra locked eyes with me, and his smile slid off as I yawned. Lion-like.

“Hayley?” he said, bringing me back to the restaurant. “Don’t shut me out.”

“I’m not—”

“You’re always in your *head*. Somewhere else. Can’t you be *here*, with me?”

I had wanted to reach for his hand, then. To show him we were close enough, and that wasn’t the problem. But you couldn’t take it. Someone’s cologne, deep and earthy—vetiver or patchouli—had reached me, and I clambered out of my chair, aimed for the door. Feeling nauseous. Overwhelmed. Betrayed. Because of you, certain smells cooked up a sickness in me: curry, coffee, cigarette smoke. Smells that I used to find comfort in.

I had stumbled outside, into the biting rain, and leaned over a bush. Ezra tracked me down, placed my coat that I’d forgotten onto my wet, shivering body. He drove me back to our apartment—to a home he tried to take in cardboard boxes, convinced we could no longer share the same space. On the way, I rolled down my window, woozy in the car’s tropical heat, and cursed the lobster against the rain.

What kind of *wonder* were you?



Now, in the cool of early June, I walk along the manicured grounds of the St. Louis Zoo, rowdy with wild children at 9:00 a.m. The animals—creatures of fur, feather, and fin—are caged, confined so they can be seen and revered from a safe distance, but I watch the people instead. They decipher maps, buy plush toys of koala bears and toucans, take pictures of penguins and seals. Toddlers go bug-eyed, either in awe or anxiety, when seeing tigers, camels, giraffes with raspberry-pink tongues the size of forearms. Babies that are pushed in strollers or carried close in papooses laugh and smile, wear adorable onesies that say *I woke up this cute and good or bad, time will tell*. Their parents came prepared: packed goldfish crackers and fruit snacks, applied sunscreen and buckets hats for the soft, sensitive skin of youth.

Sights like these make it hard to think about abortion. But that’s all I think about.

I’ve carried you well into the second trimester, and you’ve shipwrecked my body. What used to belong to me. Your weight whaled inside me,

threatened to break my back from the strain. My legs felt like bags of water—I struggled to move and keep myself upright. My chest hurt, heaved, heavy as my breasts made milk for you. And I had to pee, constantly, with you—an iceberg—on my bladder.

There, in restrooms, I was forced to be by beautiful girls. They wore leggings and crop tops, bandanas tied into bows to hold gorgeous, glossy hair. I wore heather-gray sweatpants and T-shirts two sizes too big, all stained in pickle juice or gravy or ice cream, for you cried out to eat everything. These girls would study their flawless skin and frosty-white teeth in the mirror, touch up their mascara and lip balm. I hid myself in the claustrophobic stalls—my skin was moon-cratered in acne and rashes, allergic reactions from the pregnancy lotions I smeared on for dry skin. When I came out, sick and tired by the scent of toilet, those beautiful girls would catch my reflection in the mirror. Then quickly look away.

“You’re a pretty, pretty thing,” a possum once told me. I’d just gotten out of the restroom at a public park and, while I prayed not to be murdered, I saw it under the fluorescents. Climbing out of a trashcan. But what did a possum know about beauty?



I could be done with you. Make an appointment and have a friend drive me after the operation. Part of me longs for the freedom when you’re gone. Young, in college, working a sad job at Dairy Queen, I’m not ready to be a mother. I’m not ready for the banshee-crying, the long and restless nights. Not ready for dirty diapers, nursing you until baby teeth come in, bite down.

I don’t want the worry. The worry to be ever watchful: what you gummed and put in your mouth that you could choke on; if you reached high and pulled something heavy onto yourself; how vulnerable you’d be to fevers, coughs, colds. These were little things, really. There was so much more to be afraid of in this world. And I was all alone—

“You think too much,” the orangutan says, startling me.

I come to. Realize my forehead is pressed against a pane of glass. I step back on sleepy feet, ease myself down on a bench. You’re rattling my ribcage, ready for a riot, and I grip the iron armrest out of blinding pain.

The exhibit before me is small, but has high ceilings. Cables and tire-swings to act as jungle vines and branches for the primates. A dry bed of

straw on the concrete floor. The orangutan, a mother itself, cradles a baby in her limber lap.

“Just let it be,” she tells me. Her big, sad eyes are recessed in a wrinkled face—a face like a motorcycle jacket, cracked and worn out by age. She reminds me of my grandmother, only kinder.

“I don’t know if I can.”

“It’s not about *you*.”

And that was the other part. The part of me that kept you alive, away from an available death. You deserved so much more.

Before Ezra had found out about Andy, he had beamed like the sun—his happiness a lifeforce—at the thought of being a father. *Your* father. Of starting a family together, the three of us. We would’ve been glorious.

Late at night, as Ezra laid beside me in bed, I imagined what our lives would be like. We’d buy a house, close to work and a good school, but far enough to take off our shoes, run barefoot, breathe in gentle air, look up to steady stars against the country dark. Ezra would paint the nurse in a yellow color with a dessert name: custard, cheesecake, buttercream. I’d buy Fisher Price toys and read Dr. Seuss to put you to sleep. I’d carefully trim your baby fingernails, bathe you in the kitchen sink, dress you in cotton. We’d teach you how to walk in our backyard, lifting your chubby body up and letting you fall, softly, in the spring grass that’d be wild with dew and oxeye daisies.

We’d give you a name that might surprise strangers, raise some eyebrows, but would capture your individuality and set you apart. I said these names in the dark, hands beneath blankets and on my blooming stomach, to see if you’d respond. *Canyon, Mint, Sable, Fifer*.

But that was before.

I leave the monkey house. Sift my way through clumps of children who shout at the sweating windows and wave thin arms to rouse the silverback gorillas. I pass the apiary, cowering under the shrill of birds, the squall of beating wings: owls, macaws, hawks, hornbills, peacocks, eagles. Curious, I peek down into the crocodile pit, but they’re hidden somewhere in the marshy water. I learn about iguanas with regenerating tails, fire salamanders with toxic skin and eye glands that’re able to squirt a highly-irritating

substance at predators. I take note of bad mothers in the animal kingdom: polar bears that kill and consume their young; lions that leave sickly or deformed cubs behind. But after seeing the elephants caked in dust, the hyenas spraying piss all over their enclosure, the antelope standing still in the tall grass like decoys, I have to sit down again.

The zoo is exhausting. All of this is *exhausting*.

Despite my discomfort, my doubt that I could ever be like them, I continue to watch and marvel at the families, the parents. The place is overcrowded, shotgun-loud with nature, and reeks of feces, musk, wet hide, but these parents brave it all so that their children can see. See what's beautiful and wild in our world.

The parents are better than most. Certainly better than mine.

My trailer home tore itself apart. Bottles of Budweiser. Cocaine in folds of aluminum foil. Hands that held violence. Mouths that were mean and always hungry. I lost my parents to partying, priors, the black-and-white bumblebee static of the TV, still on late at night. After years like this—cooped up in chaos—my grandmother took me to live with her. Left my brothers, for they were trouble.

She raised me on oatmeal, the Old Testament, Goodwill clothes. Wanted nothing more from me than to go to high school, then college. And I remember what she said as I packed my suitcase for UMSL. *Keep your legs crossed, girl. Don't make the same mistakes your mother made.*



I schedule an appointment with Planned Parenthood over the phone. Either my reception's bad or the line picks up the breeze into the conversation, for the woman that I'm speaking with goes quiet, almost like she's holding her breath, and I keep saying *Are you there are you there*, fighting back tears.

You deserve so much more. That's why I'm letting you go. You, whom ever you were about to be, needed a family. A stable home. Love. I couldn't give you that.

Better not to be a mother at all than a bad mother.

"You alright, ma'am?"

I don't want to talk to another animal. Zebra, mongoose, porcupine, nothing! But when I look up, wiping my eyes with a shirt sleeve, it's a zookeeper in khaki duds. A human.

“You seem in pain.”

“Yes. No. My baby’s just—taking up karate.”

The man laughs at that. Then he’s by my side, catching me, helping me down to the ground. I’m apologizing, blaming the heat, but the man’s calling for help. Shouts that a woman is going into labor. That we need to get inside. Get a doctor, an ambulance. To hurry.

“It’s okay,” a woman says, straight into my face. “Just breathe.”

“What’s going—”

But something is ripping through me and I’m only able to scream. A blanket is brought and thrown over my waist for privacy. My pants, panties, are shucked off. You’re crowning. Coming.

“You’re doing great,” the zookeeper says.

The woman takes my hand. “Can I call your husband?”

“I’m not married.”

“The *father?*”

“Ezra. No, Andy—”

“Ma’am!” The zookeeper’s worried. “Stay with us!”

But as they speak, I can’t understand the words anymore. Everything that falls from their lips is *noise*—some feral, foreign tongue. They lift the blanket and back away, horrified. I’m shouting *it’s too soon it’s too*—but with one more push, you emerge. Alive and well. Covered in vernix, blood, ink, feathers. All hooves, paws, wings, antlers, tentacles, scales.

You’re wild. Wondrous.

Mine.

Fate Inc.

Allison Akers

“Do you really have to babysit me?” Ben slammed the door to his fluorescent orange sports car, watching as Lark slicked back his hair in the sun-visor mirror. He had hoped the location alone would get Lark off his back. A dingy place called Sam’s Diner in the middle-of-nowhere Oregon was beneath the corporate offices and yachts Lark frequented—not to mention they’d driven two and a half hours to meet Ben’s client. Under normal circumstances, he supposed it would be enough to send Lark packing.

No such luck today.

“I wouldn’t have to, if Their Majesties could trust you,” Lark said, finally stepping out and cracking his back. A silver briefcase swung by his side. “You haven’t had a successful deal in months.”

“So? I’ve been in a funk.”

Lark narrowed his eyes. He slammed the passenger-side door, wrinkled his nose at Ben’s car, and led them inside the diner. A bell jingled overhead as they walked in, alerting a waitress nearby. She scurried over.

“How may I—” The waitress fumbled, seeing the silver briefcase and its infinity symbol. Lark’s grip tightened on the case and he jerked his head to one side. The waitress hurried off.

At a table towards the back of the diner, Ben noticed a stout, middle-aged woman staring at them: his client. Before Ben could take his eyes away, suggest maybe she’d cancelled their appointment, Lark noticed her

and elbowed Ben, who gritted his teeth. They walked to the woman's table and slid into the booth across from her with Lark boxing in Ben. The cushion underneath them crunched like rotten Styrofoam.

"Mrs. Caroline Collins?" Lark asked, cracking a smile.

"That's me," she said. Caroline's eyes flitted between the two of them, as if she were watching a game of ping-pong. She pulled her coffee mug closer. Ben noticed her right hand had a grayish tint. "I didn't know there would be two of you. Or—is he human?" She nodded at Ben.

Ben took that question with a bit of pride. He'd worked hard to make his human disguise approachable. He certainly didn't look like a lawyer with a stick up his ass like Lark. He tried to go with an average, college-guy approach; it helped keep attention off him and protected people around him. One look at his or Lark's true forms would send any mortal into cardiac arrest, and while Lark would find that funny, Ben wouldn't.

Lark put his arm around Ben, clapping his shoulder and chuckling, "No, Ben's all Fate. Served under The Royal Three with me before Ancient Greece, if you can believe it. I decided to tag along and keep him company. I'll let him take over."

Ben felt needle points pressing into his skin from Lark's nails. He forced a smile and shook Caroline's hand. "Benjamin Porter, Fate Incorporated. Bending time and space since 2002 for your wildest dreams to come true. What can I help you with today, Mrs. Collins?"

Caroline raised her coffee mug to her lips. It clattered on the table as she set it down. "My son—he was hit by a car a week ago—" Tears welled in her eyes and she wiped them on her jacket sleeve. Lark expertly took a packet of tissues from his pocket and offered one to her. Ben tried to ignore the way his coworker's eyes glittered and how the corners of his mouth twitched. Caroline didn't notice and continued, "He's been comatose since. Is there anything you can do?"

"Well, yes," Ben started, "but he might recover on his own."

"*Might* being the key word," Lark said. He shared a look with Ben, one that said Ben better shut up and stick with the script. Fate Incorporated wasn't a charity. The Royal Three and their subjects had a job to do, an order to keep each time humans asked them to tinker with time. Fates selected favorable individuals in their good graces, who made the most persuasive

appeals—so they said. “Why don’t you take a look at her threads?” Lark set the briefcase on the table and clicked open the locks. He slid it over to Ben, who suppressed a sigh and opened it.

Inside was a mirror-like surface with strands of white, glowing tendrils writhing across it. The other diner patrons noticed the radiating light of the suitcase and stared at Ben as if he had a million-dollar check. It was a desperation and hunger he’d seen around the world, wherever he or other Fates went. It broke his heart. Still, he wasn’t about to let Lark know that, so he kept his face expressionless. The human-like covering for his eyes sizzled off to reveal fiery, silver stars, and matching claws pushed through the tips of his fingers. Ben delicately lifted one of the white strands from the mirror. Lark and Caroline studied it.

“Well, what do you see?” Lark asked.

Ben shook his head. He wished he was lying. “Your son won’t make it, Mrs. Collins. Not in the current timeline.”

“But you can fix it,” Caroline pressed.

“For a price.” Lark peered over his nose at Caroline’s stiff, gray hand before taking it in his own. “Hm. This is unnatural paralysis. You’ve been a client with us before?”

Caroline nodded, although she kept her gaze fixed on the table. “To keep my marriage together.”

“Fancy that. This looks like Lux’s work. Don’t you think, Ben?”

Ben nodded.

Lark turned over Caroline’s hand a few times. He patted it. “I’m afraid a life is going to cost more than a bad marriage, Mrs. Collins. Let’s say—to restore your son’s health with no side effects—terminal cancer for yourself?” Caroline gasped and Ben glanced at Lark. The pupils of Lark’s eyes rippled silver. “What do you think, Ben? Fair trade?”

Caroline turned to Ben. She had clasped her good hand on top of her bad one, praying for a second opinion. If Lark wasn’t there, Ben would have given her a stubbed toe or even a free pass in exchange for saving her son.

But both their necks were on the line. And Ben wasn’t about to lose his. He nodded.

Lark continued, “I’m sorry it has to be this way, Mrs. Collins. Do we still have a deal?”

Caroline, tears streaming down her face, nodded.

“Get to it, Ben,” Lark said.

Ben gathered the strands of time between his claws, snipping and rewiring them. Each strand offered glimpses of strangers, births, deaths—all affected by saving Caroline’s son. Ben tried not to think about it. The problems he caused others by reworking the timeline just meant more work for Fates. More lives to toy with. To destroy.

Ben took the cancer thread, hesitating for a moment before he fused it to the current timeline. He hoped Lark wouldn’t check the threads. He did give Caroline cancer, but not until she was ninety. They’d never specified a time frame. Ben couldn’t be faulted for that, and surely The Royal Three had better things to worry about than tying up loose ends on small cases.

He hoped.

When he was done, Ben retracted his claws and his eyes changed back to their human appearance. He and Lark gave some last, consoling words to Caroline and exited the diner after Lark had passed out his business cards to curious patrons. Ben had already tossed the briefcase in the backseat when Lark stepped out of the diner, letting the screen door clatter behind him.

“I see why you like the little cases, Ben. Not quite as thrilling as toppling governments and rigging elections—” Lark grinned, letting Ben see the rows of his razor-like teeth, “but certainly more personal.”

“I guess.”

“They’re so *gullible*.” Lark leaned over and rested his arms on the hood of Ben’s car. “It’s like slow-boiling frogs. They don’t know they’re dead until it’s too late.”

Ben clenched the car’s door handle, his claws scratching the paint. He flinched and retracted quickly.

Lark locked eyes with him. “Careful.”

“Lark—” Ben started. His throat closed and he looked toward the diner, to Caroline crying inside, and then to the forest behind him. He wondered if he could run for it. Or teleport. Be anywhere except here on this miserable planet doing this miserable job. He stepped back from the car and Lark raised himself slightly. They gazed at each other. Lark shook his head almost imperceptibly.

No matter that wide, worried look in Lark’s eyes, he’d catch Ben if he ran. Kill him.

Ben put his head in his hand.

“If we keep this up, there won’t be so many of them in a few years,” Lark tried. He lowered his voice, “We’ll be able to take off our disguises. Live on Earth peacefully. Alone. You’ll like that, right?”

Ben didn’t reply. He smiled and hoped that was enough to fool Lark that he wasn’t committing treason—that he hadn’t decided to sabotage any case he was assigned.

Seemingly satisfied, Lark drummed his hands twice on the car roof and smiled back. “Let’s get to the next one. At least when I’m *in* your car I don’t have to look at its obnoxious color.” He hopped into the passenger seat and Ben climbed into the driver’s side.

They sped off.

Beside the Scarlet Sea

Via D'Agostino

When I wake, the Earth is full, straining against the confines of form, ready to birth or fell mountains. I reach out a hand, palm pressed flat against Pachamama. She's restless, ready for what comes—a change that I must guide into being.

“I hear you,” I soothe, enervated already. I dread what this day will hold.

A tremor laces through the Earth, but it's small, barely more than a murmur. My people and I have long been accustomed to such trembling, even before the Collapse, but back then it didn't fill us with terror—terror only I can dissipate. We knew styles of architecture that stand to this day, while the invaders' myriad buildings constructed on our foundations lie in ruins.

They're the reason we've fallen so far, but though they decimated the branches of our trees, our roots stand strong. They've fallen to savagery, but we returned with grace to our old culture. Most of us can't remember why we ever chose to live another way.

I rise and leave my mat, quiet and careful. Tuta, my pareja, mirror-image opposite, sleeps on. He watches over the night just as I guard the day, so I see him asleep more often than awake. Except for the occasional ceremonies—a la madrugada y atardecer—dawn and dusk. We're all present in those times, in between day and night, life and death, when I always carry out my duty as I must—as only I can.

Outside, the sky wavers a shade of purple, a spilled qero of chicha morada. Even as I head down towards the pueblo, the color lightens. A good sign—I am the Listener, and She knows that I hear Her. That I will obey, and so She will protect us. Today is the day.

The soft pattering of footsteps catches my attention. I glance back; Asiri grins at me as she approaches. She's always smiling—right from the day I helped bring her into this world—and I do what I must to keep that smile intact.

Asiri dips her head. “Paqari.”

I am not the oldest or youngest, nor do I have any claim to a powerful bloodline to set me above the others. They defer to me only because I hear Her more clearly and understand what she means.

“Pay khatatan,” I say. *She shakes.*

“Noqa yachani.”

I quirk an eyebrow. “Kusa, kusa. You know there was a tremor, but what does it mean?”

Though Asiri is young, many hope she'll one day take my place. Her tie to the Earth is tighter than most, but the way her face squinches tells me the bond isn't tight enough.

Pachamama has always spoken to us, just as She speaks to all Her children, whatever name they give her. Pachamama. La madre tierra. Gaea. Mother Earth. All are the same, and She always speaks. We are where we are because generations of my predecessors did not listen.

Still, we knew enough that, when los conquistadores washed onto our shores, long before the sea stopped being blue, we hid ourselves away, buried our homelands, passed our traditions mamaytaytaykuna to wawayusikusuna. It took hundreds of years, but the outsiders eventually found their way to the ruins of what had once been ours. Las turistas—yura uyankukuna—arrived in droves. Pachamama screamed, but no one was listening. No one heard until it was far too late.

I was barely more than a child at the time of the Collapse, but we pass our stories down. The tales tell of the sky running black; Inti, the source of light and warmth, driven back by the arrogance of humanity. The Earth heaved, ripping and tearing Herself, cracking continents apart, desperate to make us hear. Whole cities were swallowed by the sea. Lima, Trujillo, Tokyo, San Francisco—all gone in mere moments. I myself remember the water boiling, the screams as it scalded skin, the silence of those who had

drowned. I remember the color, too, puka, rojo, el sangre del los dioses. Not the crimson of a healable wound, but the scarlet of arterial blood.

We took and took and took, until Pachmama had nothing left to give. And then the pendulum began to swing the other way. Resources could not match population, and the damage was too severe to undo. Though some can't understand, our ceremonies prevent us from taking more than we give, and the equilibrium I'm charged with maintaining enables Pachamama to keep us alive.

I remember standing beside the scarlet sea, steam curling off las olas crashing against the shore. I remember the look on my father's face as the water seared his flesh, even as he hurled me from its grasp. I remember my mother crying as I took her hand and led her away. Though I'd only just learned to walk, I knew where to go. It wasn't hard—all I had to do was listen, and the Earth told me the way. Up into the mountains, down to a canyon floor. As the sky turned to q'ellu—a sickly, withered yellow—and all moisture was sucked away, we clambered up the other side.

We weren't the first to arrive in Choquequirao—the golden cradle—but the others didn't know what to do. As they cowered in fear, I stepped into the scorching, fiery rain that ignited the sach'apatakuna. With trees aflame around me and la lluvia ácida blistering my skin, I flung back my head, screaming out the words She needed to hear.

“Ñañay! Sister! Te oyo. Uyarini. I hear you, and we will listen.”

I don't remember standing in the storm, but I remember the way the world seemed to calm. How the clouds split open, and for just a moment the sky flashed anqas again, the blue I'm told it always used to be. Then illapa—lightning—streaked past, turning it the color of chicha morada. The color it is today.

P'unchay hampi, they called it. The day of healing. Rain—chirí: cold and pure—fell again. The land once cultivated by our ancestors long past bore fruitful añawi. Chokla, chicha, sara, papas—the terraces were built by a people who listened and worshipped Pachamama, and so when we took up the old ways, She understood. She allowed us to live. I became the first Listener, and I must always heed Her word, no matter the cost.

La Madre guides my footsteps through the pueblo. When I knock on the mud-brick wall, two women appear. One is young—joven, wyna—her belly swollen, face aglow. Children don't often survive to be brought into the world; she deserves this rare happiness. We all do. The older woman,

abuelita, awicha, is no less beautiful for her lined face and graying hair. Gray—yuraq yana—combines black and white, embodying the balance we keep, lest the pendulum swing again.

We're isolated here, and though the old roads still twine us together, it isn't often anyone makes the journey. I've seen what the cities became: destruction and misery. It's a dangerous path, and rare we risk it. Still, I've heard tales of the forms life has taken in other parts of the world. To the west, they don't curb their population, so everyone starves together. Eastward, they've done away with themselves entirely. And north, where much of the destruction began, they've formed a religion convincing each other to commit suicide. Speakers, they call themselves, when all the Earth asks is that we Listen.

Our traditions melded into the ceremonies of today, and we do not sink to such savagery as so many others.

"Ari?" asks the mamay.

"Warmiykusakuna," I greet them. *My good women.* "Prepare yourselves. Today's the day."

They bow their heads, only then catching sight of little Asiri. She smiles her brightest smile, warm and welcoming. "It'll be a good celebration," she says.

And because the Earth rumbles Her agreement, I know Asiri is right.



Inti has fallen behind the mountains, its last sunrays peeking out around the orqokuna. The procession begins; everyone living in Choquequirao makes their way along the mountain. We're high in the peaks, safe above the rising tide of the frothing, bloody seas. It's easy to see why our ancestors chose this spot, and hard to remember why we ever left.

Asiri falls in step beside me as we lead our people—simiykukuna—along the ridge of our mountain home. As we pass our own mud-brick structures, Tuta joins us, his eyes alert now that night is falling. There are more of us, the chakakuna. We are the bridges between Pachamama and simiykukuna, for not everyone hears la Madre as we do. To us, the Listeners, the signs are clearer, the way more distinct. For me, most of all.

The ceremony always takes place at the hallpa, a flat plain atop the peak that reaches the farthest into el cañón Apurimac. Although it takes several hours to traverse the trails here from the agricultural sectors, the rooms

where the other chakakuna and I dwell are as close as possible. When we moved in to what our ancestors left us, we didn't remodel or reorganize. We simply fixed the crumbled places and added roofs the best we could. My sleeping place is in the ruins closest to the hallpa.

Tuta catches my hand as we climb the ancient stairs. He doesn't hear the Earth the way I do—in fact, Pachamama rarely speaks to him above a whisper—but this is why I need him. Without his presence to keep me in my body, my mind would float away, lost in the deluge of feelings Pachamama always gives to me. Tuta is my anchor, my counterweight. Without him, I would be set adrift at sea.

When we reach the hallpa, the others fan out, circling the clearing's edge. We all fit perfectly, as though this place was intended for exactly this many people—no more and no less. Simiykuna—these are my people, and as Listener, they're all my responsibility. All I do, I do for them.

Tuta and I cross to the drop off and look down into el cañón. A faint, narrow ribbon twines along the bottom, purple instead of the blue-green I'm told it once was. It's all that's left of the river that carved out our home.

I hear moaning as Asnu, a man stronger than a donkey, carries the pregnant woman over to us. She's red-faced and sweaty, her companion struggling to keep up. Asnu and Tuta settle the woman beside the edge. I was named Paqari for the dawn—the beginnings of life—but it is always Tuta, the night, who helps the newest member of our tribe into the world. It's my responsibility to pour the tea that carries minds away.

A small fire has been set, water warmed in a clay pot. I tip some into the mouth of the flower I plucked from the mallkihampi—the healing tree. We call the large, white blossoms *ayawaska*, but they have other names, too. I take the first sip, then help the old woman drink the rest of the liquid. On the ground beside me, Tuta murmurs words of encouragement to the young woman as she sinks deep into her labor pains. I take the free hand of the *awicha*; her other clutches the flower. All we have left is to wait.

The moment comes two hours later. The Earth shudders beneath me so strongly it's a wonder they don't all feel it. I gasp, vision swirling out of focus just as the young woman lets out a scream. Tuta's voice soothes, then, as my eyes clear, I hear a baby's cry. I turn to the *awicha*, still

clutching my hand, but before I say anything, the other woman screams again.

“Paqari?” In Tuta’s arms is not one infant, but two.

“Iskay?” I gasp.

The word rips through all those watching. Pachamama heaves again. We’re taking, taking more than we bargained for, and She’s impatient for us to give back in equal measure. I can feel the mountain beneath us beginning to crack apart.

“Peace, Mother,” I murmur, without really knowing what I’m saying. If I don’t balance this, we will all perish. I cannot let my people die. I turn to the older woman. “Iyman sutyiki?”

“Suyana.” Hope. Esperanza—a good name.

I raise my voice, addressing simiykuna. “We cannot take more than we give. Pachamama has bestowed upon us today the gift of iskay. We respond in equal measure.”

A man, grizzled and worn, steps forwards. My heart drops. *No, not him*, I think. *Anyone but him*.

I know his name before he gives it.

“Sutiymi Mijhaell.”

I mustn’t play favorites with simiykuna, but this man is so like my father in appearance and demeanor—and like my father, he’s ready to give himself for the sake of others. I must aid him in doing so. Such is my responsibility, whatever the cost.

The water’s gone cold, and there’s no time for ayawaska to take hold. Suyana’s mind is cushioned in peaceful dreams, but the best I can offer Mijhaell are three coca leaves, one representing each realm: condor, the land above; puma, our realm; amaru—the serpent—for the world below. I feel the eyes of all three spirits upon us as I walk to the new mother.

I hold my hand out and she takes it, staggering to her feet. Tuta and Asiri, each bearing an infant, help keep her upright. We straggle closer to the precipice, two old, two new, three chakakuna, and one warmi—the taker and giver of life.

“May Pachamama claim and keep your souls,” the new mother says, placing a hand upon each Suyana and Mijhaell. Their fingers twine. “What we take we must return, for balance must be maintained,” she says. “Paq’arinkama.”

It means *hasta mañana*: until tomorrow. We will see them again,

someday. Some tomorrow. But for now, their sacrifice means that we may live. For every child born into this world of bleeding, scarlet seas, another must willingly leave. Easing them from this life is how I keep us all alive.

“Paq’arinkama,” Suyana and Mijhaell repeat.

Their names become the second names of each child, so their sacrifice is never forgotten. Mijhaell gives me the faintest of smiles, sadness and hope bright in his eyes. Then the mother, taker and giver of life—the embodiment of Pachamama—sets them free with a single shove. The Earth roils again, setting into a rhythmic hum as the two silent shapes fall into blackness. We took and we gave: two lives and the tatters of my heart. I’ve served my duty as chaka, the bridge, the Listener—and Pachamama knows She’s been heard.

“Napaykuna,” voices whisper to the infants. “Kacharparikuna,” they murmur after the dead, for we cannot have one without the other. Those words are the balance of life and death, two sides of the same chakana.

Napaykuna and kacharparikuna.

Welcome and farewell.

The Old Man of the Lake

Kylie Mullen

The corpse in the corner of the sleeper car is gathering frost. The ravens outside are getting antsy. It's time to leave.

Ulva takes the felted greatcoat and boots from the old man, bundling against the rising wind outside and tying the boots double so they won't slip off. Not like he'll be needing them.

She props herself with one hand against the door of the sleeper car, measuring the distance of the drop. Despite herself, she looks back.

The old man is slumped into the chair of the private booth. The coat had been looped over his arm and escaped the damage when the tree branches came through the wall in the crash, but the black and tacky blood has dried into the chair and his white dress shirt. The branches snapped from the weight, but not before goring him through the side, chest, and skull. One eye is glassy, dull and blue. The other is a blackened hole sucking in the light and edging with ice.

"He's dead." The voice, sibilant and blunt, sounds like it's perched on her shoulder. She might even feel the breath on her ear, but there's nothing and no one there. "*You can turn back now. Move on.*"

"He's died before," Ulva mutters. She tugs up the collar and sinks into a crouch in the doorframe.

Outside the door of the wrecked train car, the hill holding up the train tracks slopes down into the forest, and the fresh snow tapers off into the

litter of a forest floor. The car itself leans against a barren maple tree at the crest of the hill, the few other cars disconnected from the steamer in the crash long since abandoned. Two ravens shuffle up and down the branches, muttering to one another, then to her.

"I won't follow the tracks," Ulva huffs, and the air fogs with her frustration. The ravens squawk and bark, but she merely flashes her teeth. "Now we do things my way."

She fairs the drop and marches toward the woods, and the ravens flutter after her. When the wind flares as she reaches the tree line, she stuffs her chapped fingers into the pockets of the coat and receives the bite of a papercut for her trouble. The parchment she pulls out is worn and faded, but a bright red line traces its path across the northern half of the country, stuttering and swerving, but ultimately ceasing at a point in the northwest corner, some hundred miles from the coast.

"A half day's travel," she says, glancing up to meet a beady black eye, "as the crow flies."

The raven snorts and churls derisively back at her, sweeping up above the canopy to join his companion. Ulva stuffs the map away, but not before she hears the voice mutter at her back, snapping in a garbled, throaty tongue.

"*But has he been killed before?*" he hisses, as if no time has passed. Ulva marches on and he grates out, "*You're free now. How long has it been since you've tread without direction, without control—how long since you've been out from under his thumb?*"

A year, Ulva thinks, then—no, two now. *I've seen two summers come and go in this march west.*

"*And yet you march still.*"

Ulva flinches, glances down, glares. A gray squirrel stops in its tracks ahead of her and stares back.

"I swore, didn't I?" she snaps back. The squirrel scurries.

"*Is he deserving,*" he hisses, almost sweetly, "*of devotion? What do you owe—clumsy bitch!*"

Ulva ducks away as the howl in her ear cuts off, hands up by her head.

The ground beneath her feet shakes. Snow piles tumble down from their perches on the branches above and the leaf litter jitters. Then, in creaks and cracks and crashes, the forest howls back.

She hits the ground in a curl, covering her head with her hands and bloodying her elbows against the roots and stones. Behind closed eyes, she hears the squeal of metal and screams of the steamer crash. Old wounds ache and her bones chill with older fear.

Eventually, all she hears is her own breathing and the quivering stutter-step of her own heart. When her eyes open, the sun has sunk beneath the horizon, the clouds dying in rosy streaks. Ulva rolls over, breath fogging the air and blurring the outlines of the barren tree branches, lashes crusting with crystalline frost.

The raven pair perch and peer down.

Ulva marches on.



The lake is clear as glass, a deep, dark, midnight blue in the moonlight, and next to it the snowbanks seem to glow.

Ulva stands at the edge, grinding the soft, loose stone beneath her boot and tugging at the choppy, dark hair at her temple, just starting to grow out. The lake is almost perfectly circular, as if something had bubbled up beneath the rock long ago and the bubble had finally burst. The slopes are sharp, sending her skidding when she'd first come down from the gravel road above. Her palms are just this side of raw, smarting in the cool air like popping coals.

To her left, an island with a gentle slope and a healthy copse of pine trees rises from the mirror-pane water. To her right, a jut of vertical rock spires, not unlike furled sails. Ahead, a dot bobs on the far shore.

There are screams coming from the spires.

Muted and muffled, as though bleeding through a wall, the screams echo behind her right ear.

Ulva leaves the coat and boots on the shore, wading into the water in just calf-length leggings and baggy dress-shirt, and is surprised to find it warmer than the winter air above it. She pulls herself towards the spires of rock, dipping into their moon-cast shadow as the screams reach a fever pitch, then fall away. She clambers up the shallowest slope and treads warily.

On the moonlit side of the spires, two figures curl in agony. One bound, haggard and ashen, gasping for breath and biting out curses; the other, blonde and dull, stretched and shaking as she holds a shallow dish above

the pale man's head. From the rock outcrop above, crystalline drops fall into the dish, and the man flinches with each soft *plink*.

"Finally come for the old one," the pale man sneers, his green eyes as poisonous as his tone, but Ulva finally has a face to put to the voice. The gaze softens for a split second and he flashes her a smile. "Don't suppose you'll do *me* any such favor?"

Ulva's gaze roams away and falls on the blonde woman.

"Who are you?" she asks, crouching against the wind as it cuts through the soaked shirt.

The woman looks up and away from the pale man. The distance in her gray-green gaze clears after a moment. "Sigyn," she murmurs finally.

Ulva stares for some time, nods, then offers a hand. "Come with me?"

"I cannot." Sigyn shakes her head, looking to the bowl then down at the man. Her eyes go flat again. "We are bound together, in life and death. I promised, despite all he . . . despite everything. I swore."

"Fuck that," Ulva barks. Their gazes clash, and with the moon's light she sees her own reflection in the dark pupil. "Fuck *him*. A moment's bond does not deserve a lifetime's devotion."

Sigyn's arms shake.

"You don't owe him anything."

Ulva upturns her palm and moonlight pools within it.

Sigyn reaches back.



At the far side of the lake, the dot on the surface takes form: a tree trunk, centuries old, yet made ageless by the cold clarity of the lake.

Black iron chains hang from the exposed trunk like a thong of leather around a bared neck. From them hangs the old man, waist deep in the water, face downturned to stare into its depths. His eye and gut are shocks of crimson in the moonlight, freshly ragged, as though the branches from the train wreck had only just been ripped away.

"I *know*," he says, and with the words the trees on the shore behind Ulva and Sigyn shake and whisper and shiver in the night. "All. All that there is to know."

"Congratulations," Ulva murmurs, crouching down to be at eye level despite the trunk floating thirty paces from shore. The moonlight above does nothing to drown out the spill and spray of a hundred million

glittering stars in the sky above, nor the wisps of dancing light slipping down from the north.

The old man looks up after some time, meeting Ulva's gaze with his one bright, blue eye dancing with light, as well. He looks as quest-hungry as the day they met—the day he found her in the wilds near her home and brought her with him, westbound. His voice rumbles from cracked lips beneath graying beard, "I am ready to return, girl. Free me and you will be free in turn."

Ulva glances down at her feet and around the empty shore.

"I'm already free," she responds.

The old man growls wordlessly and Ulva's head cocks to the side, but she directs the wordless question upwards.

Sigyn's gilded bangs hang over her eyes, but the gaze is clear. In the silver light, she glitters and glows as bright and brighter than the stars above. She shakes her head.

"You took us," Ulva says as she pulls her gaze back to the bound old man and to the spires of rock beyond him. "Both of you. Both of us. You took us from what we knew and remade us into something different. Something we didn't recognize.

"It is our turn," she says, rising. "To remake ourselves."

They turn from the lake, climbing the slope arm in arm as the moon sinks beneath the lip of the caldera. In the morning light, at the western shore of the lake, the coat and boots disappear with the morning mist.

Edgar Alphabet's First Day of School Discussion

Samuel Ernst

*ENGL-198-A: Abecedarian Studies >
Discussions > Edgar Alphabet Discussion*

Edgar Alphabet Discussion

Dr. Fernanda Extrapolinski

Please post a response to the Edgar Alphabet reading by Thursday. Brownie points for giving us a discussion question to go off of for class Friday. I want you to engage with the reading—don't be afraid to reply to someone else's post. Let's get the literary conversation going!

Aoli Xavier-Ford

Sunday at 3:33 am

In *Edgar Alphabet's First Day of School*, Tsnre presents a cautionary tale against the problems of the lack of communication present in our society. Failure to communicate causes a decrease in empathy, and Edgar symbolizes the anger that wells up in the absence of empathy: Edgar is an anagram for "raged." In fact, Edgar's anger doesn't merely originate from his communication problems. The forms of Edgar's anger manifest themselves as anger at communication. In Edgar's encounter with Švrøkñæršyövåk, he can't understand a word the creature is saying: "Toxic slobber rained

down from his jaws, as the beast wailed a string of unspeakable sounds” (Tsnre 26). Because Edgar cannot understand the creature, Edgar cannot understand the creature’s feelings. When Starbeard spills a hot macchiato on Edgar, Edgar’s frustration originates not from the actual spill, but from his language: “Why does it have to be ‘Aye’ and ‘Naye’ all the time?” Edgar says. “Why can’t he just say ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ like a normal human being” (Tsnre 2)? Despite having valid reasons to despise Starbeard, such as the fact that he holds hot coffee with his hook hand and lets his parrot fly free in the café, Edgar becomes fixated on the language. For Edgar, language becomes a medium for hate. This hatred stems from his Freudian preoccupation with his mother. While Edgar’s mom doesn’t actually appear in the book, the letter “A” symbolizes his mother. As Edgar moves from A to Z, he gets further and further away from where he started: his metaphorical womb. Edgar wants to return to the womb, but once he’s passed A, he has to go on to the rest of the alphabet. This is why Edgar is so hung up on his *mother* tongue. Even after Starbeard corrects him, Edgar still refers to the “Flagship” size coffee as “Large.” Edgar insists on his own, anti-pirate language.

Dr. Fernanda Extrapolinski

Saturday at 5:00 pm

Very good insights but next time try to write under 250 words. This was over 300 and after the 290th I had to break out a bottle of wine. Any more words and I would have had to break out the Swedish meatballs.

Barney Willsmith

Wednesday at 1:23 pm

Edgar’s name symbolizes his internal conflict. Edgar is almost an anagram for Regard. Edgar regards everyone a different way. He regards Smorgasbord with confusion, while he regards Starbeard with anger. Importantly, Starbeard does not regard Edgar the same way Edgar regards Starbeard. Starbeard spells Edgar’s name on his coffee cup, Edgaargh, which is almost an anagram for geared. Starbeard recognizes Edgar’s anger not as a conscious decision, but as an unfortunate result of the chemical makeup of his brain. Edgar is *geared* that way.

Dr. Fernanda Extrapolinski

Saturday at 6:02 pm

This might be a good jumping-off point for your research paper. There's a good article I think you'd be interested in by Oedward Tantalus on Lacanian interpretations of the alphabet book. I'd send it to you but I am in my wine cellar right now and the reception down here stinks.

Colton Kronos

Thursday at 5:27 am

The main theme of Edgar's First Day of School is the finite time we have on this earth. Edgar can only live out his first day of school once. Starbeard's offers a remedy for this. The hyper-caffeinated Java offers people a chance at staying awake longer, experiencing more of life, while having the energy to speed through the boring parts. Ultimately, though, pirated coffee proves unsatisfying. Thus, Edgar turns to time travel. By traveling in the bungalow, Edgar can relive his first day of school. Edgar's First Day of School shows us that sometimes, instead of living in the present, we need to take the time to travel to the past in the bungalows in our daily life.

Colton Kronos

Thursday at 3:28 pm

Who's the dum dum now Francine

Francine Museu

Thursday at 4:59 pm

Time Travel isn't real you dum dum

Dr. Fernanda Extrapolinski

Saturday at 7:36 pm

Glad to see you're engaging with the material. *Edgar Alphabet's First Day of School* can be a tough read, but it rewards multiple rereadings. Even after the second or third time around I can never believe that he's going to get to Z. I would send the story to you again so you can read it a second time but I am currently

in an IKEA and the reception is terrible in these places for some reason.

Dan Victrola

Thursday at 2:36 pm

//Colton Kronos 4/20/19

//This program will take a String inputted by the user and reverse it

```
Import Java.util.Scanner;
```

```
Scanner in=new Scanner (System.in);
```

```
System.out.println("Enter a String to be reversed.");
```

```
String userInput=in.nextLine();
```

```
int halfLength=userInput.length()/2;
```

```
for (int i=0; i<halfLength; i++){
```

```
    userInput.charAt(i)=userInput.charAt(halfLength-i);
```

```
}
```

```
System.out.println(userInput);
```

Dan Victrola

Thursday 11:11 pm

Wrong class my b

Dr. Fernanda Extrapolinski

Saturday at 8:01 pm

Nice job, Colton! I have an article about Starbeard's use of heteroglossia that I would send you, but I am currently at a wedding reception and the reception is just terrible.

Elaine Elay-Elaid

Thursday at 3:00 pm

Edgar's Alphabet Adventure is all about removing the toxic people from your life. Edgar realizes his own self-worth. His decision to stop speaking to Starbeard represents personal empowerment. Starbeard has all the traits of a typical toxic person. As Edgar says in his TripAdvisor review, Starbeard "sings sea shanties incorporating the names of the menu items, uses his hook hand to hold customers' coffee, and doesn't wear a hairnet" (Tsne 100). This reflects the triangle of toxic relationships—the Bermuda triangle,

as Starbeard puts it, consisting of Abuse of Time, Space, and Not Wearing a Hairnet. Starbeard's singing wastes Edgar's time at the coffee shop, the way he clumsily handles the coffee allows a hot macchiato to invade Edgar's personal space, and Starbeard also does not wear a hairnet. This triangle reoccurs with Svroknoersyovak, who also does these three things. The triangle becomes important in the letter B section, as the Bungalow provides Edgar a vehicle for traveling in time, space, and the hairnet dimensions.

Question: The alphabet is inherently linear in structure. Could a triangle offer new ways for thought to flow? How could we make a triangular alphabet? If Edgar knew a triangle alphabet, would he be able to visit past letters? Would there even be such a thing as past and future? Is this why no triangles show up in the T-section, not even among the instruments Turty plays?

Dr. Fernanda Extrapolinski

Saturday at 8:46 pm

I think I just bought a Svroknorsyovak from Ikea

Felicity Cordray

Thursday at 6:33 pm

The part that most stuck out to me was when Edgar said, "T is for Tur-tles" (Tsnre 878). I had a pet turtle named Turty when I was 9 and one day Grandma fed it Chicken Cordon Blue and according to my dad, the world-famous Accordion player Connor Cordray, on tour now at the Glassboro May Community Picnic, the Chicken Cordon Blue lifted my turtle's spirits so high that Turty decided to move out and become a Tambourine player in Upstate New York. I never saw him again. I never saw my turtle again either

Francine Museu

Thursday at 6:34 pm

Turty isn't real you dummy

Felicity Cordray

Thursday at 6:35 pm

Who's the dummy now Francine

<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/fb/e5/4c/fbe54cff951d4b27a5ab485371de7ea4.jpg>

Francine Museu

Thursday at 6:36 pm

Thats a gazebo

Felicity Cordray

Thursday at 6:37 pm

Turty's in the gazebo.

Felicity Cordray

Thursday at 6:38 pm

Here he is

<https://www.google.com>

[/search?rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS831US831&biw=1366&bih=657&tbm=isch&sa=1&ei=olSiXP_GOsG6ggfLt6Fw&q=cute+turtle+pictures+real&oq=cute+turtle+pictures+real&gs_l=img.3...102642.107561..107797...3.0..2.155.1749.27j1.....0....1..gws-wiz-img.....0..0j0i67j0i8i30j0i30.FNQeXLLGlo4](https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS831US831&biw=1366&bih=657&tbm=isch&sa=1&ei=olSiXP_GOsG6ggfLt6Fw&q=cute+turtle+pictures+real&oq=cute+turtle+pictures+real&gs_l=img.3...102642.107561..107797...3.0..2.155.1749.27j1.....0....1..gws-wiz-img.....0..0j0i67j0i8i30j0i30.FNQeXLLGlo4)

Garrett Danco

Thursday at 8:30 pm

Edgar's Alphabet is about listening to each other. When Edgar meets Turty the Timpani player at Ticonderoga, Edgar is understandably Thrilled. He's finally made it to the letter T. He finally gets to see his idol. Turty lets Edgar down, however. Turty is only there to sign autographs because his agent is making him. Turty doesn't take the time to listen to what Edgar has to say. When Edgar tells Turty how he felt when he listened to the B-side of his album at the Bungalow, Turty's response is a hollow, "Yeah. Thanks, kid" (Tsnre 73). Turty even spells Edgar's name wrong when signing his kindergarten yearbook.

Should we try not to be a Turty, and actually listen to each other? Or is it better to accept the cold dog-eat-dog, turtle-eat-turtle mentality of the universe, and lock ourselves inside an emotional stronghold as it's the only way to cope with the eventual disappointment when all our childhood dreams are finally shattered once and for all?

Dr. Fernanda Extrapolinski

Saturday at 10:01 pm

Terrific, Tom. I Think you might want to look at how Turdy

misspells Edgar's name. He spells it, Felicity, which is eerily similar to Vivid. Turdy regards Edgar vividly. His eyesight is better than someone who's had several bottles of Chardonnay. In response to your question, I don't even think cold hot dogs taste good sober.

Jane Jlanco

Thursday at 9:33 pm

Buy Hydroxis brand Quinoater, the only water with Quinoa that cleanses harmful toxins from your body. Click for a free sample → <https://cant-not-tweet-this.com/>

Question: How would you like to work from home, making 333 dollars an hour, and receiving a free monthly packet of Quinoater? All you need to do is spread the word and get your friends and families involved. Quin on!

Dr. Fernanda Extrapolinski

Sunday at 1:15 am

Sounds good chief.

Lawrence

Thursday at 10:03 pm

Edgar Alphabet's First Day of School is all about the impossibility of time travel. Time marches eternally on for Edgar, as much as he would like to relive his first day of school. He spends most of the novel aiming for Z, but when he finally gets there, he realizes he's wasted his entire life. Edgar should have stopped to smell the roses. He should have stopped to smell the Chicken Cordon Blue. There are a lot of things he should have stopped to smell but now all he can smell is Zebras' rear ends.

Question: Do we learn anything by reading the book backwards, from Z to A? Might we be able to turn Edgar's tragedy into a story of triumph?

Dr. Fernanda Extrapolinski

Sunday at 2:48 am

This is it! The ultimate groundbreaking never before seen interpretation of *Edgar Alphabet's First Day of School*! Yes, it all makes sense. The way Edgar rushes through the alphabet serves as the perfect metaphor for the way I'm rushing through grading these things right now. You can copy and paste this post as your whole

research paper. This is already perfect. Your magnum opus for the rest of your life! Just like Turty's album, "Chicken in Paradise," whose B-side features the song, "Glassboro Glamour," including the lyrics, "I hope you know that Cordon Bleu's just fine / as long as it's paired with some meatball wine." You might want to explore Turty's lyrics for your research paper.

Russel Reverso

Thursday at 10:05 pm

So there's this Edgar guy, right? And he can time travel. But here's the catch. He can only like travel when he's at the Bungalow. Tsnre wants you to think that he can't time travel ever again, but I think there's this sense that you can travel to the past through the present. The turtle guy, I forget what his name is, his song is all about nostalgia. And the guy with all the umlauts on his name, his job at IKEA helps him to live out his heritage. And it's at that crucial moment in the novel when he's eating the caviar that he decides to listen to his old Connor Cordray CD. I think this shows how we can go back to old books, or to old class discussion boards, and reread them, and sort of experience the magic again, because maybe the first time around we were just doing them to get it over with. Ya know?

Dr. Fernanda Extrapolinski

Sunday at 4:00 am

Some nights were not meant to be relived.

Dan Victrola

Thursday at 11:59 pm

I think Edgar's First Day of School is about

Dr. Fernanda Extrapolinski

Sunday at 4:32 am

Very insightful but next time try to write under 5 words. That was almost 9 and I just cant deal with something like that I mean all the bars are closed at this hour.

The Stairs Have Heard What the Walls Have Seen

Ashlyn M. Brisley

He inhaled the warmth of the summer air, the smell of pine needles and gardenias, the sound of crickets and cicadas, and the consoling sight of a cloudless night sky. He exhaled a long, slow breath on which thousands of silent words escaped his chest, where, throughout the day, he collected them—one by one—and locked them away with a skeleton key. The wooden planks hard against his back, his hands rested on his stomach. It'd been years since the treehouse was new and, as the summers went by, the weather had taken its toll. The wood faded and splintered. The green-tarp roof dry-rotted in the heat and the rain until it separated from the support beam and bloomed to the heavens. Though he didn't play on it much anymore, it was his escape. In the day, he would sit on the swing and twist the chains, spinning around on it until it jerked straight again and swung side to side. On nights like this, he liked to sit and watch the heat lightning or lie down and search the stars.

Light opened into the yard before closing again. There was a new sound now as slipped feet padded through the soft grass. "Austin?"

He thought he could see the Big Dipper—the curved handle and the square bottom. His teacher said a lot of people thought they saw that constellation, but it wasn't the Big Dipper at all, just a phony version of the real one.

"Hey."

His eyes traced the stars of the phony dipper, trying to find the flaw that gave it away. Another breath caught the slight breeze, louder now, as his hands rode the movement of his diaphragm.

“What’re you doing?”

Rolling his head across the planks, he glanced at his mom standing at the bottom of the slide. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to talk, but that he had been so long alone in his thoughts, he wasn’t sure how to find his way out of them. He didn’t know how to break a silence he had been having a conversation with.

“You see any spaceships up there?”

The corners of his mouth twitched. “No. But they probably have camouflage.”

“Oh, you’re right,” she said, smiling and crossing her arms over her nightgown. “Do you think they’re mean?”

He shrugged, sitting up. “I guess some of them are.”

“Well . . . maybe tomorrow we can try to send them a message and invite them to dinner? Maybe they’re not mean, just hungry?”

“Okay,” he said, breaking into a smile, “but they’ll only eat burgers.”

“Burgers, huh?” She stepped back as he came down the slide.

“Yep. They like burgers. That’s why they’re always sucking up cows.”

Her mouth made a silent “oh” as she squeezed him to her side and they walked into the house. “Anything to go with those burgers? Do they like french fries?”

“No one doesn’t like fries, mom.”

She laughed and nudged him towards the stairs. “Get ready for bed. It’s late.”

He noticed the brown recliner, empty and alone in the corner of the living room. “Where’d dad go?” he asked, peering back at her as she turned her eyes to the only plate of food still on the table, undisturbed and cold.

“He’s at the grocery store.”

“But it’s—”

“You’re stalling. Go shower.”

He was going to say 9:00.



The garage rumbled open, growling and shaking his bedroom floor,

until the door rolled all the way up with a loud *clunk*. The car drove in, tires squeaking as they turned on the smooth cement, and all was silent. Austin listened a while longer, eyes on the black, metal rungs holding the bed above him. His heart pounding in his chest echoed in his ears until the silence was too loud. He threw off his blanket and crept into the hallway. The light outside his door he always asked be kept on was off, and his parent's door that was always closed was open. No one was up there with him. No one was in bed. No one was asleep.

"What're you still doing up?"

His dad's voice sounded from somewhere in the kitchen or living room, but it found its way around the corner, up the stairs, to where Austin stood with his clammy hand on the wall. In the dark, he groped his way to the banister before his bare feet felt their way down the carpeted stairs to the hardwood landing.

"What do you think? I had to work, pick up Austin from school, help him with his homework, cook dinner, get him ready for bed, clean up . . . all while you were—"

"While I was what, Susan?"

Austin made it to the last three stairs, safely hidden behind the closet wall, but close enough to hear them in the living room. His superhero pajama pants were warm when he sat and hugged his knees to his chest. Hardly breathing—afraid they might hear his breath. Hardly moving—afraid they might hear the creak of the stair.

"I'm not stupid, you know? You can spray cologne. You can chew gum. You can use all the eye drops you want, but we both know where you've been."

Keys landed hard on the table. Austin flinched

"Oh, come on, Susan. What does it matter? I go to work. I get paid. That's all you care about, right? That's why you're still here, isn't it? Because you can't support Austin without me?"

There was a small snuffle as slippers padded from the carpet to the hardwood and back. "Why can't you just admit you need help? He needs a dad—he *wants* a dad!"

"I am his dad!" There was a short pause in which Austin heard more wet snuffles. "He is mine, isn't he? Hell, I wouldn't put it past you."

She scoffed, choking on tears. "I wish I had cheated on you, then maybe his dad would be sober."

A loud noise made Austin jump and grip his knees tighter. It sounded like someone tried punching through a cardboard box.

“Are you out of your damn mind?” she shrieked.

He scooted down another stair and peeked around the corner to see his dad shaking out his hand. The blood dripping from his knuckles mixed with the white powder of drywall, caking onto his skin as he stood there flexing and relaxing his fingers, while Austin heard his mom in the kitchen opening and closing drawers, trying to find something to stop the bleeding.

His heart knocked against his chest. He could feel it trying to break free of its cage even before he bolted back up the stairs and jumped into his bed. The adrenaline that made his heartbeat almost hurt and his body tremble also made his hands shake when they dragged the blanket back onto the bed. He straightened out the wad as best he could, before disappearing under it—straight as a man in a coffin. His heavy breaths blew the fabric off his face before sucking it back down. It felt like he was suffocating, breathing in the blanket and hot air, but he couldn’t make himself leave the odd comfort of feeling invisible.

The light flicked on in the hall.

He stopped breathing. Held still.

She was standing in the doorway.

He could feel her swollen eyes resting on him.

“Goodnight, baby. I love you.”

There was nothing to tell him that she was gone, except that feeling went with her and he couldn’t hold his breath any longer. His body didn’t relax when she left or after she turned the light on outside his door. Instead he stared straight up, his arms straight as pins at his sides. The light pierced through the abyss of the navy-blue blanket, through the thin threads that held it together. It looked like the night sky. He twitched one of his eyes. The stars twinkled. He moved his head. He flew to another galaxy. When he contacted mission control, the only reply he could hear through the static were his dad’s distant snores echoing up the balcony from where he slept in the recliner. He turned off all communication and, gazing into the night, went on a mission to find the spaceships from the stars. He didn’t know what he would do once he found them. Maybe he would ask them directions to the Big Dipper? Or maybe he would invite them to dinner? After all . . . maybe they’re only mean because they’re hungry.

Advice For Driving While High

Chris Denham

Put the key in the ignition, then remember to clip your seatbelt. Turn on your car; turn on the lights. Put your car in gear and start to cross the parking lot. Be glad it's an automatic.

You're only a little high. You've been smoking a couple of times each month or so for the whole school year—a total of maybe 14 or 15 times now—and you know your limits. You can make smart decisions. You've never driven high before, but everyone has told you how easy it is.

Your coworker turns on their car too. You both waited 45 minutes until you felt sure enough you could drive. Or rather that they felt comfortable enough they could drive, and you agreed. The two of you had smoked one bowl of weed; you put in the eye drops they gave you; and you had waited a while. It's only a couple miles.

Turn out onto the road. Glance all around you: out the windshield, the side windows, in your mirrors. Check even though you know that logically the chance of a cop being here at this exact moment is really fucking low.

Watch in the mirror as your coworker pulls out behind you and heads off in the other direction. Worry that next time you have a closing shift they will expect the two of you to smoke, and you will start doing this regularly. It's not that you don't want to smoke, but you don't want to do it here.

Drive a little slower than usual, but not too slow. Keep your hands at 10 and 2. Or 9 and 3—that works too. If you drive fast you might make

mistakes, but a cop might also get suspicious about a car going way below the speed limit.

Think about pulling over and stopping. Your parents could pick you up. Or you could walk home. Or you could wait a few more minutes until you are less affected.

Think about how all these options could also end badly. Your parents would want to know why you couldn't drive. If you left the car somewhere, they would wonder why. If you wait on the side of the road, a cop might get suspicious. Keep driving. It's only a little farther.

Ease into the accelerator. Ease into the brake. Remind yourself to switch on and off your high beams when you encounter other cars on the roads of your town, but you really don't see any after midnight in a small town. Still, any car coming toward you could be a cop, and he's less likely to think you are under the influence if you switch off your high beams.

The first time you ever smoked was last summer at a concert. Think about how the guy who gave you the weed drove away afterwards. Fortunately, you were riding with a friend who stayed sober the whole night.

Think about how disappointed your parents would be if they knew. You're their only child: they thought you would tell them everything. They probably wouldn't kick you out. What you don't want to tell them is you're bored and that doing this behind everyone's back is a thrill, especially because your friends do it. They would be disappointed, thinking you were peer-pressured into it. Tell yourself that you weren't. You started smoking because you wanted to smoke.

Worry about drifting off the side of the road. That worry will keep your attention on staying in your lane. Watch the white and yellow lines, but don't look at them too far ahead. You'll hypnotize yourself and wake up in a ditch or a hospital or a grave.

Pass by the gas station where you bought your bowl, paying \$12.15: \$10 for the bowl, \$1.25 for the lighter, and \$.90 for tax. You didn't even need an ID. A minor can buy a bowl, and once you start smoking it's not hard to find someone who sells.

The gas station is dark now. Even the pumps close by 11:00 in a town this small.

Remember your coworker's advice; they drive high all the time. *Just be confident*, they said. *It translates into how you drive.*

Don't overthink it.

Feel a pang of fear as you see a bulky object on top of a car going in the other direction. Switch off your high beams. Feel relief hit you when you realize the object on top of the car is only a ski rack.

Sit up straight. Don't slouch or you'll sink into the cushioned seat.

Notice that the green and yellow lights on the dash—the speedometer, the fuel gauge, the RPM counter—are annoying and a little blinding. Glance at them unintentionally as you round a turn, your eyes leaving the road.

Briefly consider the mugshots of people you've seen on TV who have killed people while driving under the influence. Think that you couldn't possibly end up the way they did. Know in the back of your head that even if the chance is low, there is still a chance that actually could be you. That would end your college hopes.

Snap back out of your thoughts and realize that you missed a turn toward your house. Decide to take the back way on a less used road. Turn in slowly when you reach that road.

Take the curves especially carefully. A bigger turn comes up out of the night and you take it wide. Your tire crosses the yellow line in the middle of the road, but that should be okay. It's only a little over.

Don't panic when you see the cop. He is sitting on a gravel turnaround on the side of the road, lights off, but you notice the dark silhouette of the car. First the thought that it is a cop car will creep hesitantly into one shadowed corner of your brain. It must just be a civilian car left there overnight. Peer forward intently, analyzing the shape and color of the vehicle. It is a cop. Panic. Tell yourself not to panic.

Instantly swerve a tiny bit, back over the line into your own lane. You don't mean to, but it's better than swerving a lot. Don't switch off the high beams. Wonder if you should switch off the high beams. Belatedly switch off the high beams just as you go past him. Realize that now you can't do anything more to look normal. And realize when the cop turns on his car, then his lights, that you couldn't have done anything more to seem sober, so don't berate yourself.

Your heart starts to beat faster as his siren rings in your ear. Watch in your mirror—in shock—as he drives off the turnaround onto the road and the red and blue lights fall in behind you.

Give him a couple seconds to follow you, just to make sure he is after you. Realize the brief hope you had that he wasn't after you was idiotic. Tell yourself you need a game plan. Hit the brake.

Slow down and pull onto the shoulder. Use your blinker. Be proud for a second that you used the blinker, as it makes you not seem high, but then remember that you still have a cop to deal with and lose all your pride again.

Place the car in park and turn it off. Leave the lights on, turn on the overhead light. Hit the tab next to you to roll down your window; quickly run a hand over your face to make sure you look alert. Glance around the inside of the car as the red and blue lights make everything look different colors than they actually are. Worry if you have something in your car that is incriminating or that the officer might see, then remember you were smoking your coworker's weed, not yours.

Look in your mirror. The officer is still in his car. Start running scenarios in your mind: he figures it out, tells you to get out of the car, cuffs you, takes you right to jail; he figures it out and calls your parents; he figures it out.

Get a chill as you realize he's going to figure it out.

Wonder if you smell; realize you can't do anything about it if you do.

Watch in the mirror as the officer gets out of his car and walks over to you. Remember what your dealer—the old guy who grows it in his backyard—said to do if the cops ask you if you are high. *Tell them the truth*, he said. *And tell them if you have anything in your car as well, cause if they suspect you at all they will search the car.* You are guaranteed to get in trouble that way, he explained, but the sentence might be lower, compared to the harsh sentence you will inevitably get if you try to lie or hide it from the cops and they find out.

Think to yourself that his advice still doesn't make sense. It does in a way, but if you get caught you're fucked anyway.

Hear the crunch of gravel as the officer steps up to your window. Look up as he shines a flashlight in. Squint, not a ton, but a little, so hopefully he won't see redness in your eyes, but it won't look like you are shielding your eyes from the light.

Ask if you can help him, officer? Try to look sober and alert as he tells you that he saw you swerve. "So what's going on?" he asks.

Say you were just taking the curve too wide. Glimpse enough past the bright light in your face to recognize the officer. His son was in the class ahead of you in high school. Have a rush of panic as you think about everyone at school hearing about your DUI, talking about what a failure you are.

Answer quickly, almost panicked—when he asks you what brings you out on the roads this late—that you are driving home from work. Unzip your jacket to show him your uniform as proof. Realize he is actually impressed with your industriousness; become aware of the tenseness in your muscles as you start to think he doesn't know.

“Not doing anything illegal tonight?”

Make a snap decision, despite what your dealer said.

No sir.

Your dealer is old; if he gets caught it doesn't ruin his life. Maybe it's smart for him to confess for a lighter sentence, but for you the chance of getting out of this is too tempting.

Look at the officer's face. Red and blue flashes across it. Belief or disbelief? He glances around the inside of your car, sees your backpack and hesitates for a second. Then he looks back at your uniform. Wonder, maybe too hopefully, if he's thinking to himself that you must not be on anything, since you were at work.

The officer turns the light off your face a little bit, so it's not blinding you as much. Listen carefully, hopes rising, as he says to just make sure you stay between the lines in the future.

Thank you, sir.

Respond you too, sir, when he says drive safe, and instantly feel foolish. He's a cop: he doesn't have to worry about driving safe.

The officer straightens up. Watch in the mirror while he walks back to his car. A pang of fear crosses your mind. Could this be a trick? Tell yourself it can't be; he couldn't tell you were high. Your heart beats jagged in your chest. The officer gets in his car and turns off his siren. The red and blue lights stop flashing on the walls of your car. Take three long breaths.

Turn the key forward—watching in your mirror—and put the car in drive. Wonder if you should pull out before the officer does. Wait another second, then press down on the gas as slowly as you can.

Pull onto the road—every muscle in your body tense—and drive away carefully. The headlights disappear from behind you. Watch in the mirror as the officer does a perfect three-point turn and heads back to his spot. Then curse internally and look back at the road as you realize you are drifting again.

Wait until you round three curves to actually believe you got away. Make sure as you round these curves that you don't drift over the line. Worry

again that this is all a set-up, that a cop will be waiting for you ahead, that they will be waiting for you at home, even though you know that doesn't make sense. Grip the wheel harder with sweaty palms.

Tell yourself you are never smoking weed again. Realize that is probably a lie: you still want to smoke weed. Tell yourself you will at least never drive while high again. Wonder if this is a lie too and promise yourself you will never do this again. Actually mean it.

Snap out of your thoughts as you stop at the intersection to your street. Pull into your driveway, turn out the lights, and turn off the car. Worry that your parents might still be up, even though there aren't lights on in the house. Walk inside carefully, waiting every moment for them to snap on a lamp and be waiting for you in a chair to say "how could you smoke weed?" even though there is no way they could have found out.

Walk slowly up the creaking stairs to your bedroom. Walk in past the dresser, where hidden in an old sock you no longer use, a small bag of weed hides next to your bowl and lighter. Drop your backpack next to the dresser; worry that it smells of weed. Dismiss the worry; if the cop let you go, you're not going to get caught by your parents.

Peel off your clothes and toss them on a pile of dirty laundry. Fall into bed, glad that tomorrow is Saturday and you can sleep in. Remind yourself that you haven't brushed your teeth and decide it's not worth it. You can live with it. It's only a little mistake.

SIGMA
TAU
DELTA

REVIEW

“It Drives Me Crazy”: Childhood and Madness in J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*

Ashley Walker

Holden Caulfield, narrator of J.D. Salinger’s 1951 *The Catcher in the Rye*, remains one of literature’s best-known teenage rebels. His larger-than-life narration and dynamic personality inspire a sense of sympathy, as he describes his disillusionment with “phony” American materialist society and its educational system. Most critics address *Catcher*’s treatment of childhood or madness. Critics who discuss childhood in *Catcher* tend to comment on Holden’s youthfulness and innocence, and how these traits influence his actions. Critics who discuss madness tend to talk about Holden’s psychological state, how it influences the ways he presents himself and views himself, and how he feels disengaged from society. Scholars have not yet connected childhood and madness in *Catcher* to Michel Foucault’s work on carceral systems, delinquency, and discourse. In *Catcher*, however, the American materialist society Holden despises forces him into carceral systems, labels him as delinquent when he rebels, and denies him discursive power. As Foucault’s writings suggest, Holden is unable to escape society: the collection of discursive practices that produce individual subjectivities, including his. Holden is able to rebel, though, by engaging in subversive practices that Michel de Certeau describes as “tactics.” While subjects cannot escape the dominant discourse, they can use tactics to reappropriate dominant discursive practices and thus gain some degree of agency. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield represents the ways

society turns childhood into a form of delinquency by categorizing it as a type of madness. As Holden tries to rebel against the world that labels him a delinquent, he attempts to re-center power and establish his own discourse through autobiography. Though he ultimately remains unable to escape from the carceral system—from discourse, which Foucault indicates is an impossible task—Holden nonetheless suggests self-narrative can serve as a “tactic” that reappropriates the dominant discourse, exercising some agency within the inescapable confines of discourse.

The competitive, authoritarian boarding school environment in *Catcher* operates as a carceral system, allowing the educational system to re-define childhood and to produce adults who will not challenge the status quo. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault lists three factors that contribute to the power of a carceral system: “hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment and their combination in a procedure that is specific to it, the examination” (170). In *Catcher*, the way Holden describes Pencey Prep exemplifies these disciplinary factors. He complains that the dorm rooms lack privacy, allowing boys like Robert Ackley to “barge in” (26). Foucault asserts that dorms are similar to prisons in terms of the carceral surveillance they allow (*Discipline* 172–73). The intrusions of students like Ackley reveal how easily authority figures can implement surveillance at Pencey. Pencey also possesses Foucault’s “normalizing judgment,” as the teachers at Pencey use their authority in attempts to “normalize” Holden. When narrating his conversation with Mr. Spencer—his history teacher—Holden complains: “except that I get bored sometimes when people tell me to act my age. Sometimes I act a lot older than I am—I really do—but people never notice it. People never notice anything” (13). His complaint, however, is not actually that “people never notice *anything*,” but that people only notice *some* things. Teachers like Mr. Spencer only notice Holden’s behavior when it diverges from the standards of their normalizing judgement—when he does something “abnormal.” Holden hyperbolically claims that people like Mr. Spencer never notice anything, because they only selectively notice behavior; they selectively discipline behaviors. Authority figures’ desire to normalize their students governs Pencey’s discipline. Holden’s frustration with Pencey prompts him to flee to New York, rebelling by removing himself from Pencey’s surveillance and the normalizing discipline it enables.

The ease of surveillance in the dorms and the normalizing judgement of teachers like Mr. Spencer combine to suggest what Foucault calls

"examination": "The school became . . . increasingly a perpetual comparison of each and all that made it possible both to measure and to judge" (*Discipline* 186). Schools like Pencey rely on examination, with the resulting competition serving as a type of conditioning: by disciplining students who fail to adhere to normative standards, the education system conditions these students to participate in a society that thrives on competition. In fact, when Holden visits Mr. Spencer, the teacher wants to discuss Holden's history exam paper and its shortcomings. Holden, though, seems to reject the "perpetual comparison" of education. As Alexander H. Pitofsky points out, "the common denominators of the 'careers' that do appeal to him—recluse in the New England woods, ranch hand in Colorado, deaf-mute auto mechanic, 'catcher in the rye'—are silence, isolation, and the absence of any form of masculine competition" (20). While Pencey and similar schools exist to prepare boys like Holden for a world of noise, connection, and competition, Holden rejects each of these, thereby rejecting society's disciplinary conditioning. In the midst of a system—a private boarding school—that thrives on examination and comparison, Holden craves isolation. His rebellion against Pencey's system—and, more broadly, American society—reveals how heavily both rely on examination: educational examination conditions students for examination in broader society.

While the school system attempts to condition Holden, American society makes Holden into a delinquent by defining his youthful idealism as madness in order to suppress it. Foucault specifies the relationship between illegality and delinquency, saying "no doubt delinquency is a form of illegality; certainly it has its roots in illegality; but it is an illegality that the 'carceral system,' with all its ramifications, has invested, segmented, isolated, penetrated, organized, enclosed in a definite milieu, and to which it has given an instrumental role in relation to the other illegalities" (*Discipline* 277). According to Foucault, the carceral system creates delinquency out of illegality; it chooses which forms of illegality are defined as delinquency. Similarly, in *Catcher*, American society defines—and is responsible for creating—Holden's delinquency: it defines his childishness and youthful idealism as madness when they challenge social norms. When Holden critiques society or expresses his distaste for institutions like Pencey, he tends to describe himself as "crazy" or "a madman." In these situations, however, he places the blame for his madness onto society, just as he does when he's talking about the "phonies" at Elkton Hills, another boarding school:

“I can’t stand that stuff. It drives me crazy. It makes me so depressed I go crazy. I hated that goddam Elkton Hills” (19). Holden’s comments reveal that society defines his youthfully idealistic desire for genuineness as a type of madness. This society depends upon the phoniness he hates so much, so when he advocates for genuine interaction, society defines his ideas as madness, thereby producing his madness. It drives him “crazy.”

Joyce Rowe addresses the importance of childhood to his idealism: “Holden . . . is committed to a hopeless vision that makes all the more acute his disgust with the actual;” his ideal “lies in a sunlit childhood Eden, dominated by the image of his dead brother, Allie, who stands for whatever is most authentic in Holden’s inner life” (80). Holden’s idealism stems from a decidedly childish innocence: as a child, he lacks adult experience and views the world more idealistically than the adults around him. This conflict prompts society to define his youthful idealism as madness. By doing so, society discredits him—as a delinquent—then seeks to control him through carceral systems.

As Holden uses the language of madness to blame society for labeling him crazy, he also takes the language of madness from American society and from psychiatric institutions and uses it to gain some agency, though he is unable to escape the discourse. Foucault defines discourse as “the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized” (“Order” 53). For Foucault, discourse is something inescapable and pervasive. De Certeau critiques and adapts Foucault, arguing that while discourse may be inescapable, individuals can engage with the discourse’s tactics through acts of subversion and reappropriation: “tricky and stubborn procedures that elude discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised” (96). Though he cannot escape American society’s discursive formations, Holden can express agency by reappropriating their language. After the encounter with Mr. Antolini shakes Holden, he describes a fantasy in which he pretends to be deaf and mute, living in isolation near the woods: “I got excited as hell thinking about it. I really did. I knew the part about pretending I was a deaf-mute was crazy, but I liked thinking about it anyway . . . all of a sudden, I ran like a madman across the street—I damn near got killed doing it” (258). His frequent references to himself as “crazy” or a “madman”—words prompted by his actions outside the bounds of social convention—reveal the close tie between madness and society. Holden, though, uses this language of madness subversively—it

does not matter to him whether his plan is "crazy." Holden does not act as if "crazy" and, for instance, "valuable" are mutually exclusive terms. He acknowledges the madness of subversive ideas, but does not dismiss them.

As Donald P. Costello notes, "Holden's slang use of *crazy* is both trite and imprecise. 'That drives me crazy' means that he violently dislikes something; yet 'to be crazy about' something means just the opposite" (16). Yet Holden's use of the language of madness is not imprecise in a careless manner. Rather, his language reveals he does not view madness as something entirely negative. By using the language of madness to reflect this view, he subverts the discourse, using language ironically as a tactic to reclaim some agency. He deploys non-literally the language society uses against him, thus challenging the accepted definitions of these words and gaining some agency within the dominant discourse.

Holden also attempts to create a new discourse by re-centering the narrative using autobiography. Jacques Derrida claims that new discourses emerge in moments when the the dominant discourse's culture is "*dislocated*, driven from its locus, and forced to stop considering itself as the culture of reference" (282). Just as the creation of new discourses involves a decentering—or re-centering—Holden attempts to maintain control of the story, re-centering focus onto *his* story. Though he cannot operate outside of discourse, he does possess the power to shape it slightly with his own story, as de Certeau suggests: "The reader takes neither the position of the author nor an author's position. He invents in texts something different from what they 'intended'" (169). Since Holden is constrained by discourse, his autobiography's text is first written by discourse, then he reads and retells it. Nonetheless, he is able to invent something in his autobiography that subverts the dominant discourse.

Holden begins the novel by addressing his role as narrator: "Besides, I'm not going to tell you my whole goddam autobiography or anything. I'll just tell you about this madman stuff that happened to me around last Christmas just before I got pretty run-down and had to come out here and take it easy" (3). He admits he is no impartial narrator—that he is only going to tell his audience what he wants them to know—revealing how his reading of events functions as a subversive tactic. Similarly, at the end of the novel, he says "that's all I'm going to tell about. I could probably tell you what I did after I went home, and how I got sick and all. . . . But I don't feel like it. I really don't. That stuff doesn't interest me too much right now" (276).

Even after being moved from one carceral system to another—boarding school to a psychiatric institution—Holden maintains tight control over his narrative. Even when unable to control his circumstances, he can control his reading within discourse. A. Robert Lee addresses the necessity of Holden's role as author: "He has, so to speak, remade himself. Moreover, the privileges of authorship, in addition, have given him his occasion as for the first time to elicit pattern, order, from what throughout his troubled young life has overwhelmingly been flux and loss" (94). Holden's role as reader of the autobiography constrained within discourse and author of his own reading of this autobiography gives him agency society otherwise denies him. By reading—and thereby writing—his autobiography, he re-centers the discourse and exercises some agency.

Ultimately, the cyclical nature of the novel's ending reveals the pervasiveness of society's carceral nature and exemplifies Holden's perseverance in fighting against the system. Because society has been unable to control him within one carceral system—schools like Pencey Prep—it dubs him a delinquent by labeling him as "mad," thus relocating him to another carceral system: psychiatric institutions. Yet, because Holden is still a child, the psychiatric institution's goal is merely to send him back to school in order to mold him into the sort of adult who submits to carceral authority. The doctors—at least from Holden's point of view—seem more interested in getting him back to school than in helping with his mental troubles: "A lot of people, especially this one psychoanalyst guy they have here, keeps asking me if I'm going to apply myself when I go back to school next September. It's such a stupid question, in my opinion. I mean how do you know what you're going to do till you *do* it? The answer is, you don't. I *think* I am, but how do I know? I swear it's a stupid question" (276). In a psychiatric institution, Holden is the subject of even closer examination than he was at Pencey. He is under constant individual, medical surveillance. Holden still rebels, however, against examination by challenging the psychiatric institution's surveillance, thus resisting the dominant discourse. According to Foucault, "it is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection" (*Discipline* 187). Even as he is forced into an institution more easily able to physically surveil him, Holden continues to rebel by refusing to subject his thoughts to authority figures' surveillance. His rejection of the psychoanalyst's query as a "stupid question" reappropriates the question, discrediting it, and

reveals that Holden still fights the system trying to mold him (though less dramatically than when he fled to New York at the novel's beginning). He continues to cling to genuineness, expressing himself in defiance of what he knows the doctor wants him to say.

Arthur Heiserman and James Miller note that Holden clings to his values throughout the novel: "In childhood he had what he is now seeking—non-phoniness, truth, innocence. . . . Still, unlike all of us, Holden refuses to compromise with adulthood and its necessary adulteries; and his heroism drives him berserk" (5–6). While Holden's ideals necessarily are constructs of the dominant discourse, he refuses to submit to this discourse if doing so requires him to abandon these ideals. He fights the discourse while simultaneously trapped within it. Holden refuses to submit to the psychiatric institution's surveillance and refuses to comply with its discipline, remaining genuine to the end. Thus, even while he is under physical surveillance, Holden retains the agency he gained by re-centering the discourse. He continues to fight against the carceral system, refusing to give the doctor the "phony" answer he wants. Even in his narrative's conclusion, Holden shows that a "delinquent" idealist can tactically subvert the power of a system within which he is trapped, challenging the system even as it attempts to silence him.

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Voice and Transformation in the Exeter Book Riddles

Alana Truitt

What is more central to riddles than identity? The Exeter Book, a 10th-century manuscript, boasts ninety to ninety-five riddles—depending on who does the counting. Among these riddle poems are an array of strange creatures and wondrous objects, some of which speak with a miraculous voice—begging to be named—while others sit in silence. Within the Exeter Book’s first-person riddles, we find a pattern, in which voice becomes important: the acquisition of speech by either non-human or non-living speakers is linked strongly to craftsmanship and to the metamorphosis of the subject or speaker through another’s actions. In addition, the riddles raise issues of marginality and the subversion or destabilization of what are generally taken to be fundamentally opposite states. I argue that the Exeter Book’s first-person or “ic eom” riddles use displacement, coercion, and transmutation to allow their speaking subjects to cross the divide between silence and the realm of speech, and invite their readers to change in order to speak their names correctly.

Oppression, marginality, dislocation, and, most importantly, transformation at the hands of some other are all significant elements in both the first-person and third-person riddles. The speaker/subject in many of the first-person riddles reflects on a past life that has been stolen from them, a violent metamorphosis through which they take on a new form and function, becoming an object with human characteristics, including a voice.

Jerry Denno claims that one of the riddle's common narratives involves "remember[ing] being taken from the margins of the human world," of being "seized, removed, and rendered inanimate; and of being implicitly bound" (38). A good example of this narrative is found in Riddle 24 (I follow Craig Williamson's numbering from *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book* throughout this essay):

Mec feonda sum feore besnyþede,
 woruldstrenga binom, wætte siþþan,
 dyfde on wætre, dyde eft þonan,
 sette on sunnan þær ic swiþe beleas
 herum þam þe ic hæfde (lines 1-5a)

[One of my enemies robbed me of life, deprived me of physical strength, then wet me, immersed me in water, then took me out again, set me in the sun where I quickly lost the hairs that I had.]

Considering the language of capture and coercion, it should come as no surprise that the riddles are saturated with themes of servitude and oppression, for not only is the speaker torn from its home and "deprived of strength," it is bound, coerced, and manipulated as it is "wrested into materiality" (Denno 38).

Thus, one of the riddles' dominant themes emerges: speakers who have been deliberately "made" and, thereby, subjugated at the hands of a human craftsman, or by God himself. Often, the acquisition of speech follows the violent transformation by which the subject is made into an object that can be used. This theme appears in riddle 24 (the solution to this riddle is frequently thought to be a book or bible):

Heard mec siþþan
 snað seaxes ecg, sindrum begrunden;
 fingras feoldan, ond mec fugles wyn
 geondsprengde speddropum, spyerde geneahhe
 ofer brunne bred, beamtelge swealg,
 streames dæle, stop eft on mec,
 siþþade sweartlast (lines 5b-11a)

[Afterwards, the knife's cruel edge cut me, scraped me free of impurities; fingers folded me and the bird's joy scattered on me useful drops,

made a track often over a dark brim, imbibed ink, a portion of the stream, afterwards stepped on me, travelled leaving dark paths.]

In addition, the word “*wrætlic*” gestures toward the importance of craftsmanship in the Exeter Book riddles. Of the forty-eight times *wrætlic* appears in the Old English poetic corpus, twenty-one are found in the Exeter Book riddles (Ramey, “Riddle” 462). Though *wrætlic* is most commonly translated as “wondrous,” the contexts of its usage—especially in the riddles—suggests that it refers to the aesthetic quality of a “deliberately crafted strangeness,” and that it has less to do with the object being described than it does with the cunning work of its creator (Ramey, “Riddle” 466). For instance, note the “*wrætlic weorc smiþa*” (“wondrous workmanship of smiths”) described in Riddle 24, where the ornamentations themselves give the object the power of speech:

Nu þa gereno ond se reada telg
 ond þa wuldorgesteald wide mæra
 dryhtfolca helm (lines 15–17a)

[Now, these ornaments and the red dye and these splendid treasures
 make the protector of peoples widely known.]

Rather than a mere matter of aesthetics, the relative frequency of *wrætlic* and words with similar connotations suggests the centrality of craftsmanship in the riddles, and the continuing presence of the craftsman in the work itself. The recurring word raises the subject of material speech and the means through which the riddles’ speakers are given voice.

Many of the “*ic eom*” riddles use *prosopopoeia* to grant the subject a voice, disrupting the boundary between the speech-bearing human and the silent, subjugated object or creature. *Prosopopoeia* is a rhetorical device through which non-human creatures and objects are given the power of speech, and its usage in the riddles allows for crucial descriptive information to be revealed first-hand, while creating a paradox that conceals the speaker’s identity (Nelson, “Rhetoric” 428). In the riddles, *prosopopoeia* gives the sense that an entirely inanimate object is in some way alive and, in a metaphorical sense, human. As a genre, riddles frequently exploit the impulse to believe any speaking thing must be “classifiable . . . as human” (Nelson, “Paradox” 609). For Denno, voice in the riddles takes on the sense

of being “a sort of code for *human*—as opposed to *bestial*—consciousness” (43). Mirroring the transition from a living thing to a human-made object is common in “ic eom” riddles.

Interestingly, it is only after the riddling subject has been transformed that it gains this voice—only through the violence of its subjugation does it gain the limited agency accompanying it. Through metamorphosis, the object crosses from the material or animal world into the human realm. And it does so in more ways than one: by gaining speech, the speaker has disrupted the binary Marie Nelson posits between the human and non-human realms—a divide that falls entirely along the boundary of voice (“Paradox” 609). When added to the vocabulary of strangeness and wonder, these transformations reflect the paradox of a normally voiceless, servile, and forcefully-made object exhibiting agency through powers of speech ordinarily reserved for humans.

Voice is not something *achieved* by the riddling things; it is imposed upon them. The thing is taken from its home—from its prior state—and shaped into something humans can use. As the culmination of its integration into the human world, it silently speaks as humans do. Jordan Zweck addresses this point, arguing that for a riddle subject to be silent is a willful act of resistance to assimilation: “to be silent in Anglo-Saxon culture can be to resist normal human sociality, to resist being human” (322). In this way, the issue of voice in the riddles resembles the forced linguistic assimilation that conquered, enslaved, or otherwise marginalized people groups faced during this time period. It becomes clear that, though the thing gains the ability to make itself heard, speech is yet another marker of its bondage. It loses silence when it has no need nor desire to speak.

This multifaceted subjugation creates in the riddled thing the sort of paradoxical existence that obscures identity—a requirement for the genre—and in doing so, forces the riddle to disrupt several “binary oppositions”: divides between the living and the dead, the human and the non-human, the voiced and the voiceless, and, sometimes, the male and the female (Neville 521). Through its transmutation and subsequent integration into human life, the riddle subject transgresses these lines, disrupting our ability to correctly name it, as it asks. Nelson identifies the paradox of human/non-human classification that falls along lines of speech, signaling one opposition that muddles attempts at identification (“Paradox” 609). The weakened divide between the living and the dead is another

common binary in “ic eom” riddles. The riddles, like sacred texts, possess what Ursula Schaefer calls a “vicarious voice” (qtd. in Ramey, “Writing Speaks” 336). Mary Hayes alternately calls this phenomenon “a mediumistic power” that facilitates the voice and, therefore, the presence of the dead speaker (27). In addition, the riddles often feature “linguistic ambiguities” that “direct as well as misdirect the reader” in matters of time, number, and grammatical gender (Afros 436). Such language tricks—not unlike the “wrætlic weorc smiþa”—transform the straightforward task of naming an object into a task with additional challenges for the would-be solver.

To correctly name the riddle’s speaker, one must seek to experience the world and its ambiguities in the same way as the object—to become the riddled/riddling thing—suggesting a transformation akin to the way the craftsman has transformed the object. Williamson contends that riddles hold “a liberative power,” through which what “we guess finally is what we have become” and that, in that moment, we recognize that the thing “in its suffering and sorrow is simply one of us” (*A Feast of Creatures* 9, 11). Denno similarly argues that “the reader is challenged . . . to become, for the moment, the riddled thing,” indicating that by solving a riddle, one “must assume [the subject’s] straitened subjectivity and thus experience imaginatively its bondage” (42). It becomes necessary to cross into the thing’s twilight realm of paradox and unravel the riddle’s net of ambiguity in order to discover how to answer its plea—to “Frige hwæt ic hatte / niþum to nytte [Say what I am called, useful to men]” (Riddle 24, lines 26b-27a).

Riddles, by their nature, concern questions of identity. The question of identity, though, is more complicated than simply naming a mysteriously talking, somehow dead, yet also alive creature or object. Themes of marginality, displacement, and transformation highlight the issue of voice and silence that runs through many Exeter Book riddles, and they elucidate the transformative property that riddles—by their very generic nature—must possess. If gaining a voice is a symptom of the speaker’s oppression as they are created by human hands, then to be successfully named in a riddle would be a sort of temporary freedom from servitude. To identify the speaker, we must first identify with it, to live or die as it has, to understand the pain of its loss and transformation. Only then can we unwind the ambiguous and contradictory language that surrounds the unnamed thing. Only when we, for a brief moment, join the object under the craftsman’s knife or

anvil—under the pen of the poet who speaks through it—can the speakers of the “ic eom” riddles be released.

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“Fifty cents for her love”: Autobiographical Fiction and the Rejection of White Patronage in Zora Neale Hurston’s “The Gilded Six-Bits”

Amber Gaudet

Critics have often labeled Zora Neale Hurston as an apolitical folklorist, and many during the Harlem Renaissance criticized her lack of emphasis on the period’s racial issues. Contrary to this recurrent reading of her work, however, Hurston consistently underscores race, class, and gender, though not always overtly, which might have made her work more difficult to publish or incurred the wrath of the white scholarly community. Hurston’s experiences as a black woman, author, and academic during the Harlem Renaissance—beholden to white benefactors and limited in some ways as a result—arguably inspired much of her work. “The Gilded Six Bits,” Hurston’s 1933 short story, has pseudo-autobiographical underpinnings and can be read as a rejection of white patronage, which had a corrupting effect on black writers of the Harlem Renaissance. I thus assert that “The Gilded Six-Bits” was influenced by Hurston’s relationship with Charlotte Mason—her notoriously overbearing patron—and contains a rejection of white patronage. By detailing Slemmons’s role as representative of the corrupting power white values have on black communities, and drawing parallels between Hurston’s experiences and the story’s Missie May, I read the story as a racial commentary that reflects Hurston’s self-proclaimed positions on race relations.

In 1927, Hurston—while studying at Columbia University and traveling to collect material for her writing on folklore—met and began working for

Charlotte Osgood Mason (Lawless 161). Mason was a white philanthropist and a patron to other Harlem Renaissance writers like Langston Hughes. Hurston, like many of her counterparts, needed funding for her fieldwork, and without alternatives, reluctantly accepted Mason's sponsorship (Lawless 161). Making a deal with Mason, however, meant more than keeping her abreast of Hurston's progress: Mason had a reputation for being overbearing, demanding that she have total control over her beneficiaries' work. Hurston was required to keep detailed records of her expenditures and provide exhaustive daily accounts of her work (Lawless 162). She could not access her research materials without Mason's approval, since Mason kept them locked in a vault in her house, and Hurston was forbidden to speak to anyone about her fieldwork (Lawless 162).

More importantly, Mason had a fascination with what she saw as the "primitive" nature of Black Americans, a role Hurston had to adopt at times to keep Mason happy. Hurston used tongue-in-cheek nicknames in her letters to Mason, no doubt poking fun at Mason's perception of herself as the black literary community's savior. In fact, "she actually addressed Mrs. Mason as 'Patron to the Primitives,' and 'Godmother,' signing her letters 'Your favorite Darkie,' 'Your little Pickinanny,' or 'Most devotedly your black spasm'" (Lawless 163). For Hurston, the cost of funding was a humiliating one: Mason's patronage meant complete possession, not just of Hurston's work, but also her autonomy.

Hurston's history with white patronage began long before she met Mason, as she describes in her 1942 autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*. From the time she was a young child, whites recognized and rewarded Hurston's intelligence and zeal (Patterson 16). Hurston relates instances when she was singled out, favored by whites even before her literary career began. Later, though, she came to realize this system of patronage reinforces, rather than counters, racial supremacy and systemized subjugation. As Tiffany Ruby Patterson suggests, "being wealthy and white meant having the privilege to invite a 'poor, colored primitive' into the world of wealth and patronage" (181). White philanthropy was its own form of oppression, one that created a system of total reliance on the "generosity" of whites, and allowed them to set the terms.

Despite the degradation of playing a role steeped in the era's race relations, Hurston's works rebuff and mock notions held by whites about blacks during her era. Numerous accounts speak of Hurston's tongue-in-cheek

comments and the undertones of anti-racism and racial justice in her stories—present, but not overt enough to prevent the narratives from selling or to anger her patrons: “We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn’t know what he is missing” (*Mules* 2). The master storyteller in black culture adeptly wears masks designed to prevent the “white man” from knowing everybody “else’s business”: It is “a feather-bed resistance. That is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries” (*Mules* 2–3).

This resistance—letting whites believe what they want about Black Americans—appears explicitly near the end of “The Gilded Six-Bits,” in Joe’s exchange with the candy-store clerk. Joe puts on a “mask” for the white clerk when asked where he got the gilded coin, allowing the proprietor to hold onto his notions about the harmless and “entertaining” nature of blacks: “‘Wisht I could be like these darkies. Laughin’ all the time. Nothin’ worries ‘em’” (549). In reality, Joe’s life is filled with turmoil—caused by his wife’s infidelity—and is anything but a laughing matter. Hurston suggests here that it is better to allow these stereotypes to stand than challenge them, because nothing good will come from whites gaining a better understanding of the black community in the racially-divided Jim Crow era.

Beneath this overt critique of race relations lies the story’s rejection of Mason’s brand of white patronage. Hurston presents a happy couple—untouched by the Depression or the South’s racial discrimination—living in “a Negro house in a Negro settlement . . . But there was something happy about the place” (541). Joe and Missie May are, relatively speaking, financially well-off—with enough money to put away savings—and they appear to have something they value even more: love and family. Slemmons, then, seems the antithesis of Joe and Missie May, representing white, urban values like materialism and excess (Chinn and Dunn 779). While Joe and Missie May are content in Eatonville with their modest wealth, Slemmons tempts them with the false promises of gold and the possibilities it represents.

Hurston’s habit of emphasizing Southern values and telling the stories of Black Americans in the South was no accident. Though not a supporter of the brutality that accompanied Jim Crow laws, she believed blacks and whites were happiest when separate, saying in a notorious 1943 interview that the “Jim Crow system works” (qtd. in Trefzer 69). In response to the backlash that followed, Hurston clarified her position the following month:

“The south by opportunity of long practice has worked out a system, while the north, caught between its declarations of no prejudice and its actual feelings . . . was groping around for the same thing, but with fine phrases (qtd. in Trefzer 69). According to Hurston, the philanthropy of Northern whites like Mason was nothing but a thinly-veiled tool of the same racism perpetuated by Southern segregation.

The similarities between Missie May’s situation and Hurston’s own experiences are undeniable. Hurston, who grew up in Eatonville and describes her childhood as one absent of the racial discrimination facing other blacks in the South, might have ended up with a life like Missie May’s had she not been lured by the possibilities of higher education (Lawless 156). Hurston left the peace of Eatonville to pursue academic endeavors on what would prove to be a tough road to travel, given her position as a black woman during a period of intense racism. Hurston was the only Black American at Columbia—where she attended before meeting Mason—which made her study difficult. Only after tiring of the lack of funding and the constant barriers did she decide to leave the academic world and strike out on her own with Mason’s limited financial support (Lawless 163). As I noted above, however, Mason demanded from Hurston much more than to share in her work’s discoveries, and her motives were not as philanthropic as they seemed. Slemmons, then, reflects the same values as Mason: illusory affluence, greed, and white Northern ideals that—though they appeared more progressive than Southern racism—perpetuated subjugation.

Missie May, in this context, appears much like Hurston: naïve, lured by Slemmons’s false promises, reshaping her identity in pursuit of material gain. Ultimately, her decisions serve only to corrupt. As a black woman in the South, Missie May represents an intersectional marginalization. She knows she and Joe are likely never to get gold unless they “find it,” so she turns to prostitution when Slemmons promises her some (545). In a somewhat similar manner, Hurston’s experiences parallel Missie May’s. She doesn’t literally prostitute herself for Mason’s funding, but her willingness to present herself (and her community) as a sort of minstrel show—and to give Mason total possession of her work—signals a metaphoric prostitution. As Elaine Lawless notes, “Hurston’s politics were gendered as much as they were raced. She knew black people were the mules of the world, yet she also knew and was willing to say openly that black women were the mules in the black community as well” (165). Missie May, then, evokes not just

Hurston's experiences, but those of black women collectively, who regularly had to be what others wanted them to be in order to survive.

Slemmons embodies the corrupting influence of white philanthropists on the black community's voices during the Harlem Renaissance. Mason's efforts to control Hurston and other authors like her were not an anomaly, but the inclination of most benefactors during this era. White sponsorship of black artists was driven by political, classist, and racist motivations, and a general desire to channel their curiosities about taboo subjects through the voices of the Black American experience. Lawless suggests that "without the postcolonial language we now throw around so casually, [Hurston] knew all about the 'exotic other,' about how whites 'fetishized' the 'primitive' blacks, how they believed the notion that blacks were pure in their primitive state, innocent, uncomplicated" (164). Hurston evokes the white philanthropic community's values through her presentation of Slemmons and the Banks's contrasting, redemptive values.

Slemmons is framed as an antagonist—representative of white patronage—who tempts the Banks, an aspect of the story crystallized by Slemmons's background. He claims to have gained his fortune by prostituting himself to whites: "Well, he tole us how de white womens in Chicago give 'im all dat gold money. So he don't 'low nobody to touch it at all. Not even put dey finger on it. Dey told 'im not to. You kin make 'miration at it, but don't tetch it" (544). Not only does Slemmons present a corrupting influence to the Banks, but he sold himself to whites in exchange for what turned out to be a gilded fortune, a false currency. The perpetuation of corruption—passed down from whites, infiltrating the black community—emphasizes the story's representation of the dangers of selling oneself, literally or figuratively, to whites in the hopes of gaining wealth or respect. As the white women did to Slemmons, the white community's promises may prove false, and the price Black Americans have to pay for any concessions, much too high.

Likewise, Slemmons's manner of dress and his body itself align him with white Northerners like Mason. The emphasis on his "gut" and the comparisons to rich whites like Henry Ford and John D. Rockefeller present him as gluttonous and willing to rely on whites for his fortune (544). The story's characters recognize his link to white Northerners, as well: "He jes' got a corperation. Dat make 'm look lak a rich white man" (544). Joe, on the other hand—a self-sufficient black man—is praised for being built "noble,"

since he embodies that which Hurston celebrates about Southern black community: hard work, family values, and self-sufficiency (544).

As Hildegard Hoeller suggests, the symbolism of the currency in Hurston's story is lent particular significance by the context of the gold-standard debate. Hurston herself drew a parallel between currency and race in 1934:

The Negro's universal mimicry is not so much a thing in itself as an evidence of something that permeates his entire self . . . In primitive communities actual goods, however bulky, are bartered for what one wants. This finally evolves into coin, the coin not being real wealth but a symbol of wealth. Still later even coin is abandoned for legal tender, and still later for cheques in certain usages. (qtd. in Hoeller 761)

Hoeller contends that gold is representative of white consumerism and even white supremacy, with silver being the currency of the Black American community (762). Hurston uses the gilded—representative of the falseness of white patronage—as a stand-in for Slemmons throughout the remainder of the story, emphasizing that the corrupting power of patronage is ineffectual without the complicity of the black community. While Slemmons is an intruder in Eatonville, he only gains the power to disrupt the Banks's peace once they covet what they believe he has.

Joe and Missie May are redeemed by their willingness to cast off the values associated with Slemmons—greed, pride, vanity—and return to those of their self-contained community. Missie May cares for Joe, cooking him breakfast, giving him back rubs, and performing her “wifely duties” in spite of their lack of intimacy. Missie May is finally, fully redeemed by giving Joe a son, a nod to traditional family values. Joe is redeemed too, but only after finally suppressing his pride and anger by using Slemmons's gilded coin to purchase sweets for Missie May, thus ridding himself of the corrupting item. Hurston suggests, then, that the black community can thrive only through the total rejection of white values and everything associated with them. Joe and Missie May return to their rituals with a tentativeness that comes from knowledge—from a loss of innocence. They recognize the evils of gilded temptation and appreciate more fully the peace that comes from being true to themselves, knowing they possess the real fortune, already.

Hurston's “The Gilded Six-Bits” rebuffs the illusory promises and

corruption of white patronage prevalent during the Harlem Renaissance, offering her tongue-in-cheek response to its racism. The story critiques the influence of whites on black autonomy, with Slemmons representing the corruption of white values, which are contrasted with the authenticity and sincerity of Joe and Missie May. Missie May herself is reminiscent of Hurston: once happy in her community, she is lured by Slemmons's false promises, just as Hurston was drawn into the self-degradation of white sponsorship. "The Gilded Six-Bits," then, is both a rejection of reality at the time and, perhaps, a wistful daydream of what life could have been had she stayed in Eatonville.

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What is the Word: The Prerogative of the Interrogative in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*

Andrea Herrig

Samuel Beckett's 1957 single-act play *Endgame* seems purposefully elusive, the path to reach a conclusive interpretation shrouded by absurdity. The focus is not on answers, but the search for answers. The questions the characters ask implicitly take the form of statements; the only answer is doubt; the only indisputable fact is inescapable curiosity. The ambiguity of questions without answers suggests that life itself is a series of unfulfilled wonderings. Inevitably, the play returns to the what, where, why, who, and how of existence. Not only are the answers to these existential questions unclear, but the words themselves are inherently insufficient. In *Endgame*—which weaves together specific diction with tragicomic elements—Beckett pursues meaning, while also acknowledging the limitations of language. The interrogative “what?” functions as the lens through which the play considers the game of life. Ultimately, then, *Endgame* explores the necessity of perpetual contemplation for the human condition.

Questions act as *Endgame*'s framework, *provoking* independent thought instead of *providing* it. The interrogative model of inquiry—a systematic, logico-philosophical model developed by Finnish philosopher and logician Jaakko Hintikka—aims strategically to allow for discovery, while accommodating “problems of uncertainty and justification” (Hintikka 430). Despite the complexity of this inquiry-based system, “in its basic features, the interrogative model is simplicity itself” (Hintikka 429). Beckett's work employs

the simplicity and uncertainty of the interrogative model. The question-strewn dialogue uses simple syntax that allows for confusion, not from the form or content, but from the extratextual train of thought. Through this model, “the Inquirer has available . . . two kinds of moves. . . . Either the Inquirer makes a deductive move, i.e., performs a step of logical inference from what has already been established, or else makes an interrogative move, i.e., puts a question to an idealized source of information . . . tentatively dubbed Nature” (Hintikka 429). Beckett, as the Inquirer, uses the latter move, which leaves space for uncertainty. The inclusion of questions—such as Clov’s query to Hamm, “why this farce, day after day?”—does not follow the deductive inference approach to discovering an answer (40). It creates the necessary space for a search for meaning instead of following a logical series of inferences to reach a conclusion. In relation to his own work, Beckett would find fault with inferences because *assumptions* differ vastly from *answers*. Accepting inferences would be to stray away from truth rather than slowly inching toward it via a never-ending series of insightful questions.

The circuitous plot of *Endgame* moves through interrogative exchanges amongst characters, reminiscent of the final moves in a chess game, referred to as the “endgame.” The play begins with Clov tonelessly saying, “finished, it’s finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished,” and ends with Hamm saying, “you . . . remain” before covering his face with a handkerchief, thus depicting the same image from the opening of the play (8, 93). The end of the game—death—is the only certainty. *Endgame*’s characters are trapped in a time loop that precedes the finality of “check-mate.” They are left to exist in an uncertainty enhanced by questions about playing the game, or, in less metaphorical terms, living life. The characters choose to play; their choice is evidenced by their incessant dialogue, the suggestion that the play continues on a loop, and Hamm’s repeated phrase, “me to play” (76, 90). Ihab Hassan contends the play’s game is “subject to arbitrary or absurd rules” (132). The incomprehensible rulebook ensnares the characters in their search for answers. Questions relating to how and why they are playing fuel this incessant cycle, yet never lead to a set of comprehensive rules that will guide their final moves. Therefore, “nothing ends, because potentiality overwhelms reality and alternatives proliferate;

nothing is . . . consummated. Hence, time tends to be viciously circular” (Hassan 132). Questions mirror the play’s circular temporality. The characters return always to the what, where, why, who, and how.

The question of what the play is “about” haunts any analysis. According to Frederick Hoffman, “it is idle to ask what Beckett’s novels and plays are ‘about.’ In any traditional or conventional sense, they are ‘about nothing’ . . . they are, for the most part, neither defenses of nor attacks upon society, civilization, culture, or class” (xii). Hoffman suggests Beckett’s works are unconventional, but that does not mean they are about *nothing*. Surely, *Endgame* has no concrete meaning, an uncertainty signaled when Nagg says, “what does that mean? [Pause.] That means nothing” (28). And again:

Clov: Zero . . . zero . . . [he looks] . . . and zero.

Hamm: Nothing stirs. All is—

Clov: Zer— (65)

Even later in the play, Hamm says, “Absent, always” (83). Nothing—in its literal sense—indicates a dead end, a standstill. Yet, nothingness is not meaninglessness. Nothingness as “zero” and “absence” is not the lack of meaning, but the presence of space for exploring meaning. Through nothing, there is room for something, but that something is ambiguous. If the play is “about” absolute nullity, then there would be no game, no cycle, just the bleak finality of death. Abstractly, the play is about the absence of an answer, but the presence of a search.

The play attempts to harness the paradox of language: the idea that language can never fully capture meaning, yet it is all humanity has in some respects. Language in *Endgame* “serves to express the breakdown, the disintegration of language. Where there is no certainty, there can be no definite meanings—and the impossibility of ever attaining certainty is one of the main themes of Beckett’s plays” (Esslin, *Theatre* 86). *Endgame*’s dialogue elucidates several types of uncertainty: the uncertainties characters carry within themselves; the misunderstandings between characters; and, more broadly, the play’s obscured meaning. The search for clarity—for meaning—is tied inextricably to language: “In the game that the mind plays with itself, language, of course, is the original flaw” (Hassan 132). This flaw is particularly apparent when Hamm asks Clov for something to ponder and Clov responds, “there is nothing to say” (88). Then, after Clov’s forced

attempt to say something, Hamm says, “articulate!” (89). This exchange illuminates the simultaneous necessity and inadequacy of language. There is a desire to speak and hear something sensible, yet, this *something* cannot entirely convey meaning. According to Martin Esslin, “for the artist the compulsion to express his intuition of the world is a condition of his very existence” (“Introduction” 3). Hamm’s exclamation “articulate!” suggests an artist’s expressive compulsion.

Despite the insufficiency of words, they are one of the only tools available in the search for meaning. As A.J. Leventhal claims, in *Endgame* “it becomes clear that the sparse, bare vocabulary is giving profundity to the statement . . . Nothing is clear cut. Nothing can be known absolutely” (29). Leventhal suggests that syntactical brevity and lexical simplicity create space for seeking. In Beckett’s work, verbosity obscures meaning; wordiness constricts nothingness until it becomes a false somethingness. Beckett repeatedly “challenges the value of his own verbal descriptions, impugning their accuracy, offering another verb, another noun, and finally dismissing them all as being as worthless as the thoughts whose messengers they are” (Leventhal 30). Even the “sparse, bare vocabulary” can misleadingly gesture to meaning. Words—as unsatisfactory as they are for Beckett—are the primary form of human communication. Yes, he dismisses words as being worthless, yet he recognizes their indispensability and continues through trial and error to communicate effectively.

Sometimes the questions in *Endgame* are directed at the concept of the word itself. Hamm asks, “[normal voice.] All is . . . all is . . . all is what? [Violently.] All is what?” and Clov responds, “what all is! in a word? Is that what you want to know? Just a moment” (37). Note Clov’s rearrangement of Hamm’s “all is what?” to “what all is?” Multiple discrete meanings can be gleaned from the two related questions. “All is what?” seeks to classify the ambiguous word “all”—as in “all of existence”—into a single word, which would be the answer to “what?” If Hamm’s question is read as a statement, it suggests that the word “what”—an interrogative pronoun “asking for information specifying something”—is the answer to the meaning of “all” (“What”). Clov’s “what all is?” could merely be a question for Hamm, clarifying that he wonders about the meaning of “all.” Alternatively, it could ask more about “is” and less about “what”—less about classifying and more about the nature of “all.” If read as a statement, “what all is” indicates a circular logic responding to “all is what?” The uncertainty continues with

“in a word?” and “just a moment.” Does Clov supply the word “moment” as an answer to “all is what?” Or does the phrase “just a moment” indicate that Clov needs time to think before answering? Beckett’s wordplay and ambiguity dominate the play.

The word “what” functions as a signifier not neatly linked to its signification. Beckett’s poem “What is the Word” explores the elusiveness of meaning—how meaning slips frustratingly through the fingers of a word:

afar -
 afar away over there -
 afaint -
 afaint afar away over there what -
 what -
 what is the word - (lines 36–41)

These lines point not only to the inability to find the word, but also to the importance of the search for the word. The never-ending search for the suitable word is symbolic of the search for meaning in life. The poem contains a sense of hopefulness, because—despite the word being “afaint,” “afar,” and “away”—the speaker keeps searching. The repeated line (and title) “what is the word,” offers two possibilities: the interrogative form, “what is the word?” and the declarative form, “what is the word.” The latter implies that the word “what” is the suitable word—an answer. “What” serves not as a word with a single meaning, but a question proposing that the answer will always be unknown and unnamable (a concept further explored in Beckett’s novel *The Unnamable*). The interrogatives in *Endgame* operate similarly.

Echoing serves as another sort of interrogative element in *Endgame*, both in the dialogue and the silences. Gerald Weales claims the play’s echoing is a “repetitive device” found in “the kind of echo passage in which there is no real repetition, but in which the sound of one line approximates and suggests another. That, essentially, is what is going on in the ‘Who-What’ exchange” (114):

Hamm: Who?
 Clov: What?
 Hamm: Who do you mean, he?
 Clov: Who do I mean! Yet another.

Hamm: Ah him! I wasn't sure. (68)

And similarly:

Hamm: Why do you stay with me?

Clov: Why do you keep me?

Hamm: There's no one else

Clov: There's nowhere else. (26)

In these “echo passages” there is “a suggestion that the ideas, as well as the lines, are echoing one from the other” (Weales 114). Parroting a fragment of the previous speaker’s line—usually a repetition including the interrogative pronoun—shows the overlap between questions and findings. Both characters express similar uncertainties and, in some cases, similar conclusions. In addition to echoes in the dialogue, Hassan notes that “the sound of a universal silence echo[es] in every act, and the rigorous game of living and dying [takes] ineluctable form” (174). This silence permeates the pauses in dialogue and the same questions about the metaphorical “endgame” resonate in it.

Questions prompt silence, listening, and contemplation. Jack Frisch contends “the modern poet uses to great effect the ‘action’ of silence,” suggesting that Beckett is “more concerned with what occurs in his listener’s mind during the silences a poem provides” (258). *Endgame* works similarly: questions elicit poetic silences, with the question mark functioning as a portal to introspection, a catalyst for searching. And these questions are part of a complex network of interrogation: “Beckett’s questioning of everything is itself under question. . . . The questioning of language is accompanied by a questioning of the work” (Nadeau 124–25). Beckett’s work “mark[s] an asymptotic line moving steadily, cruelly, toward silence and immobility” (Hassan 114). Mathematically, the line can never intersect the asymptote, therefore *Endgame*’s game is trapped in the approach toward silence, immobility, and death. As the asymptotic line nears ultimate silence, it becomes “impossible to move further towards silence through the word. The author is now left with only one alternative: to stop writing or to repeat himself” (Nadeau 125). As Maurice Nadeau claims, the cycle repeats itself, causing “[Beckett’s] narratives [to] trace a movement: from words to silence, from life (even a precarious one) to death (in life)” (123–24). Extending Nadeau’s

point a step further, this cyclical process—the contemplative act of questioning—becomes immortalized.

Endgame calls for pragmatic interrogation, not abstract analysis; for an inquiry-based, systematic approach, not a series of deductive moves. The use of interrogatives in *Endgame* generates a search for an explanation of “what.” Beckett recognizes the evasiveness of complete understanding, but emphasizes the importance of perpetual contemplation. The play’s game analogy points to the cyclical nature of questioning. Ultimately, “endgame” reflects the play’s aboutness: nothingness. Language’s limitations eternalize the search for meaning. Questions repeat and the silence allows them to echo. We are left with the stark final line as Hamm pauses and says, “you . . . remain” (93). What is there to do, but to remain?

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José Martí, Travel Writing, and the American Canon

Catherine Evans

José Martí's works "The Truth About the United States" and "The Indians in the United States" provide an outside perspective on social injustice. They critique corrupt democracy, foreshadow Cuba's run-ins with the US, and anticipate the internal social issues that continue to plague the US today. Martí demonstrates an anti-imperialist attitude from early encounters with the US, as he was conscious of the danger the country posed to Latin America. Although there is debate surrounding the genre of Martí's work, I propose reading his texts specifically as instances of travel writing. Considering Martí's essays as travel writing demonstrates that they invert the traditions of the genre, challenging its conventions, and provide an account of the US from a perspective that reflects the concerns of the period's Latin American leaders.

Before turning to Martí's texts, it is important to define travel writing. Broadly speaking, travel writing is a genre based on accounts of travels. According to John Zilcosky, the history of travel writing can be traced back to *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and oral cultures likely included stories of travel even earlier (4). Travel writing can be either fiction or non-fiction. Works such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, for instance, are fictional works, but still fall into travel literature's generic boundaries. One of the most important elements that identifies a work as travel writing is that it speaks about the culture through the

construction of the “Other” by the author. Documenting the unknown has been a core concern of much literature, and travel writing is no exception. Cultures are often defined by their relationship to the Other, differences frequently documented by travel writing. The creation of the Other is often rooted in a place of privilege.

Zilcosky addresses this privilege, noting that “travel-writing—created mainly by upper-class white men—has ‘produced’ the rest of the world . . . it has invented ‘others’—in order to draft a certain image of oneself” (9–10). In other words, travel writing originates from a sense of privilege that defines not only the writer, but also the subject. It “produces” the world through the lens of the author’s perspective in a way an audience similar to the author can digest. Travel writing, therefore, does not create an objective view of the unknown, but a reflection of the author’s biased perspective. The genre has a lineage that can be traced to the victors, conquistadors, and wealthy influencers of exploration. Martí’s position simultaneously speaks to and challenges this tradition.

Known as the “Apostle of Cuban Independence,” Martí is arguably one of the most important Latin American figures of the 19th century (Sierra). He is known for his poems, essays, and translations, and for his political resistance. A part of the *Modernismo* literary movement, his works helped shape Latin American identity and influenced modern literature. He advocated for the abolition of slavery in Cuba and the independence of Cuba from Spain (Sierra). When he died in battle against the Spanish, his death served as a battle cry for Cuban rebels who embraced his dedication to liberty. Before his death, though, his challenges to Spanish colonial rule over the Cuban territory led to his arrest and exile from Cuba in 1870 for charges of “anti-Spanish” activities. He traveled to the US, where he began critiquing US culture in his writings (Sierra). I contend these works should be read as examples of travel writing.

Martí’s comparisons of US injustices to the Cuban population’s own issues connect his work to the genre as a whole. Travel writing links the unknown to the known as it works to process encounters of difference. For instance, the travel literature of historical explorers accomplished this goal by relating plants, animals, and people to things familiar in their homeland. Martí, on the other hand, does not catalog his surroundings in the quasi-scientific or putatively comprehensive ways explorers did when writing about native populations and their environment. He instead uses similar

understandings of inhuman treatment to relate his readership's experiences to the US "The Truth about the United States" begins with slavery, rather than beautiful scenes of rolling hills or complimentary mentions of innovation. "The Indians in the United States" begins with cruelty—the displacement of the indigenous population by imperialism—rather than dwelling on the war traditions of native groups. Cubans of his time would have been aware of slavery's conditions, through exposure to cruelty against native populations in their own nation, but by connecting these issues to the US, Martí provides a type of mutual understanding that might prompt further discussion of injustices.

Martí's position as a Cuban abolitionist and revolutionary greatly influences his representation of the US in his texts. His choice to dwell on US imperialism's dark underbelly promotes his political values. For example, he focuses heavily on the inhuman treatment of native and slave populations. In "The Indians in the United States," Martí references the loss of identity and place experienced by native populations, writing "the Indian must recover his soul's clarity. . . . Let the tribes agree to revoke the treaties that have brought them to this miserable state" (163). As an activist in the Cuban independence movement, Martí uses this subject to establish common ground between the two lands. As customary in travel literature, he relates the Other to the known. By appealing to a shared feeling of recovering oneself from the oppressor, he offers an indirect call to action for Cuban readers. This move also challenges traditional travel literature about the Americas by connecting Cubans to marginalized people in the US. Traditionally, Europeans were the ones writing about the actions of natives or slaves in the Americas. Here, we have a Cuban activist writing about colonial cruelty in the US. Normally, his voice would be silenced. European nations and the US were international powers at this time, and Cuba was not a large part of the global conversation. So, while travel writing is rooted far from Martí's Cuban identity, he enters the conversation by both using and challenging its conventions.

Martí's texts are not always considered examples of travel writing, because they are not formatted as travelogues or travel journals, which are often considered the genre's standard forms. Additionally, his perspective is often excluded from US literary studies, because he is not European or American. Yet, his influential social position does align him with travel literature's history. Not only was he a man (a definite form of privilege

in the 19th century), he was also a public figure, a political icon. Latin American perspectives are often excluded from the US canon, and works originating outside the US that are included are typically European accounts of the nation. “American” literature tends to begin and end at the US border with the exception of occasional European commentary—Marti’s work highlights this divide. His presence affirms travel literature’s male-dominated history, but his status as an author on the periphery of the American literary tradition challenges the canon, as well. Thus, his background simultaneously supports and erodes the traditions of travel writing about the US.

Travel writing about the US and the Americas prior to Marti’s writings reinforced colonial power, as it developed into an enterprise entangled with trade routes and conquest. Works by authors such as Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Bartolomé de las Casas, and Christopher Columbus compelled leaders to send more men to newly “discovered” land (Clifford 20–22). It became a form of writing directly tied to conquest, exploitation, religion, and empire. In turn, the works promoted violence in these “new lands.” Zilcosky notes that travel writing “produces representations that in turn become commodities and cultural capital. Because this cultural knowledge appears as literature, its ‘investment’ is both political/economic and aesthetic; this knowledge becomes a style for dominating others” (10). Domination and the expansion of power were central to these texts. As a result, travel literature became an “ideological tool of empire” (Zilcosky 10). Since the travel itself had colonial intent, the writing became key to the mission of exploitation. Hence, travel writing became a tool through which power over the Other was consolidated.

Marti’s texts’ political motivation appears similar to this tradition in some ways, but it also challenges traditional power relations. Although Marti may not have looked to exploit the US, his works are not completely bereft of political intent. Conquistadors and explorers used their texts to fund explorations and to exploit land, people, and resources. Marti’s pieces do not look to take anything *physical* from the land or to dominate the population. Rather, he observes, taking with him the knowledge of similarities and differences between Latin America and the US. While his works do not seem based in malice, they are framed to promote his political agenda at home. The US provides an example for him to use in pursuit of his aims. As John Kirk argues, “there were, indeed, major faults and

serious problems in the social conditions of North America, Martí noted, but these tended to be of minor importance when compared to the broad sweep of social inequality, and to the widespread abuse of power in Latin America . . . [Martí's] mission subsequently become one of enlightening his readers" (282–83). Kirk connects Martí to the line of powerful travel writers before him. His audience lies at home; his texts work to construct an image of the land he is visiting. He does not exercise power over the US people, but his texts do hold some power in his homeland. Travel writers "produce" a certain image of their subjects to pursue their goals. Martí uses his writing to persuade his readers in a manner similar to how explorers used their texts to solicit funding from monarchs. He presents an image of the US that contradicts violent traditions, but supports his mission.

Martí also critiques widespread blind admiration for and misconceptions about the US, especially views prevalent in Latin America: "Rather than being resolved, the problems of humanity are being reproduced here . . . instead of growing stronger and saving itself from the hatred and misery of the monarchies, democracy is corrupted" (331). This radical statement elucidates US hypocrisy. As Kirk notes, "despite the noble origins of the Republic, the basic picture he presented was one of a society only superficially interested in political life" (279). In other words, Martí's position as an external party removed from US culture allows him to see the obvious injustice interwoven with the nation's supposed democracy. As a visitor, he can make such observations without bias in favor of the country, an advantage travel literature sometimes provides. This critique is possible precisely because he writes travel literature. If read as a different genre, his position does not provide the same insight, nor carry the same weight. He can acknowledge the government's history and intent, but also observe the population as an outsider. Although Martí is also critical of Cuba, he shows an increased skepticism about the US unparalleled in most of the US canon.

Martí's skepticism towards the US contradicts the majority of other travel writers of the time, thus providing a rare perspective. "The Truth about the United States" compares the conditions and reactions of the Latins and the Saxons: "The only way to find out whether Saxons and Latins are different, or to compare them, is by seeing how they have reacted under comparable conditions" (330). Martí calls direct attention to the division between the US and the rest of the Americas, despite their similar

reactions. He acknowledges the perceived superiority of the US, but he does not accept it. Martí is conscious, however, that many others do worship the US blindly: “an excess love for the north is the imprudent expression of a desire for progress so powerful that they fail to see that ideas . . . must grow from deep roots. . . . Monsters are created thus, not nations” (331). Martí here refers to the blind admiration and uninformed idea that progress can be achieved anywhere by following the US example.

In comparison to other Latin American works of travel writing around this time, we can see a stark difference between Martí’s criticism and the love for the nation other authors express. For example, the work of Domingo Sarmiento might also be categorized as travel literature, but his works praise the industry and innovation of the US without considering the system’s horrors. Sarmiento speaks of the wonders of trains, the improvement of education, and the possession of land as revolutionary. In doing so, he discounts the horrific treatment of the native populations, newly landed immigrants, slaves, and other minority groups. When Sarmiento does acknowledge these groups, he does so with disgust. Comparing Martí’s discussion on the treatment of the Native Americans to Sarmiento’s reveals how opposite these accounts of the same nation are. Sarmiento refers to the native population as “savages” and as guilty of “incurable barbarism” (190–91). On the other side of the spectrum, Martí writes regarding the truth of the natives’ condition. He describes them as “mentally, morally, and physically capable of all a white man can do . . . but we deprive him” (160–61). Using the same genre, the two offer very different understandings of the US. Using these two perspectives on indigenous populations as a frame of reference, it is possible to see the radically different uses of travel writing. The same genre can be used to present two very different messages about the same subject.

Martí pushes back against the notion that travel writing must do the sinister work of colonialism by reforming and repurposing the genre as a tool for raising political awareness. He distances himself from systems of injustice and travel literature’s colonial history. Although aligned with some of the genre’s traditional elements—he’s a man with a position of relative power and influence—he challenges this tradition, refusing to let his works be empire’s tools or exercises in blind admiration. Rather, he uses the platform to call attention to US mistakes, to consider how the nation’s choices created its problematic systems, and to promote his political vision

for his homeland. As a Cuban writing about his experiences with the US, he offers a different view, one commonly excluded from US classrooms. Reading Martí's writings as travel literature complicates the genre's relationship to colonialism, and it allows us to see how works outside of the standard travelogue or journal forms might reshape our understanding of the genre.

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Mind Under Matter: Death and Margaret Cavendish's Poetic Natural Philosophy

Dillon O'Neil

Margaret Cavendish's 1653 *Poems and Fancies* upended both the literary and scientific masculine status quo. Choosing to publish openly, rather than with a pseudonym, Cavendish disturbed her contemporaries, namely members of the Royal Society, a learned group of natural philosophers and physicians chartered by Charles II in November 1660. Her persistence in navigating these two spheres—despite unrelenting criticism—allowed Cavendish to develop an idiosyncratic natural philosophy that pushed the boundaries of scientific knowledge and gendered literary restrictions. In her collection, “Nature’s Cook” and “A Woman Drest by Age” address the fascination with death and, indirectly, the afterlife. Reading the two together reveals Cavendish’s attempts to legitimize her contributions to natural philosophy—a male-dominated sphere that dismissed women’s thought—and to transform perceptions of women’s bodies. Ultimately, these poems explain the nature of death in the only way she thought possible: through physical observation.

Many scholars argue that Cavendish’s poetry works to feminize science by carving out a new space in which women can enter the field, but domestic work and science frequently overlapped at the time. Elizabeth Scott-Baumann contends women in the kitchen were not exclusively performing domestic duties: “servants, wives, and daughters repeated experiments in the kitchen to fulfil the Royal Society’s methodology of proof. Women’s

autonomous involvement in science was also chronicled in more covert ways than men's, such as recipe collections" (89). Thus, despite women's contributions being hidden in recipes and often ignored by history, women during Cavendish's era still found opportunities to engage with the Royal Society and science. Alongside traditional puddings and breads, we find a recipe for calming medicine—a sweet beverage that reduced fevers, coughs, and inflammation—or remedies for hemorrhaging at childbirth or during menstruation. While women were denied a *formal* role in the profession, the prevalent belief that men occupied science to peak capacity without room for women's involvement appears shortsighted. Rather, there were preexisting spaces in science women oftentimes occupied and were demonstrably capable of filling. Cavendish's poetry works, then, not to carve out a gap, but to engage with one already present.

Cavendish's "Nature's Cook" elucidates this scientific space, evoking imagery of recipes and cookbooks. Cataloguing lethal, grotesque diseases, Cavendish playfully foregrounds the numerous natural causes of death, illustrating how "some for bacon by Death are singed, or scaled, / Then powdered up with phlegm, and rheum that's salt" (lines 27–28). This sequential preparation morbidly parallels a recipe book filled with ingredients and instructions. For death, the recipe for bacon requires dead humans, phlegm, and rheum. The body must then be singed, scaled, and powdered, completing the dish. "Nature's Cook"—through Cavendish's culinary imagery—speaks to the history of women cataloguing their experiments through her depictions of death and aging. She enters conversation with these women by replicating—and engaging with—their methodology. By doing so, Cavendish legitimizes her own additions to science and natural philosophy, which duplicate this historically feminine process: she is another woman working in the field.

Women's scientific work often met with contempt from male scientists, who believed that repeating science experiments initially carried out by men was dubious evidence for women's scientific capability. Cavendish's "Nature's Cook" challenges those suspicions. The poem introduces personified death as "the cook of Nature; and we find / Meat dress several ways to please / her mind" (lines 1–3). Cavendish genders death, making her a woman and invoking the platitudinous expression used by mothers: they

brought their children into this world, so they can take them out. While initially these lines seem to grant women power over life, the gendered death instead emphasizes that women are a part of nature, not excluded from it. Thus, women—just like men—can commune with and understand nature. By gendering death, the poem inextricably links women to the realm of natural science. It demonstrates women were not blindly repeating experiments previously carried out by men, but rather possessed a deep understanding of the work they performed. In short, “Nature’s Cook” validates these women and their work, making them credible sources. Despite failing to find recognition from her Royal Society contemporaries, Cavendish’s gestures toward women’s recipe books serve to legitimize her as a scientist and philosopher.

By authenticating women’s scientific capability, Cavendish can expound her natural philosophy and materialism credibly. The Lucretian model of presenting scientific philosophy through poetry allows Cavendish to envision women in science. Jessie Hock claims Cavendish was inspired by Lucretius’s first-century BCE atomist poem *De rerum natura*, a didactic piece that attempts to explain Epicurean philosophy to Romans via poetic language. She writes that “for Cavendish, writing at a time when few women were . . . granted access to a male-dominated intellectual scene, [*De rerum natura*] not only welcomed women into its teachings, but modeled a way for women to practice natural philosophy—in poetry” (Hock 775–76). Thus, Cavendish’s poetry lays out the foundations for her theory: the world, composed of solely concrete materials, is devoid of abstract immaterials. Cavendish argues that, even if something immaterial were to exist (such as life after death), our material minds would be incapable of understanding it, let alone formulating theories about it. Ultimately, humans cannot understand *everything*, so people must find fulfillment by understanding as much as our material bodies will allow. Contextualizing this philosophy with “Nature’s Cook” and “A Woman Drest by Age” reveals Cavendish’s claim that, since material humans cannot conceive of an immaterial afterlife, people must find fulfillment by observing the physicality of death. In doing so, humanity can begin to understand death in fathomable ways, rather than through abstract theories and immaterial concepts.

Cavendish’s materialist natural philosophy seems to reject the dominant religious beliefs of her time, a potentially fatal move threatening the scientific authority she worked to establish. Emma Wilkins addresses

Cavendish's attempts to mitigate that fear: Cavendish explains that in our exclusively material world, the only immaterial thing is God himself, and "by taking such a position on the unique immateriality of God, she was securing a special place for him in an otherwise wholly material universe—thereby avoiding . . . dangerous impieties . . . and . . . ambiguities" (869). Her staunch religious defense saved her from ostracization, while enabling her to critique the Church and address its doctrinal ambiguities, namely the afterlife. Cavendish rejects the concept of incorporeal spirits, believing that if spirits exist, they must be material beings that can exist only on Earth, not in an immaterial afterlife. By extension, even if an immaterial afterlife exists, it would be uninhabitable for material human bodies or spirits. She therefore sees no reason to ponder the afterlife, since one seemingly does not exist for humans, nor could people even conceive of it if it did. Her qualitative focus on death in "Nature's Cook" and "A Woman Drest by Age" grounds death in reality by removing its mystic aura, allowing her to explain the nature of dying through physical observation—the only way she thought possible to understand death.

In "A Woman Drest by Age," death returns, this time "dressing" a dying old woman like a turkey, signaling that the poem can be read as an extension of "Nature's Cook." In this poem, though, Cavendish pushes back on the traditional, sexist literary trope of the blazon, transforming perceptions of women's bodies and continuing her exploration of death. Cavendish employs the blazon, simultaneously building up an unsightly image of an elderly, dying woman, while breaking her down into parts, much like a body decomposes after death:

Her stockings cramps had knit, red worsted gout,
And pains, as garters, tied her legs about.
A pair of palsy gloves her hands drew on,
With weakness stitched, and numbness trimmed upon.
Her shoes were corns, and hard skin sewed together,
Hard skin were soles, and corns the upper leather. (lines 9–14)

Cavendish defies the traditional standards of the blazon by depicting an unappealing image of an elderly woman, rather than a young, beautiful girl. Perceptions of the female body therefore shift away from their typical role as objects of desire and possession, instead becoming objects of anatomical

study. Indeed, Cavendish does not remove the image of women as objects. Rather—like she does with death—Cavendish normalizes the body and grounds it in reality, removing the absurd standards for women’s beauty. She then studies the dying woman, elaborating on the various ways death prepares her: gout, palsy, weakness, numbness, withering skin, and, of course, old age. The poem explores natural causes, echoing Cavendish’s belief that any elements of death other than the physical are inherently unknowable.

Cavendish’s poetry often heightens, rather than eliminating death’s ambiguity, paradoxically increasing human knowledge of finality. Wilkins explains: “Cavendish [believed] that phenomena could be explained in terms of matter in motion, but, in her view, the matter itself was both self-moving and perceptive” (862). Wilkins also argues that, for Cavendish, natural phenomena are material and include bodies, motion (which is inseparable from the body), thoughts, and ideas (863). A dying body and, by extension, death are natural phenomena, both self-moving and perceptive. Thus, people cannot predict, prevent, or even blame death on the wishes of divine authority. Cavendish rationalizes death by making it increasingly more mysterious, isolating it from God and representing it as a separate entity that acts according to self-will. In other words, people die for a myriad of natural causes with no explanation beyond death’s own desires and preferences, as the numerous conditions in “Nature’s Cook” and “A Woman Drest by Age” suggest. Cavendish’s poetry—and her philosophy—indicate that death is unknowable, a self-moving phenomenon that kills indiscriminately without explanation, and to truly understand death is to understand nothing more than that reality.

Having established women’s credibility within the scientific realm, her materialist natural philosophy, and her observational methodology for studying death, Cavendish suggests human knowledge of finality culminates with death’s natural causes. In “A Woman Drest by Age,” the speaker reveals that the titular woman suffers from “a mantle of diseases [that] laps her round, / And thus she’s dressed, till Death lays her in ground” (lines 15–16). The poem ends with apprehensive uncertainty: the woman does not die, yet experiences a seemingly premature conclusion. Plagued by disease and old age, she is “dressed” for death, already as good as dead. Both the woman’s journey and the poem conclude with disease and aging instead of continuing into an afterlife, implying the two are the full extent of what humans can understand about death. Cavendish reaffirms humanity’s

ancient ignorance about what follows death, but still finds fulfillment in the unknown. For her, people need not look further to explain death; the answer manifests itself in and on our bodies, through aging and disease. Death is a mystery, according to Cavendish, only because humans refuse to find satisfaction in that answer.

Despite being ostracized, Margaret Cavendish was an eclectic, prolific poet and philosopher. She never found recognition during her lifetime, and even appeared in Samuel Pepys's diary—himself Fellow in and later President of the Royal Society—as a curious, possibly laughable character. Centuries later, however, feminists rediscovered her work, recognizing the value of her art and her philosophy. She often fuses the two, using poetry to comment on natural understandings of the world—as she does in *Poems and Fancies*—conveying elements of her philosophy like atomism and materialism. By doing so, Cavendish challenges the period's male-dominated literary and scientific scenes. “Nature's Cook” and “A Woman Drest by Age,” in particular, reveal an understudied aspect of her position on the nature of death. Through these poems, Cavendish legitimizes her contributions to natural philosophy, transforms perceptions of women's bodies, and explains death in the only way humanly possible.

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Defending the Toxic Woman: William Faulkner's "A Rose For Emily" and Toxic Discourse

Isabela Medina

Toxic discourse—the fear of the unwanted and the encroaching contamination of a pure world—is an environmental movement deriving not only from environmental anxieties, but from social and cultural anxieties, as well. Though not a story with obvious environmental themes, William Faulkner's 1930 "A Rose for Emily" depicts a toxic discourse emerging from the anxieties of a changing Southern town. Emily Grierson dwells at the center of this discourse, representing two ideal and "deeply-rooted Western attitudes": the pre-Reconstruction South and the ideal of white womanhood (Buell 639). Emily's embodiment of these ideals serves as a "monument" of a romanticized Southern past, and her image acts as a "protective . . . blanket" for a town facing environmental and cultural anxieties caused by increasing industrialization (Buell 646). Analyzing the story through the lens of toxic discourse, however, reveals that Emily troubles this ideal image by elucidating the destructive, decaying nature of the South's past, and by showing how the new South is still beholden to it. Emily's rejection of these protective fantasies disrupts the pastoral setting and prompts opposition to Emily as the town attempts to preserve its already contaminated community.

In the Southern town that serves as setting for "A Rose for Emily," there appears a conflict between the old and new society—the pre- and post-Reconstruction South. In this sense, Emily and her antebellum home

represent a history the town simultaneously wishes to forget and to maintain. At the story's opening, the description of Emily's house demonstrates the conflict—between the old and new South—that inspires the town's desperate efforts to preserve an idealized past. It describes Emily and the house as both glorious and decaying. The house is "lightsome," with decorative "cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies," reflecting the rich culture of the old South (9). Emily is impressive and respected, for, upon her death, she "had gone to join the representatives of those august names where they lay" (9). These descriptions, though, are juxtaposed with negative imagery. The house "had once been white," indicating deterioration, neglect, and contamination of its previously pure state (9). Furthermore, the house cannot sustain itself in the presence of new industrializing forces: though the house is "set on what had once been our most select street," it loses its impressive stature, because "garages and cotton gins had encroached and obliterated even the august names of that neighborhood" (9). Now the house lifts "its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps—an eyesore among eyesores" (9).

The manner in which the outside, industrializing world threatens the house's sacred nature suggests what Laurence Buell calls "pastoral disruption" (647). The town believes the house has what Mary Douglas calls "a strong but unjustified sense of subjective immunity" (qtd. in Buell 648). It should be able to withstand, in Robert D. Bullard's words, "unwanted industrial encroachment and outside penetration" (45). The house, however, cannot withstand modernity. Facing the environmental and cultural anxieties precipitated by encroaching industrialization, the town attempts to reject modernity by preserving the idealized image represented by Emily and her house.

Emily troubles the town's ideal image of the old South when she shows signs of mental instability following her father's death. In her distress, Emily refuses to believe her father has died, dismissing the town's request to take his corpse: "Miss Emily met them at the door, dressed as usual and with no trace of grief on her face. She told them that her father was not dead. She did that for three days, with the ministers calling on her, and the doctors, trying to persuade her to let them dispose of the body. Just as they were about to resort to law and force, she broke down, and they buried her

father quickly” (12). Though she eventually consents to having her father’s body removed, this moment shows signs of Emily’s mental disturbance and indicates that the ideals she represents are also beginning to fracture. Despite the town witnessing her dysfunctional behavior, however, they continue their efforts to preserve her image. This preservationist tactic is typical of those who participate in toxic discourse: in order to prevent the community’s contamination, the community as it exists must be preserved. Emily’s potential mental instability threatens the idealized vision, for if she can deteriorate, so can the old South. In desperation, the town preserves these images by normalizing her behavior and by restricting Emily’s agency: “We believed she had to do that. We remembered all the young men her father had driven away, and we knew that with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will” (12). When Emily stubbornly clings to the corpse of her dead father, rather than acknowledge the potential significance of Emily’s mental state, the town instead pities her, painting her as a victim. They normalize her behavior: “she had to” hang onto her dead father’s body, “as people will.” Thus, despite signs of Emily’s instability and her potentially harmful tendencies, the town absolves her of any fault, preserving their idealized town by making her into a pitiable victim.

Just as she lingers as a symbol of the old South, Emily similarly signifies white womanhood. When this story was written, antiquated notions of white womanhood were used to sustain patriarchal power and to justify the resurgence of racist groups like the Ku Klux Klan. Within the story’s context, however, Emily is expected to embody—perform—white womanhood, yet she repeatedly refuses. As Emily grows older, she becomes increasingly secluded, never leaving her house, refusing to be seen outside. For many years, the townspeople, then, cannot see her aging physically. When male town officials visit Emily to demand she pay her taxes, they are astounded by her unpleasant appearance. The story’s description directly contrasts with the town’s earlier impressions of Emily. The narrator describes how the town “had long thought of [the Griersons] as a tableau,” with Emily as “a slender figure in white in the background” (12). She has transformed from a “slender figure” wearing “white” to an overweight woman dressed in “black” (12). Furthermore, she refuses to be “in the background,” despite her deteriorating appearance and the town officials’ shock. Emily takes ownership over her

appearance and confronts her audience, making direct eye contact with them, looking “from one face to another” (10).

The scene reveals not only Emily’s physical deterioration, but also the deterioration of the community’s romanticized image of aristocracy, womanhood, and the old South. She showcases her family wealth by “leaning on an ebony cane,” but this cane has a “tarnished gold head” (10). Losing its luster from age and neglect, the cane suggests a similarly tarnished legacy. Emily is also described as being “bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue” (10). Her deterioration—resembling a decaying corpse—results from Emily’s stasis. Stuck in “motionless water,” she cannot progress due to her own stubborn adherence to the past and the town’s preservationist impulse. As the romanticized image of the old South decays, the story suggests any attempt to preserve this image—to escape the true past—is unsustainable. The ideal will only deteriorate over time.

Despite the town’s attempts to preserve Emily’s pristine and untouched image—their efforts to preserve a distorted view of the past—they only ever mask the truth. The true nature of the old South persists in the smell. After Emily secludes herself, the townspeople begin to notice a stench permeating the town. Following several complaints, Judge Stevens—attempting to avoid insulting Emily by confronting her—sends a party of men to her house:

They broke open the cellar door and sprinkled lime there, and in all the outbuildings. As they recrossed the lawn, a window that had been dark was lighted and Miss Emily sat in it, the light behind her, and her upright torso motionless as that of an idol. They crept quietly across the lawn and into the shadow of the locusts that lined the street. After a week or two the smell went away. (11)

This scene confirms the town’s desperate preservationist actions. First, they preserve the ideal of white womanhood by not confronting Emily with the smell; instead, the men defend her womanhood by masking the smell themselves, without her knowledge. This preservation is described as a form of worship in the name of white womanhood, with Emily called “an idol.” Second, by not confronting Emily about the smell, they allow themselves to remain ignorant in the name of preservation. For, if they were to

ask Emily about the smell, they might uncover an unfavorable truth about her—and her house’s—true state, and, subsequently, the true nature of their past. This willful denial hints at the town’s fear of infection: by refusing to name or identify the smell—and instead simply mask it—they hope to contain it, to prevent it from infecting the rest of the town. Despite their preservationist efforts to reduce the risk of infection, though, the town cannot ignore its past or pretend that it’s acceptable.

The story reveals the inescapability of the town’s true past in its final scene, when the townspeople discover Homer Barron’s body in Emily’s house. Following her death, the town finally can see the state of Emily’s house, which has for so long been closed off to them. They force their way into the restricted upstairs room and find Homer’s body. The seeming murder of Homer at Emily’s hands vividly illustrates her mental deterioration and thus the decay of the town’s delusional past. Their attempts to normalize Emily’s behavior have ultimately failed. Despite their preservationist efforts, Emily kills Homer. They could not eliminate her true nature; they merely masked it. The corpse—the smell’s source—remains. The townspeople all live with it, but they delude themselves into thinking otherwise.

In the scene when the townspeople discover Homer’s body, the repetition of “dust” and “acid” gestures to the cultural decay of the idealized old South, but it also suggests environmental decay, using natural contamination as a symbol for cultural contamination (16). The “patient and biding dust,” inescapable, “dry and acrid in the nostrils” (16), poisons the “nurturing space of clean air, clean water, and pleasant uncluttered surroundings” that the town considers theirs “by right” (Buell 648). Though the town sensed this contamination earlier, this scene acts as the “awakening . . . a horrified realization that there is no protective environmental blanket” (Buell 646). In this moment, Emily’s true nature, her house’s essence, and the truth of the past become inescapable, just like the dust. When the town fully immerses itself in the idealized past it associates with Emily, they become fully saturated—and fully contaminated—by its gruesome decay.

“A Rose for Emily” depicts the conflict between a woman in the past and a town in the present, gesturing to the “forms, origins, uses, and critical implications of toxic rhetoric” (Buell 639). As the town faces the increasing threat of industrialization and their own anxieties over the South’s troubled

and destructive past, they cling to an idealized image of Emily and the “deeper-rooted Western attitudes” she represents (Buell 639). However, the image to which they cling is unsustainable. Despite their attempts to preserve something that never truly existed, the town continues to be implicated in the racist and patriarchal past they try to ignore. Ultimately “A Rose for Emily” demonstrates how toxic discourse itself—notwithstanding its moralism—can be a harmful rhetoric that feeds paranoia in the name of preservation, because masking the smell does not destroy its source.

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Language of Blackness: Negotiating Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

Maddie Schultz

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* offers a modern immigration story through its main character, Ifemelu. The story, however, is not just about Ifemelu or her blog, which addresses the nuances of race from a non-American-black perspective. Before Adichie wrote this novel, she warned against "the single story" ("The Danger"). This novel both combats the pitfalls of the single story and recognizes the limits of a single character. Ifemelu's cousin Dike—a second-generation immigrant—is born in the US and lives there beginning at age one. Dike's identity splits between his African heritage and his American environment, creating an internal conflict—a hybrid between the two cultures—similar to W. E. B. Du Bois's experience as a biracial American at the turn of the 20th century and Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theory of hybridity. Adichie fragments Dike's story throughout the novel as the protagonist, Ifemelu, interacts with him during different stages of her time in the US. Although Dike spends most of his life in the US, his identity appears conflicted just as much, if not more than Ifemelu's. He faces the pressures of American culture, while his family strives to prevent him from the burden of "becoming black." Dike's Nigerian roots and American environment create a duality within him—a conflict between his Black American identity and his African identity. As a hybrid figure, Dike navigates this conflict, ultimately recognizing the depth

of his competing identities and redefining himself as a second-generation African immigrant.

Whether society sees Dike as an American African or an African American significantly affects how he views his own identity. As a second-generation immigrant, he faces familial pressure to alter his identity to achieve acceptance and/or status, two goals that often contradict. Mary Waters distinguishes between the mindset of first-generation immigrants and Black Americans: “The first generation believes that their status as foreign-born blacks is higher than American blacks” (797). Black immigrants have a small—but significant—social advantage that isolates them from the Black American community, yet sometimes benefits them when searching for jobs or housing opportunities. The differences between African and Caribbean nations provide non-American blacks with distinct identities from each other and other Black Americans. In a blog post titled “To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You Are Black, Baby,” Ifemelu denies the distinctions between Africans and Caribbeans, because the US does not care about distinctions between nationalities, but only about race (273). Differences of nationality matter to immigrants, though, serving as a way to avoid being grouped into American blackness.

Although Dike does not grasp completely the nuances of race and nationality, he recognizes that his mother’s adoption of American culture does not always suit him. For example, Uju wants Dike to wear a certain shirt for church, but he rejects it. Ifemelu reflects on the shirt’s significance: “I reminded her of his friends she had met one weekend, a Nigerian couple visiting from Maryland, they had two boys sitting next to them on the sofa, both buttoned-up and stiff, caged in the airlessness of their parents’ immigration aspirations” (267). Uju wants her son to be successful in the US, but her experiences as an adult immigrant limit her view of success. She assimilates as much as possible to succeed, while American society still views Uju as American African because of her accent. Dike is in a different situation, because society views him as a Black American. As Ifemelu says: “the minute you step outside, race matters” (359). Race affects his day-to-day experiences, like when his school administration accuses him—the only black student—of hacking the school computers

(433). Or again, when Dike avoids questions about his “swagger” and speech, which seem like a performance to Ifemelu (412). Adolescent development contributes to these changes, but his behavior and speech mark him in the eyes of American culture as black, rather than an immigrant. This two-dimensional grouping reinforces hybridity by privileging one part of twoness.

Dike—whose very name reflects his duality, with the prefix “di” meaning two—develops an identity that gestures to a modern form of double consciousness. Not one of whiteness and blackness, but one in which Dike is both African and American. Mindi McMann notes that “W. E. B. Du Bois described the ‘strange meaning of being black’ in turn-of-the-century America and explained double consciousness as ‘the sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others’” (202). Du Bois’s experiences—over a century ago—resonate with Dike when others label him based on their pre-established categories. As a child of an immigrant, he develops his identity in the face of opposing opinions from his culture and his family. Both tell him who he is, rather than allowing Dike to decide for himself. Because society and family define who Dike is and who he is not, he possesses no sense of agency, which leads to an identity crisis and his eventual suicide attempt. Only by discovering both sides of his twoness does Dike develop a positive vision of his hybridity.

Uju insists that Dike reject his race, elucidating her assimilation to American colorblindness and further isolating Dike from the American part of himself. As a child, Dike expresses his frustrations in an essay, but his mother refuses to talk with him about it, limiting his questions until he feels shame. In response to the essay, Uju says, “I think he wrote that because that is the kind of thing they teach here. Everybody is conflicted, identity this, identity that” (269). American culture limits Dike to one identity that will not describe his full self. As an adolescent, Dike adopts his culturally-assigned position as a Black American. He takes pride, texting Ifemelu, “I can’t believe it. My president is black like me” (447). His blackness becomes something he accepts, in part. Samir Dayal suggests that the power dynamics of “who-speaks-for-whom are only too familiar here” (47). Dike accepts the identity American culture defines for him, along with all the negative stereotypes culture simultaneously enforces under the veil of colorblindness.

Additionally, Dike’s mother refuses to discuss the ways in which his

American experience shapes his identity. After Dike's suicide attempt, Ifemelu blames Uju:

"Do you remember when Dike was telling you something and he said 'we black folk' and you told him 'you are not black?'" she asked Aunty Uju, her voice low because Dike was still asleep upstairs. "You should not have done that." "You know what I meant. I didn't want him to start behaving like these people and thinking that everything that happens to him is because he's black." "You told him what he wasn't but you didn't tell him what he was." (470)

Uju does not want Dike to see himself as black. Though perhaps Ifemelu should have voiced her concern when Uju made these comments—rather than blaming a mother after her son's suicide attempt—she sees a void in Dike's identity, created by defining him only by what he is *not*. This passage, further, reveals Uju's acceptance of damaging views of Black Americans when she uses the phrase "these people." Here, "these people" refers to Black Americans: Uju does not want Dike to identify as black. The phrase also shows her adopting colorblind vocabulary, using a non-specific pronoun rather than clearly indicating race. She uses this phrase previously when she tells Ifemelu of Dike's suicide attempt: "I saw him lying there looking so sweaty, sweat all over his body, and immediately I panicked. I said these people have given my son drugs" (453). In light of her other comments, it seems she again uses "these people" to refer to Black Americans. Uju blames Black America for her son's attempt on his life. She fails to realize that her attacks on the American elements of Dike's identity damage his sense of dignity. McMann notes the effects of this sort of colorblindness: "in contemporary America we see the insidiousness of not talking about race and racism because of the rhetoric of being post-racial and of being ostensibly colorblind" (207). Uju has the privilege of pretending to be colorblind, because society views her as separate from Black American culture. This separation leaves her son to navigate race and racism alone.

Without the influence of African language, education, or traditions to aid his discovery of African culture, Dike grows up with only trace amounts of his African heritage, which leaves him with little sense of how that heritage might influence his identity. Speaking Igbo—or with an African

accent—preserves for Ifemelu a lingering connection to Nigeria that Dike never experiences. Many children of immigrants continue to speak their mother language, but Uju does not allow Ifemelu to speak to Dike in Igbo: “Dike, I *mechago*?” Ifemelu asked. ‘Please don’t speak Igbo to him,’ Auntie Uju said. ‘Two languages will confuse him.’ ‘What are you talking about, Auntie? We spoke two languages growing up.’ ‘This is America. It’s different” (134). Uju’s Igbo restrictions reinforce the normative, American monolingual home, yet, as Ifemelu acknowledges, their family learned two languages as children. Uju rejects her linguistic, familial, and cultural traditions by limiting Dike’s experiences to English. Although Uju prohibits others from speaking Igbo, she uses it specifically to express anger toward her son. For instance, when Ifemelu visits Dike, Uju threatens, “I will send you back to Nigeria if you do that again!” speaking Igbo as she did to him only when she was angry, and Ifemelu worried it would become for him the language of strife” (211). Uju—whether she realizes it or not—links Igbo to anger at her son. This association inspires in Dike a lack of interest in—or even fear of—their African language. Furthermore, she responds to behavior she wishes to correct by threatening to send him to Africa. The entire nation of Nigeria serves as a means to threaten Dike, rather than a source of identity for him.

Dike’s exposure to African culture comes primarily from insignificant and unreliable sources: Ifemelu eating a banana with peanuts; his mother’s negative portrayal of Igbo; and whatever he learns about Africa from American culture. Speaking about negative portrayals of Africa, Adichie notes the image of Africans as people “unable to speak for themselves” (“The Danger”). Her description highlights the consistent media image of Africa that Dike sees while growing up and that reinforces the lack of firsthand information he has about Africa. Together, American culture and his family shape the African portion of Dike’s identity into a bleak shell. E. Philip Page defines the Black American experience as “exceptionally multiple,” yet Dike’s experiences lack dimension (119). Both society and authority figures tell a single story that circumscribes his ethnic identity and limits his opportunities to know himself wholly. No longer in control of his American or African identity, Dike struggles with depression in a world where he cannot openly express his pain. Ifemelu experiences a similar period of depression that she denies initially, but writes about years later in a blog post called “On the Subject of Non-American Blacks Suffering

from *Illnesses Whose Names They Refuse to Know*" (242). All the defining influences in Dike's life belittle or deny his depression, categorizing it as him acting like a victim or a self-absorbed American. His mother tells him who he is not; US society tells him who he is. No one tells him he has value, dignity, or talent. Dike chooses suicide, in part as a response to the suppression of his potentially dual identity, which might empower him. Fortunately, his recovery process begins to create a new identity that allows him to assert some control over his hybridity.

Dike acknowledges the forces shaping his self-definition and regains agency through his experience in Nigeria, as open communication allows him to develop an identity based on both his American and African cultures. Ifemelu returns to Nigeria, because she feels it's "where she [is] supposed to be" (7). She leaves the US in order to rediscover her roots. She also sees the benefits of Dike visiting. Her off-hand comment becomes something Dike looks forward to while he recovers from his suicide attempt: "You would like Lagos, I think," she said, and he, eagerly, surprisingly, said, "Can I come visit you, Coz?" (518). Dike seems genuinely interested in discovering his African heritage with Ifemelu, who serves, thus far, as the only positive influence linked to African culture. His visit to Nigeria offers Dike hope that he can develop an authentic African self apart from American perceptions of Africa. His trip also expands his view of race. Upon arriving in Lagos, he exclaims, "Oh my God, Coz, I've never seen so many black people in the same place!" (518). In the US, Ifemelu feels black for the first time in part when she recognizes her own minority status. Dike experiences the reverse in Africa, where he is part of a majority and feels a sense of belonging without having to guard his emotions. Rose Sackeyfio notes that Adichie's works often feature rediscovery: "Adichie allows the possibility of individuals recovering what they have lost or put aside in a rush to acquire the trappings of western life" (105). In Dike's case, he does not strive for a typical American life, yet he never establishes an African self while saturated by US culture.

Dike's story does not extend beyond his time with Ifemelu in Africa. His experiences there and discussions his mother would have silenced, however, allow for a more positive hybridity: his time in Africa reveals his interests and allows him to wrest agency back from those who would define him. Before his visit, he shows interest in Africa during his phone conversations: "Ifemelu called him every other day, and sometimes he spoke about

his session, and other times he did not, but always he wanted to hear about her new life” (518). Prior to his crisis, either US society—which sees Dike only as a Black American—or his mother silenced his curiosity. His conversations with Ifemelu, though, show increasing openness when discussing his recovery process. His recovery and reestablishment of identity are both transatlantic: he breaks the silence about his mental health while in Africa and continues conversing with Ifemelu about his identity.

Dike uses this time of reflection to determine what he wants for himself. In Lagos, he confesses to Ifemelu, “I wish I spoke Igbo” (523). Dike explores various aspects of himself to redefine what he values, rather than what others tell him to value. As Page suggests: “Our most ethical and effective course is to align ourselves with the multiplicity by projecting ourselves into as many other perspectives as possible. If we fail to do so, we become locked in our narrow, private perspectives, unable to change, unable to emphasize” (117). Dike’s limited identity traps him in stereotypes—limitations that produce his identity crisis. Until he explores his African heritage, Dike possesses an incomplete picture of his identity. By reflecting and expressing, he reasserts agency, developing an identity separate from earlier influences.

Dike’s story is fragmented from the outset. His position as a second-generation immigrant challenges his ethnicity—American or African—with US society coding him as a Black American, though his mother fervently denies it. These contradictions show a type of double consciousness: he is African and he is American, yet belongs to neither group. This doubleness, alongside the silence surrounding his African heritage, ultimately produces an identity crisis. Only by discovering his heritage and openly communicating (with professionals and his family) can Dike begin to redefine himself. His hybridity no longer isolates him, but allows him to reclaim agency. The Dike subplot in Adichie’s story depicts an identity struggle different from Ifemelu’s, showing the continued loss of identity precipitated by double consciousness and a lack of authentic experiences. As Adichie claims: “Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity” (“The Danger”). For most of his life, others define Dike by a single story. By discovering the multiplicity of his cultures, Dike rediscovers his dignity and breaks the single story.

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India as an Imagined Community:
The Function of Magical Realism
in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

Olivia Klein

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* met with critical acclaim upon its publication in 1981, and it has since become a staple of postcolonial literature. Crucially, Rushdie's novel relies on magical realism, a literary device requiring fantastical elements to be normalized in a real-world setting. *Midnight's Children* is set in India on the eve of its independence from the British. The novel's protagonist, Saleem Sinai, parallels India throughout the text: the events that happen to him and his ancestors allegorize political and historic events unfolding in the nation. The novel explores the varied experiences of Indians during this time, leaving no singular conclusion to be drawn about the nation-state as a whole. The novel's magical realism, though—seen in the Sinai family's fantastical noses and the magical gifts of the “midnight's children”—unites postcolonial India under a collective fantasy. By setting the novel in newly postcolonial India, Rushdie unites the massively varied nation-state as one “imagined . . . community . . . conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” under the collective fantasy of the Sinai family's magical gifts (Anderson 7).

Midnight's Children paints a picture of India at the time of its independence from British colonial rule. Saleem, who narrates the novel, comes into the world at exactly midnight on August 15, 1947, at the same moment India becomes an independent nation. He crafts a narrative around this monumental event, providing intimate details about the years before and

after independence, weaving in and out of the lives of individuals who impact his life and his country's life. Through a combination of recounting oral history, narrating events from his own life, and taking an omniscient look into the lives of contemporaneous Indians, Saleem captures a snapshot, or rather, a multi-generation photo album of what it means to be Indian during the shift from colonialism to postcolonialism.

Scholars have addressed *Midnight's Children's* treatment of the connections between magical realism and India's postcolonial nationhood. Asli Degirmenci, for instance, questions magical realism's role in Rushdie's attempt to unify India fictively: "By centering the supernatural around the discourse of nation and nationalism informed by an emerging bourgeois class, Rushdie attempts to secularize magic and thus save it from its connection to a mythical and a supernatural past that fuels sectarianism in India and poses a threat to its becoming a unified modern nation" (66). Rather than uniting the nation through the use of magical realism, Degirmenci argues, Rushdie reinforces the "continual clash of the modern and the traditional, progress and 'changelessness,' secular and religious" by removing magical events from their traditional religious origins and placing them into the context of India's emerging secular bourgeois class (66). In this way, Degirmenci suggests *Midnight's Children* does not promote a unified India, instead secularizing magic in a misguided effort to withdraw from history and to re-contextualize elements from the past.

Joyce Wexler, on the other hand, argues that "magic realism promotes national identity because it represents the empirical reality of the historical past and present while also expressing longings that transcend the flux of events" (139). Wexler contends magical realism might unify a nation as diverse as India: "since indigenous myths are too local to unify a new nation comprising diverse traditions, postcolonial magic realists create new narratives of a national imaginary" (149). While Degirmenci questions magical realism's power in the context of a newly independent nation—comprising newly emerging classes and quickly secularizing—Wexler argues that "the postcolonial use of magic realism does not evade social responsibility or efface history [but] makes the contingencies of history resonate with meanings" (151). Degirmenci looks to the past to define magical realist authors'

responsibility; Wexler reads magical realism as a method for expressing desires for the future. In either case, the “national imaginary,” upon which Degirmenci and Wexler agree, confirms that the magical realism in *Midnight’s Children* represents India as what Benedict Anderson calls an “imagined community.”

Among scholars who consider magical realism’s role in postcolonial literature, there is no universally accepted definition for a “nation.” As Anderson notes, “nation, nationality, nationalism—all have proved notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyse” (3). In 1947, British rule of India formally ended, leaving an independent nation-state, but the question of what it means to be a nation remained. Rushdie considers this question in *Imaginary Homelands*, reflecting: “After all, in all the thousands of years of Indian history, there never was such a creature as a united India. Nobody ever managed to rule the whole place, not the Mughals, not the British. And then, that midnight, the thing that had never existed was suddenly ‘free.’ But what on earth was it? On what common ground (if any) did it, does it, stand?” (27). With a current population of 1.3 billion (and about 390 million in 1947), India clearly includes a diverse array of religions, languages, and the like—variety that *Midnight’s Children* highlights. The novel, though, sets for itself the task of creating a postcolonial narrative for India as a whole, because the Sinai family is so intimately connected to the nation’s politics and history. The novel’s characters parallel—on a smaller scale—events happening more broadly, so they become a vehicle for the entire country’s narrative. Encapsulating India’s history in this way poses a challenge for Rushdie, who did not know “what on earth [India] was” while trying to define it. I suggest this difficulty—the effort to make India, with its vast population and diversity, singular and cohesive—leads *Midnight’s Children* to represent the nation as an imagined community.

Since “nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind,” Anderson argues that a nation should be considered as “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (4, 6). This definition details several characteristics that must be present for a place to be considered a nation: it must be imagined, imagined as limited, sovereign, and a community. The nation is imagined “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members . . . yet in the minds of each lives the image of their

communion" (Anderson 6). It is impossible for a community member to know everyone in their nation, yet they feel a sense of camaraderie with others through the imagined conception of the nation as a community. Additionally, this imagining of the nation must have boundaries: "even the largest of them . . . has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations" (Anderson 7). In this respect, nations are defined by their separation from the nations around them. The nation also must be imagined as sovereign, because the idea of the nation arose at the moment when "the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm" was being rethought and reconfigured: "Nations dream of being free," and thus must enjoy sovereignty to constitute nationhood as an imagined community (Anderson 7). Lastly, the nation must be imagined as a community: "the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 7). People become attached to the concept of nationhood because of the sense of community arising from it. The India in *Midnight's Children* fits all four characteristics of Anderson's national imagined community as the text's magical realism represents the nation—as an imagined, limited, sovereign community—metonymically through its focus on the Sinai family.

As Anderson notes, nations are "imagined" because "in the minds of each lives the image of their communion," a connection seen clearly in the novel's *Midnight's Children Club* (6). On his tenth birthday, Saleem "learned that five hundred and eighty-one others were celebrating their birthdays, too; which was how [he] understood the secret of [his] original hour of birth; and, having being expelled from one gang, [he] decided to form [his] own, a gang which was spread over the length and breadth of the country, and whose headquarters were behind [his] eyebrows" (203). When Saleem becomes aware of the voices in his head, he realizes he hears 581 other children also born during the first hour of August 15, 1947: the other midnight's children. He harnesses this ability quickly and learns to envision the other children, turning his mind "into a kind of forum in which they could all talk to one another, through [him]" (221). The fantastical ability to conjure the other midnight's children's images and to host meetings in his mind creates in Saleem an imagined nation. Though he may never know each club member personally, Saleem carries in his mind the image of each one. He quite literally can imagine the midnight's children communion: an imagined community.

With children so widely spread across India and so diverse in their

magical abilities, the Midnight's Children Club suggests India's diversity. Saleem notes that "the children, despite their wondrously discrete and varied gifts, remained, to my mind, a sort of many-headed monster, speaking in the myriad tongues of Babel; they were the very essence of multiplicity" (223). Just as India contains "myriad tongues" and "multiplicity," so too do the midnight's children display great variety. This "multiplicity" makes even more powerful Saleem's ability to gather the children—and, symbolically, the nation—in his mind. By imagining all 581 children communing with one another, Saleem makes feasible imagining the nation of India communing.

The Midnight's Children Club also resonates with Anderson's suggestion that the nation is limited, or distinct from other nations. Since the Club exists only within the minds of Saleem and the other children, it has finite boundaries—it's an entity separate from anyone outside their community. While enjoying the newly founded Club, Saleem reflects: "Awake I was obliged to face the multiple miseries of maternal perfidy and paternal decline, of the fickleness of friendship and the varied tyrannies of school; asleep, I was at the centre of the most exciting world any child had ever discovered" (222). The world of the midnight's children—in Saleem's mind—differs notably from his waking world. Anderson asserts that "no nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind," suggesting that nations define themselves in relation to other nations (7). The magical realism of the Midnight's Children Club creates an "exciting world" distinct from the "miseries" of lived reality. In this manner, the novel builds a community via magical realism that is limited in the same way as nations: both are defined through separation from and opposition to what remains outside them.

Sovereignty is another key aspect of any imagined community, like the fledgling nation of India. *Midnight's Children* parallels India's national sovereignty with Saleem's personal sovereignty, which emerges when he develops All-India Radio. During his adolescence, Saleem begins to hear voices speaking in different languages, ultimately realizing that "below the surface transmissions . . . language faded away, and was replaced by universally intelligible thought-forms which far transcended words" (166). Saleem recognizes that he hears the beginnings of the midnight's children and that he has the ability to listen to the thoughts of anyone around him, a skill he uses to his advantage by cheating in class: "tun[ing] in to the inner voices of [his] schoolteachers and also of [his] cleverer classmates, and pick[ing]

information out of their minds” (169). He hones this gift until he can transport himself mentally into others’ lives, beginning with schoolteachers and peasants and, ultimately, advancing to a point where he can inhabit the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Saleem’s magical ability—which he calls the All-India Radio—gives him a sense of personal sovereignty. As a child living in a house where his family dictates his life, Saleem finds that his ability makes him feel “[he] was somehow creating a world” (172). He victoriously exclaims “I can find out any damn thing! . . . There isn’t a thing I cannot know!” (172). For a young boy discovering his place in the world, this magical gift gives Saleem a sense of freedom, paralleling the sovereignty simultaneously developing in newly independent India.

When India must define itself, or when Saleem faces the same challenge, the “community” aspect of an imagined community becomes paramount. In Saleem’s infancy and the early days of independent India, he finds community in his neighborhood. When he arrives home, Saleem reflects that “at the end of 1947, life in Bombay was as teeming, as manifold, as multitudinously shapeless as ever . . . except that I had arrived” (123). The novel sees through Saleem’s eyes, apprehending the multitudinous Estate where each neighbor lives a unique life, where each possesses a different view of what Saleem means to them. Saleem himself creates the “deep, horizontal comradeship;” he makes them a community. His “I had arrived,” indicates the importance of his entrance into the world. Though Bombay seems to be as “manifold, as multitudinously shapeless as ever,” Saleem unites them: the entire neighborhood rallies around him as a symbol of unity. When he comes home from the hospital, Saleem states “I was already beginning to take my place at the centre of the universe,” suggesting he understands his power to unite the neighborhood and, by extension, to turn the nation-state into a community (26). Saleem’s infancy in the Estate reveals how his magical gifts allow him to create a community through comradeship, just as India is united by its inextricable tie to him. Ultimately, *Midnight’s Children* relies on elements of magical realism to represent India’s multiplicity respectfully by offering an alternate way to conceive of the nation. Rather than restricting postcolonial India to the geopolitical confines of nationhood, Anderson’s theory of imagined communities shows how nations are more and different: Saleem serves as a fictive “common ground” on which the nation of India can stand (*Imaginary Homelands* 27).

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The Ambivalent Critique of Imperialism in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*

Rachel Stroia

In *A Passage to India*, E.M. Forster interrogates imperialism and Western stereotypes of “the East.” The character Aziz—a mimic man—challenges colonial discourses by breaking down the assumption of inherent qualities and by undermining the notion that “the West” is innately superior. Juxtaposing Aziz’s relationship with Mrs. Moore and Aziz’s relationship with Fielding, the novel critiques the gender roles of colonizer and colonized, while undermining both the novel’s conclusion and Western ideals of male superiority. While Forster challenges notions of “Orientalism” in individual characters, he perpetuates them with his portrayal of India as a whole. He casts India as an impenetrable mystery, deploying Western stereotypes of the East. While the novel critiques imperialism and fights aspects of Orientalism, it still falls into the trap of “knowing” the East in Western terms, promoting the West’s use of knowledge to suppress the East.

Edward Said and Homi Bhabha both recognize Orientalism as a specific colonial discourse in which the West uses the intersection of power and knowledge to dominate and define the East. In the process of “knowing” the East, the West produces Orientalist representations that perpetuate stereotypes about the East (McLeod 32). These representations then allow the West to suppress the East. By imagining the West and the East as binary opposites, the West asserts a sense of its own inherent superiority, always defining the East as inferior: the East appears as the opposite of the superior,

enlightened society the West assumes itself to be. Viewing the East as its opposite allows the West to create a fantasy of an East as mysterious, exotic, and sublime. This fantasy advances the West's view of Eastern peoples as Other—radically different from and inferior to those of the purportedly rational West—which produces false stereotypes. These stereotypes ignore any individuality among Eastern peoples, assuming they possess inherent qualities that make them Other. For example, the Orientalist perspective has long portrayed Eastern women as overly sexual. Stripping away individuality and attributing universal characteristics allows the West to diminish Eastern people's humanity and to justify imperialism. "Knowing" the East as a set of stereotypes is pervasive in Western art and literature.

While Said and Bhabha agree largely about Orientalist representations, Bhabha diverges slightly from Said, suggesting the Orientalist discourse creates ambivalence. He argues this ambivalence originates in the West's desire to know the East. In order to know it, the West must create it as something familiar, but also Other and distanced. By creating stereotypes, the West makes the East into something it can understand and that it can condemn. As John McLeod explains: "On the one hand, stereotypes translate the unfamiliar into coherent terms by seeming to understand, fix and explain the alleged strangeness of other peoples . . . Securing the identity of the colonized in this way *lessens* the perceived distance between the colonizers and the colonized by bringing the colonized inside colonialist modes of representation" (53). Here we find the heart of the West's ambivalent desire to "know" the East: to "know" them they must first turn them into something they can understand. To do so, they must bring the East closer, but in order to maintain their superiority, any familiarity they create must be negative, degenerate, or inferior. As the West perpetuates stereotypes that reinforce colonial discourses, however, they also create the opportunity to challenge them, thus producing a contradiction. As Bhabha indicates, these contradictions allow a "transgression" of colonial discourse from within the "space of otherness" (95). Anglicized mimic men stand as one example of this contradiction and potential transgression. Educated according to Western standards and imitating Western culture, these mimic men—who talk, dress, and act like Westerners—undermine the West's assumptions about the East's inherent traits. Forster's novel embodies this contradiction in Aziz, whose presence undermines the British Raj and challenges Western representations of the East.

By depicting Aziz as an Anglicized Indian, *A Passage to India* challenges Orientalist assumptions. The novel shows both Aziz's versatility and his individuality, thus resisting Western views that all Indian men share a set of characteristics. Highlighting Aziz's desire to both befriend and mimic Fielding by adopting English views, the novel suggests Aziz learns to accept English *social* views, yet still maintains his Indian *cultural* sensibilities. When Fielding invites Aziz to his home, Aziz enters with much excitement. Fielding tells him to make himself at home. Aziz's reaction to this phrase shows he does not fully understand English culture or idiom, for he and Fielding understand the phrase differently: "To Aziz it had a very definite meaning. 'May I really, Mr. Fielding? It's very good of you,' he called back . . . His spirits flared up, he glanced around the living-room. Some luxury in it, but no order—nothing to intimidate poor Indians" (63). Although Aziz interprets Fielding's statement differently than an Englishman might, he evaluates Fielding's home through Western eyes, setting himself apart from the "poor Indians" by appreciating the home's interior. Aziz appears to inhabit a limbo between British and Indian culture, challenging the Western idea that—as an Indian—he must surely possess a certain stagnant set of characteristics. He maintains his own understanding of hospitality, while appreciating the British interior and judging the Indians who would not appreciate the putatively superior trappings. Aziz functions not as a stereotype, but an ambivalent character who indicates that anyone—British or not—can understand and adopt Western culture and manners. He threatens the West's own sense of itself as superior.

In *Empire*, Niall Ferguson examines ways the British Empire undermined their view of themselves as inherently superior by producing a class of educated Indian civil servants. In order to control a vast country with so little British presence, they created a class of Western-educated Indians that would be loyal to the British cause. This process—though pragmatic in the pursuit of empire—eroded many Western stereotypes about Indians. Ferguson argues that India's independence was possible only because of this class of educated Indians, who realized the colonial discourses fed to them by the British were untrue:

The reality, then, was that Indian nationalism was fueled not by the impoverishment of the many but by the rejection of the privileged few. In the age of Macaulay, the British had called into being an

English-speaking, English-educated elite of Indians, a class of civil service auxiliaries on whom their system of administration had come to depend. In time, these people naturally aspired to have some share in the government of the country, just as Macaulay had predicted. (218)

This class recognized that if they could receive an education and hold office just like the British, then the British were not inherently superior. By creating a group that initially made their empire possible, the British set the groundwork for their overthrow. Forster's novel explores this process on a smaller scale by depicting Aziz as an English-educated Indian who wants to be friends with Fielding. Aziz wants to act English, but ultimately rejects England, returning to his Indian identity. His presence in the novel demonstrates the same strain of nationalism emerging from English education and mimicry that Ferguson details.

Since both Aziz and Fielding espouse their own brands of nationalism, the novel concludes an Englishman and an Indian cannot maintain a relationship. Notably though, Aziz and Fielding are an Indian *man* and an English*man*. The novel appears to take a different stance entirely about whether an English woman and an Indian man can build a relationship. The relationship developed between Aziz and Mrs. Moore—as opposed to Aziz and Fielding—is free from mimicry, and is built on curiosity rather than assumption. Fielding appears aware of the Raj's faults, yet still holds Indians to Western values. Mrs. Moore, on the other hand, possesses a wholesome curiosity that allows her to question her own assumptions. Aziz does not feel the same avid desire to befriend her as he does toward Fielding, even forgetting their encounter and saying, “the romance at the mosque had sunk out of his consciousness as soon as it was over” (66). In contrast to his excitement upon being invited to Fielding's home, he lacks interest in Mrs. Moore. His apathy shows that Aziz's desire to mimic the West extends only to Western men, which implicitly challenges Western patriarchy and gendered imperialism. Since Aziz seeks to adopt Western male culture, he values Western men more than Western women. This attitude, however, also leads him to approach his relationship with Mrs. Moore in a manner free from his typical efforts to imitate English standards. His approach, in combination with Mrs. Moore's curiosity to see the “real” India, enable the two to begin their relationship without preconceived notions about each other.

Aziz embodies the class of Muslim professionals who sought intimacy with the Raj. His desire to befriend Fielding is based in reverence for the ruling British and a desire for status derived from British values. Benita Parry contends that relationships built under British convention will fail: "Fielding, Adela Quested and Mrs. Moore expect the sort of relationships they had known in England" (283). These expectations, though, are not realized—this type of relationship simply is not possible in India. If the West embodies masculinity and English social relationships do not succeed in India, the novel implies that Western masculinity lacks the power it is imagined to possess. Aziz and Mrs. Moore's relationship abandons Western social constructs (it even begins in a mosque) and transcends both their cultures, indicating that the English and the Indian can be friends when Western social constructs are put aside. This relationship turns Bhabha's ambivalence on its head: instead of the British creating stereotypes that are familiar, but can be distanced, the novel shows that Aziz and Mrs. Moore acknowledge the distance between themselves, which allows them to achieve greater familiarity.

Mrs. Moore's particular interest in India reasserts Orientalist stereotypes, constructing India as a Western fantasy. Though her interest may be genuine, she focuses on the mystical and fantastic. At the end of the gathering at Fielding's home, Godbole sings a song described as mysterious and incomprehensible to the Western ear, even after Godbole explains it: "At times there seemed rhythm, at times there was the illusion of a Western melody. But the ear, baffled repeatedly, soon lost any clue, and wandered in a maze of noises, none harsh or unpleasant, none intelligible" (79). After Godbole explains to Mrs. Moore that the god in the song never comes, she begins to understand, yet cannot fully. She asks Godbole, "but He comes in some other song, I hope?" but he misunderstands her question (80). The two's inability to connect while discussing not just the meaning of Godbole's song, but his religion, as well, elucidates the limits of Mrs. Moore's interest and understanding: she is open to new ideas, but she finds some aspects of India incomprehensible. She thus appears to accept the image of India as strange, fantastical, and impenetrable.

The novel depicts the East as exotic in order to critique the Western need to define India on its own terms, showing that India remains a mystery (or "muddle") to the English party. When Aziz explains to Adela that the Hindu family did not send their carriage simply because they are

Hindus—and therefore lazy—Adela dismisses his explanation, assuming the solution must be a mystery:

“I do so hate mysteries,” Adela announced.

“We English do.”

“I dislike them not because I’m English, but from my own personal point of view,” she corrected.

“I like mysteries, but I rather dislike muddles,” said Mrs. Moore.

“A mystery is a muddle”

“Oh, do you think so, Mr. Fielding?” (69)

This exchange foregrounds Adela’s hypocrisy, her inability to see beyond her own point of view, and her disregard for other cultures, yet also portrays India as a fantasy. Adela appears unwilling to see that other cultures have different customs or hold different values, declaring that she hates mysteries. Mrs. Moore, though, insists mysteries and muddles are different, implying that she sees mysteries as positive, while muddles as not. For her, mysteries can never be understood and therefore are alluring, whereas muddles are comprehensible and thus commonplace. As a character supposed to be open to Indian culture—and who rejects the traditional Western view of the East—Mrs. Moore seems to contradict other aspects of the novel as she is lured in by Western fantasies about the East.

Both Adela and Mrs. Moore are intrigued by this fantasy of India, both wish to see the “real India,” and both hope Aziz can reveal this India to them. Their ideas of knowing India differ greatly, however, suggesting that the novel’s resistance to colonial discourses produces ambivalence. Aziz plays little part in the conversation about India. When he does contribute, he notes to the party that India is not a muddle, rashly inviting them to visit him. His invitation, though, increases India’s mysteriousness rather than eliminating it. After Aziz invites them to his home, “the old lady accepted: she still thought the young doctor excessively nice; moreover, a new feeling, half languor, half excitement, bade her turn down any fresh path. Mrs. Quested accepted out of adventure. She also liked Aziz, and believed that when she knew him better he would unlock his country for her” (69). Adela’s and Mrs. Moore’s reactions highlight their disparate views of “knowing” India and suggests where the novel falls into the trap of Orientalism, while also critiquing it. Adela wants the country unlocked for

her, yet she is unwilling to meet it where it is: she wishes Aziz to present it in a way she can understand by Western standards. Mrs. Moore responds differently, elucidating the novel's subtle construction of the East as somewhere exotic and mysterious. "Languor" and "excitement" evoke images of fantasy and exoticism. While critiquing Adela's need to "know" India, the text casts it as a space completely unknowable, reinforcing the stereotypes in which the East appears only as Western fantasy.

The novel thus seems suggestive of Bhabha's theory that colonial discourse creates its own contradictions. Bhabha asserts that where a discourse exists, it must also produce discussion of that discourse—an oppositional idea hidden within the original. To the West, stereotypes require familiarity, but then distance. *A Passage to India* creates an inverted ambivalence. Instead of creating something as familiar that it can distance, the novel accepts distance, yet *then* familiarity arises. Still, the text perpetuates stereotypes of India as fantasy.

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“We shed not a tear for our own”:
Vulnerability and Advocacy in Anne
Brönte’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

Reilly Fitzpatrick

Anne Brönte’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* challenges gendered social norms in profound ways. Brönte’s protagonist, Helen, leaves her alcoholic and abusive husband to live with her son at Wildfell Hall, supporting the two of them by selling her paintings. The novel’s basic plot thus seems radical in its quiet feminism. The text, however, appeared during an era when society imposed strong confines on the domestic world, especially within marriages. Although Brönte confronts some aspects of these confines, her “novel is solidly rooted within the domestic sphere” and many of the socially stigmatized repercussions remain present in her narrative (Talley 129). Significantly, the novel addresses the social silence women are forced to maintain—even in the midst of serious marital trauma—and which prevents them from establishing healthy vulnerability with other women. Karen Dutoi claims that “as much as [Brönte] uses *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* to expose the myth of gentlemanly behaviour and the dire situation of women in abusive marriages”—an aim reflected in the fate of her heroine’s husband—“she also uses [female] friendship to call attention to issues of privacy for women and difficulties in negotiating competing needs for emotional intimacy and distance” (235–36). The many women in *Wildfell Hall* who experience marital frustration, discontentment, and abuse systematically fail to express the emotions inspired by this treatment. This lack of expression emerges due to a social expectation—both implied

and explicit—that women be obedient, submissive, accommodating wives. For the most part women do not communicate marital unhappiness on their own behalf. The novel, however, contains multiple examples of women advocating for each other, whether by privately advising caution or by public confronting the spouse. The success of these advocative gestures increases in proportion to the women's vulnerability: as they become more open about their individual marital pain—more willing to share it with each other—they become better advocates for each other and for the rising generation of women.

While young Helen Lawrence prepares to enter her first marriageable season, her aunt, Margaret Maxwell, offers an exhortation to enter into a marriage carefully: "if you should marry the handsomest, and most accomplished and superficially agreeable man in the world, you little know the misery that would overwhelm you, if, after all, you should find him to be a worthless reprobate, or even an impracticable fool" (125). This advice appears sound and perhaps countercultural, since women typically were encouraged to marry for title and fortune rather than character or love. Helen recognizes the value of her aunt's words, writing in her diary that "her counsels are good, as far as they go—in the main points, at least," yet she dismisses them quickly: "there are some things she has overlooked in her calculations. I wonder if *she* was ever in love" (126). Helen questions her aunt's knowledge of matters of the heart, which dwell at the forefront of her girlish mind, for Margaret has—as social custom dictates—kept quiet about her personal marital experience. Margaret's lack of vulnerability reduces her guidance's weight, for she presents knowledge about marital relationships impersonally—like she's quoting a conduct manual for girls. She tells Helen to "receive coldly and dispassionately every attention, till you have ascertained and duly considered the worth of the aspirant; and let your affections be consequent upon approbation alone. First study; then approve; then love" (125). Helen notes that her aunt speaks "so seriously that one might have fancied she had known it to her cost; but [Helen] asked no more impertinent questions" (125). Helen suspects her aunt has experienced a flawed marriage, a suspicion reinforced by the narrative's gestures toward Helen's uncle's questionable moral character (like the fact he does not attend church). Her aunt, however, offers no personal account to add

gravity to her guidance, and Helen does not pry. Both women obey social laws that prohibit such conversation, lest it cast Helen's uncle in a negative light. So when Helen engages herself to the fashionable, but fallen Arthur Huntingdon—an act that begins a lifetime of suffering—her aunt can only respond vaguely: "Oh, Helen, Helen! you little know the misery of uniting your fortunes to such a man!" (144).

This cycle of silence continues when Helen's closest friend, Milicent Hargrave, hears of Helen's engagement to Huntingdon. Having observed him in social settings and being free from the infatuation Helen feels, Milicent is wary of Huntingdon and hesitant to celebrate her friend's impending union:

"Well Helen, I suppose I ought to congratulate you—and I *am* glad to see you so happy; but I did not think you would take him; and I can't help feeling surprised that you should like him so much . . . because you are so superior to him in every way, and there's something so bold—and reckless about him—so, I don't know how—but I always feel a wish to get out of his way, when I see him approach." (173)

All she has to justify her impression of Huntingdon are her instincts, for society dictates that his misdeeds—as revealed later in the novel—cannot be openly discussed, especially by young women. Milicent remains innocent—as society indicates she should be—so, like Helen, she does not fully comprehend the marriage's implications. The women in Helen's life who themselves have experienced such a union either keep silent or offer vague moral warnings. Milicent tries to criticize Huntingdon, but her own ignorance and the social pressures that inhibit her, lead only to a shallow critique of his appearance, not his character: "There is nothing noble or lofty about his appearance . . . don't you think Mr. Huntingdon's face is too red?" (174). Helen is mildly offended by her friend's reaction, so "rather than reflecting that [Milicent's] objections are the same as her aunt's and should perhaps be seriously considered, Helen is indignant and dismayed," thus "she dismisses Milicent's opinion" (Dutoi 238). Helen takes Milicent's vague confession as a breach of social mores and, more significantly, as unimportant. Disregarding both her aunt's advice and Milicent's apprehensions, Helen marries Huntingdon.

Helen almost immediately becomes disillusioned with her husband,

discovering he is selfish, aggressive, prone to extreme immoderation, and even abusive. She begins to doubt her ability to "save him," and grows fearful and frustrated (144). When Milicent, however, tells Helen she is engaged (though not by her own choosing) to Ralph Hattersley—a man whose character resembles Huntingdon's—Helen makes no effort to warn Milicent. She "is as reserved about Milicent's engagement to Hattersley as Milicent was about hers" (Dutoi 238). Milicent asks Helen only to tell her of Hattersley's good characteristics, for in order to act the part of tender and yielding wife, she must idealize him: "Hereafter, I shall never permit myself to utter a word in his dispraise, however he may seem to deserve it . . . after all, I think he is quite as good as Mr. Huntingdon, if not better; and yet, you love *him*, and seem to be happy and contented; and perhaps I may manage as well" (216). Milicent's self-deception is explained in large part by Helen's lack of vulnerability about the state of her own marriage. Helen does not try to dissuade Milicent. Instead she confesses her fears to her diary alone: "Alas! poor Milicent, what encouragement can I give you?—or what advice—except that it is better to make a bold stand now, though at the expense of disappointing both mother and brother, and lover, than to devote your whole life, hereafter, to misery and vain regret" (217). Her emotional exhortation, weighted with her own experience, might induce Milicent to protest her engagement, but since social mandates prevent Helen from admitting her marriage's flaws, she stays silent and Milicent marries Hattersley.

As Helen's and Milicent's marriages progress, "they share the experience of being married to abusive, debauched husbands" (Dutoi 236). Huntingdon and Hattersley grow more corrupt, more immoderate, and more abusive, while Helen and Milicent grow unhappier, more traumatized, and more desperate. Their mutual pain fosters a growing vulnerability in their friendship, for as their husbands continue to act in an unacceptably cruel manner, the wives engage in socially unacceptable admissions of their plight. During a particularly painful period of their marriages, Helen and Milicent try to console each other in quiet commiseration. Helen admits that, of the two men, Milicent's husband is superior. Expressing this view of Huntingdon to someone other than her diary breaks from Helen's habit and from social mandates. Milicent understands and responds accordingly:

Millicent's own heart told her how much it cost me to make this acknowledgment; and, with a childlike impulse, she expressed her

sympathy by suddenly kissing my cheek . . . How odd it is that we so often weep for each other's distresses, when we shed not a tear for our own! Her heart had been full enough of her own sorrows, but it overflowed at the idea of mine; and I too, shed tears at the sight of her sympathetic emotion, though I had not wept for myself for many a week. (270)

In this moment, both women recognize the power of vulnerability and sympathy, and both gain emotional relief. As the two marital relationships fall further into dysfunction, the women's friendship grows closer as they become more vulnerable with each other. This vulnerability sets the stage for Helen's effort to save Milicent's marriage, despite her inability to save her own.

Though the mandate for wifely submission almost completely prohibits Helen from defending herself from her own husband, she, on multiple occasions, advocates for Milicent by confronting Hattersley. At a dinner where the men become intoxicated and violent, Milicent begins to cry quietly. When Hattersley roughly interrogates her about her tears' cause, Helen answers for her friend. When Hattersley later says to Helen in private that Milicent is unaffected by his raucous manner, Helen corrects him: "I can enlighten you on that subject, Mr. Hattersley . . . she *does* mind it; and some other things she minds still more, which, yet, you may never hear her complain of" (274). Hattersley's "sudden spark of fury" at her claim responds not to the accusation, but to the possibility his wife has "complain[ed] to Helen" (274). Helen reassures him Milicent is the most loving wife, which soothes Hattersley into listening to the rest of Helen's defense. Helen continues exhorting Hattersley to reform his behavior to save his marriage. Finally, he heeds her. When he tells his wife he intends to repent and to redeem their relationship, he tells Milicent to "thank [Helen], it's her doing," and "Milicent flies to thank [her], overflowing with gratitude" (366). Helen saves her friend's marriage through advocacy. Steve Davies suggests these events serve as "an index of the importance and value of female friendship in *Wildfell Hall* that Helen can take real comfort from the amelioration of her friend's lot, brought about by her forthrightness, despite the unremitting horror of her own situation" (qtd. in Dutoi 244). Helen makes herself vulnerable in her friendship, which allows her to help save Milicent and Hattersley's

marriage, providing some small redemption for Helen, despite her own unsalvageable marriage.

What Helen's advocacy accomplishes for Milicent serves as a signpost for the growing vulnerability between the two women, which, in turn, incites a legacy of relational vulnerability, female advocacy, and marital redemption in the novel. When Milicent and Helen see Esther Hargrave on the same trajectory, they refuse to stay silent or impersonal like Helen's aunt and other women did when they faced their own critical decisions. They instead resolve to use their experiences to save Esther from a similar marital fate. Milicent learns that her mother is pressuring Esther to marry an old and objectionable man whom Esther does not love, so she enlists Helen's help to impress upon Esther that she should "never, on any account, or for anybody's persuasion . . . marry for the sake of money, or rank, or establishment, or any earthly thing, but true affection and well-grounded esteem" (269). Milicent insists that her sister hear this counsel in the context of her own and Helen's experiences. She "recognizes that her own suffering has occurred due to a lack of forewarning about the consequences of marrying a man whom she cannot esteem. She fears the same fate for Esther. . . . Milicent has realized what her and Helen's embarrassment and silence have cost them and endeavours to save Esther from the same fate by rectifying the mistake" (Dutoi 244).

Helen adopts this same urgency after speaking with Milicent, a conversation that depends on vulnerability and inspires further vulnerability. Helen confronts Esther, imploring her to "stand firm—you might as well sell yourself to slavery at once, as marry a man you dislike. Remember you are bound to your husband for life" (359). Helen reverses her earlier, failed attempts at female advocacy when she counsels Esther to "stand firm." She failed to communicate this message to Milicent, but now "her advice to Esther echoes that of her aunt's to herself, but rather than a pedantic conduct lesson, Helen's warning is a personal appeal infused with compassion for Esther's situation and concern for her future" (Dutoi 245). Exhibiting a culturally taboo vulnerability, Helen urges Esther similarly to reject cultural norms, encouraging her to marry cautiously, for "marriage may change [Esther's] circumstances for the better, but, in [Helen's] private opinion, it is far more likely to produce a contrary result" (360). Esther recognizes the vulnerability of this "private opinion," and "throwing herself into [Helen's] arms . . . she drop[s] her head on [Helen's] bosom and continue[s], with

an odd mixture of sadness and levity, timidity and audacity—"I know you are not so happy as I mean to be" (361). Both make themselves vulnerable in a manner that violates social constraints: Helen communicates her painful marital experience; Esther acknowledges the message. And, ultimately, Esther heeds Helen and Milicent's vulnerable counsel: "thanks to the encouragement and lessons of Helen and Milicent, Esther succeeds in resisting the pressure from her mother and brother and marries Helen's brother Lawrence, which Anne Brontë indicates is a happy match" (Dutoi 245). Esther does not have to experience the pain and abuse that precedes Hattersley's change in character, or worse, the desolation and desperation that follows Helen's realization her own marriage is irredeemable. Helen and Milicent's vulnerability with each other and their advocacy for Esther allow them to "break the cycle of abuse and silence" and imbue *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* with feminine hope (Dutoi 246).

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A Reasoned Agent: Mary
Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* and
Feminine Power in Eliza Fenwick's *Secresy*

Rosa Canales

Published in 1795, Eliza Fenwick's epistolary novel *Secresy* explores the lives of two young women, Sibella and Caroline. Caroline, Sibella's only female friend and sole connection to the outside world, serves as her confidant and mentor, as Sibella remains isolated under her authoritarian uncle's control. The novel lingers as an important late-18th-century text, reflecting powerfully feminist ideas for the time period. Indeed, *Secresy* draws on and reflects Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, while refuting notions about proper feminine behavior held by French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Grundy 25). Fenwick's *Secresy* offers a radical portrayal of Sibella's masculinized transgressive behavior, yet the text ultimately contrasts Sibella with the stronger, surviving Caroline, highlighting Caroline's reasoning abilities. The influence of Mary Wollstonecraft can be felt throughout the novel as the women who demonstrate reason and independence—while simultaneously remaining within the feminine sphere—acquire increased power. *Secresy*'s conclusion, however, poses questions about the place of feminine sensibility in 18th-century culture.

Sibella crosses gender boundaries, straying into the masculine sphere by engaging in premarital sex, an act deemed unacceptable for 18th-century women. She believes sex with Clement will foster their love and unite them in a natural marriage. According to Anne Close, Sibella's decision to sleep with Clement characterizes her as "sexually transgressive" for

the time period (39). Since her uncle, Mr. Valmont, forbids her to marry Clement, Sibella's display of passion defies social norms and his tyrannical governance. For example, Sibella asks "for ought I to withhold myself from giving [Clement] the fullest proof of my affection . . . because Mr. Valmont cruelly commands it? Surely I ought not" (129). She challenges the strict guidelines set by a man and by the broader patriarchy. Close adds "*Secresy* challenges the Gothic commonplace that proclaims innocence as the highest virtue a woman may possess and offers sexually experienced heroines who challenge the limiting gender ideology of their culture" (44). Unlike other female characters of the time, Sibella defies gendered expectations, rebelling against social constructs that prize chastity and innocence for women.

Placed in the appropriate historical context, Sibella's defiance becomes even more radical. When she chooses to act on her passion—believing, despite Valmont's opposition, that "'tis [their] hearts alone that can bind the vow"—she ignores the period's evolving marriage laws (129). As Sarah Emsley indicates "Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act of 1753 'brought coherence and logic to the laws governing marriage' by accepting only legally registered church marriages as legally binding" (479). After 1753, natural marriages without public procedure—like the one Sibella believes binds her to Clement—hold no authority. Regardless, Sibella's act interrogates ideals of feminine virtue and "rejects the forms and conventions of society" (Emsley 489). She forgoes traditional feminine behavior, acting on her desires, defying both Valmont and social mores.

Though she attempts to break from the feminine sphere, having sex with Clement ultimately leads Sibella to greater victimization. She becomes emotionally dependent on him, believing he plans to marry her. Pregnant with his child, she learns he is married to Mrs. Ashburn—Caroline's mother—and becomes distraught, sick with grief. She has been cast away; her love for Clement appears meaningless: "what man of taste marries a woman after an affair with her?" (345). Her sexual act also fails to facilitate any escape from Valmont or her isolation. He confines her to the castle, where she has little hope for escape. Rather than bringing them closer, their secret marriage separates them: Sibella remains locked away—yearning for Clement—while he denies their marriage and thus any commitment to her.

Sibella's objectification reflects her victimization and dependence on men. For her entire life, Valmont has groomed her for marriage, like he

is raising an animal to breed. As Sibella grows older, she loses most sense of identity, becoming desirable as property that can be transferred from one man to another. They value her for her beauty or her inheritance. For instance, Filmar characterizes her as a “rich and beauteous prize after which I have so long yearned . . . marry me she must and shall, by G-d” (334). Caroline also says, “I do not even hate Mr. Montgomery; though I do despise him altogether. You suspected him of taking Sibella from the castle. I suspected him of stealing her from Mr. Murden” (337). Sibella loses autonomy as others—even Caroline—view her as property, an object to be exchanged or stolen by men.

Sibella’s victimization connects directly to her sensibility as she conflates reason and passion. Discussing her love for Clement, she states “[it] is not a mutable passion, it is incorporate with [my] nature. My love and reason have become one, my fancy only subservient to its predominant command” (128). Sibella sees her passion rooted in reason, but her inability to separate the two suggests an overpowering sensibility. She acts on her passion and becomes emotionally vulnerable, susceptible to Clement’s deception. As Close suggests, her sensibility—a lack of reason—precipitates “her inability to properly perceive the unreliability of a man to whom she entrusts her entire future,” and prevents her from understanding Clement’s inconsistencies (44). Sibella’s sexually transgressive behavior derives from her feminine sensibility: her actions are driven by emotion, not reason, so her raw desire for Clement overrides misgivings about their secret marriage.

Sibella’s lack of education, though, leads to her sensibility, just as Wollstonecraft warns in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Wollstonecraft argues women have the same capabilities as men, yet a lack of proper education results in overwhelming sensibility, a weakness of sorts, whereas as access to education will produce greater virtue and reason (89). Sibella gains neither independence nor education while confined to her uncle’s castle, where she is bred for marriage and educated minimally by Clement’s male tutor. Her passionate sensibility, on the other hand, has been cultivated since her birth: Caroline “read[s] the world;” Sibella her “own heart. Imprisoned, during so many years, within the narrow boundary of this castle and its parks,” she turns inwards, focusing on emotion rather than the outside world (73). Her immersion in nature (until she meets Caroline, her only friend is a fawn) reinforces her sensibility, as she spends her days wandering the woods, alone with her thoughts and emotions.

The little education Sibella receives comes from Valmont, who “educates” her about loving Clement—his son—so his family can claim her inheritance money. Valmont carefully crafts her upbringing, cultivating love, passion, and sensibility, and thus “contrive[ing] a project by which all the united wealth of the Valmont house would have been showered on [Clement’s] head” (309). Valmont punishes Sibella’s secrecy—which foils his plan to claim her inheritance—rather than for loving her cousin. As Caroline points out, “with such an education as [Valmont] has given you, unless you had been a mere block without ideas, it was impossible you should not become a romantic enthusiast in whatever species of passion first engaged your feelings” (140). Clement inflames this first passion. Emsley argues that “Sibella’s love seems natural, but it has been brought about by Valmont, not by reason” (487). Valmont’s omnipotent influence highlights Sibella’s obedient nature, not her rebelliousness, since loving Clement seems no less “natural [than] to breathe” (141). Instead of defying Valmont or the patriarchal order, she accepts Valmont’s idealized view of her, signaling some complacency.

In striking contrast to Sibella’s weakness and sensibility, Caroline possesses strength and reasoning rooted in her education, just as Wollstonecraft suggests. While Sibella’s childhood reinforces her isolation, Caroline’s worldly exposure increases her knowledge and capacity for critical thinking. Isobel Grundy argues “Caroline Ashburn, whose active virtue dominates *Secresy*, has had help from neither father nor mother in working out her moral and intellectual positions for herself, but has done so by paying attention to the life around her” (27). Her self-education produces in Caroline the typically masculinized trait of reason—she demonstrates intellectual powers the era attributed only to men. Caroline acts as Sibella’s voice of reason, questioning both her actions and the roots of her desire. Sibella believes Clement’s negative qualities result from Valmont’s oppression, but Caroline retorts that his behavior derives only from “febleness of character” (141). Caroline’s reasoning abilities surpass not only Sibella’s, but also the novel’s men, who, excluding Valmont, “are alike in lacking [Caroline’s] strength of mind, endurance in adversity, and interest in reforming society” (Grundy 29). Caroline appears not only a strong, smart woman, but a powerful character regardless of her gender.

Caroline’s reasoning further contrasts with Murden’s emotional sensibility, underscoring Caroline’s ability to cross gender boundaries and

depicting her as more reasonable than the text's men. While Murden remains insensible about Sibella's confinement, Caroline suppresses her feelings for Murden to help both of her friends. As she says of Murden, "yes, I confess I have loved you! yet, because I could not possess myself of the strong holds in your heart, shall I sink down and die?—No! no!—I bade the vague hope begone . . . I am ready to do any thing in your behalf that reason can approve" (285). Like Sibella, Murden is overcome with sensibility and unrealistic ideals about love. Grundy contends that "[Secresy's] two great romantic loves are each evoked by figments of the imagination: Sibella's idea of Clement, and [Murden's] equally unreal idea of Sibella" (28). For both Sibella and Murden, emotional delusion leads to pain and unhappiness. Caroline—though she too experiences unrequited love—overcomes her emotion with reason.

Caroline uses her increased reasoning ability to influence other characters, thus gaining power and respect for her capabilities as she provides service to others. Amongst all the novel's men and women, Caroline distinguishes herself with her persuasiveness and critical thinking. Characters turn to her for assistance and advice. For instance, when Mr. Davenport sees no other solution to his problem than to marry Caroline's mother for money, Caroline's "interference . . . saved them from the commission of such a folly" (143). When she learns of Sibella's confinement by her tyrannical uncle, Caroline—instead of succumbing to depression like Murden—makes a plan: "I must do something more. To-morrow morning, I set out for Valmont castle" (296). Not only does Caroline act out of compassion for Murden and Sibella, she also commits to "prov[ing] the truth of [her] affection" (304). She dedicates herself to justice. Her display of independence, coupled with her ability to act upon reason rather than passion, allow Caroline to assert agency. Rather than wait for a man to rescue Sibella, Caroline selflessly sets out to rescue her friend. By doing so, she defies social expectations that women must remain feminine and comply with masculine authority. Additionally, she earns Murden's respect for recognizing wrongdoing, having the sense to act, and possessing the courage to do so independently.

Both Emsley and Close argue that Caroline's education and concomitant increased reasoning allow her to gain power. I add that her nuanced relationship to gender norms complicates this causality. Unlike Sibella, Caroline learns to work *within* patriarchal constraints to assert agency.

Grundy claims “Caroline Ashburn, who has undertaken her own social and political education, rejects the underlying structures of social control and political power, though she complies more or less, with convention” (25). Caroline is unique in her ability to remain virtuous while crossing gendered boundaries. Whereas Sibella’s defiance of Valmont—who has “chosen a part for [her]: and nothing is required . . . but obedience”—transgresses social norms, Caroline’s actions do not (59). Wollstonecraft says of passion, “let the honest heart shew itself, and *reason* teach passion to submit to necessity; or, let the dignified pursuit of virtue and knowledge raise the mind above those emotions which rather imbitter than sweeten the cup of life” (101). Caroline’s innocence and virtue contribute to her reasoning, and, therefore, to her feminine power. Emsley notes that Caroline “lament[s] that Sibella did not resist temptation” (488). As Caroline admonishes, “I grant nothing could bring the temptation more strongly forward than the state into which Clement and you were forced: but still you should have resisted” (139). Although Caroline regrets the role Sibella’s upbringing plays, she ultimately blames Sibella for succumbing to desire.

This passive acceptance of gender norms is also found in *Vindication*, in which Wollstonecraft recognizes the need for women to be educated, yet underscores that this education serves primarily to make women better wives and husbands. She asks, “do passive indolent women make the best wives?” and “have women, who have early imbibed notions of passive obedience, sufficient character to manage a family or educate children” (104)? The radical proposal to educate women requires Wollstonecraft to locate her ideas within a less transgressive figure: a woman who does not stray far from her role as wife and mother. Caroline similarly gains power by remaining within the private, feminine sphere, practicing acceptable, virtuous behavior.

Although it appears the novel depicts sensibility as incongruous with female agency, its conclusion poses questions about the role of women’s sensibility in 18th-century culture. With pregnant Sibella dead, Close argues that “many novels that treat sexually transgressive women—*Secresy* included—end similarly, with the sad realization that contemporary society cannot tolerate or include such women” (39). I propose, however, that this grim ending reveals just as much about Caroline as it does about Sibella. Despite her increased feminine power, Caroline remains lonely in the world, her spirit buried: “[Sibella and Murden] shall be entombed

together—the dearer parts of my existence—I loved them both as I never loved man nor woman beside” (359). Caroline arguably achieves power by adopting masculine reasoning, yet her achievement is met only with loneliness, isolation, and emotional death: her passion buried in the earth with Sibella and Murden. While Caroline gains greater autonomy than other characters, the text suggests reasoning cannot fully supplant sensibility. If Sibella and Murden are part of Caroline, they make her whole. Their sensibility combines with her reasoning. Without them, she has little power. Fenwick depicts Sibella and Murden as catalysts who engage Caroline’s critical thinking abilities. Although Caroline is not sensible herself, Sibella’s and Murden’s love, passion, and sensibility drive her to use the reason through which she exercises power.

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The Paradox of Language in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Xavier Xin

Within the genre of dystopian fiction, *The Handmaid's Tale* is notable for focusing not only on the threat a totalitarian theocracy poses to its people, but also the challenges it poses to language. While Offred, the novel's narrator, gropes for the right words to describe her relationship to the Republic of Gilead, the regime willfully mutilates language to serve its purposes. At first glance, language falls short of capturing the handmaid's experiences, failing to withstand the Republic's exploitation. Offred's narration and Gilead's rhetoric, however, together present a curious paradox: language triumphs through its failure. Its insufficiency empowers Offred to express herself and resist Gilead's oppression. Its instability both cements and condemns the regime's horror, but ironically also enables the handmaid to devise a new form of writing that rescues language from the Republic's abuses.

Offred does not shy away from acknowledging language's failure, a breakdown that paradoxically unleashes language's potential. Of her relationship with the Commander, she says "whatever this new arrangement [is] between us . . . I have no name for it" (158). Offred's inability to characterize her forbidden interaction with the Commander reveals the failure of language. Here an antinomy emerges. Offred's circumstances are beyond language, a limitation that demonstrates their complexity. Much like the Wall—where Gilead displays the bodies of executed dissidents and which

Offred observes to be “more foreboding when . . . empty,” because vacancy “is also potential” for the worse yet to come—language’s failure creates its own vacancy (164). It simultaneously, though, creates the paradoxically infinite “potential” for interpretation. Juxtaposed with a republic that places limits on everything, such potential becomes a form of protest that rejects clearly defined boundaries.

During the Ceremony—ritualized sexual intercourse between high-ranking men and handmaids to conceive children—language presents an even more robust rebuke to Gilead’s practices. As the Commander performs the ritual, Offred contemplates the difficulty of describing the sexual activity: “I do not say *making love*, because this is not what he’s doing. *Copulating* too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does *rape* cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven’t signed up for. There wasn’t a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose” (92). As language stumbles amongst these alternatives, it eventually settles on a bare minimum: the exclusively physical aspect of the sexual practice—“fucking” (92). The absence of a word to describe this activity illustrates language’s insufficiency, yet existing terms’ failure to capture the cruelty of the Ceremony testifies to its extremity. Carrying this paradox further, while the term “fucking” represents a compromise term, its vulgar and potentially violent connotations shed light upon the grotesqueness of the scene, thereby implicitly condemning the practice. The apparent insufficiency of language thus becomes the source of its triumph as it conveys the raw terror of the regime, but also opens up possibilities for protest.

Offred’s greatest protest comes when she stretches language to express her emotional state in these extreme circumstances. For example, she confesses her feelings toward Serena Joy, the Commander’s wife: “Partly I [am] jealous of her” (159). She quickly puzzles over the apparent inaccuracy of her word choice, however: “how could I be jealous of a woman so obviously dried-up and unhappy? You can only be jealous of someone who has something you think you ought to have yourself” (159). Language fails Offred again, as the word “jealousy” offers at best an approximation of her feelings toward Serena. By stretching the word’s meaning to cover something beyond its scope, Offred constructs a unique self with complex feelings. In

this way, she resists Gilead's strategies for control, which seek to annihilate the handmaids' individual identities: the renaming of handmaids (their names signifying that they are the Commanders' possessions); the uniform garments they are forced to wear; and Aunt Lydia's haunting sermon about the virtue of making oneself "invisible" (26). Offred's effort to verbalize her own feelings by stretching words' meanings thus resists the regime's effort to homogenize the handmaids.

Offred's language-stretching also appears in her rhetorical strategies. Similes, for instance, allow her to exploit language's insufficiency. As Offred walks with Ofglen, she thinks: "I resent her meek head, bowed as if into a heavy wind. But there is no wind" (41). Here, Offred represents her partner's gesture by comparing it to "a heavy wind." At the same time, though, she expects the simile to do more than merely describe Ofglen's action. She realizes the description's insufficiency, because there is, after all, no wind. By highlighting two situations that are fundamentally incomparable, Offred subtly suggests that something else makes Ofglen bend her head. Gilead's shadow looms large; its oppression of the handmaids is so extreme that it has been internalized, manifesting in self-regulated physical behaviors. Exploiting the inadequacy of language with a simile, Offred conveys Gilead's horror in a way that circumvents direct statements that are risky and bound to be censored.

Whereas Offred uses language's failure to resist, Gilead abuses it to oppress, a strategy that backfires as the instability of language both cements and condemns the regime's terror. Aunt Lydia—who trains and indoctrinates the handmaids—instructs them: "Ordinary . . . is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary" (31). She explains that the word "ordinary" has no fixed meaning; its signification shifts according to what one is "used to." Gilead exploits the term's inherent instability, juxtaposing it with the word's quotidian connotation to legitimize the regime's rule. One's current oppression might feel intolerable, because it is new; once it becomes ordinary, one will no longer mind. The regime's evil extends to abuses of language that bolster its tyrannical authority. By underpinning an unscrupulous autocracy, language thus denounces the regime's horror.

An even more sophisticated exploitation of language's instability appears in Gilead's deployment of words' multiple meanings. During another of her lessons, Aunt Lydia instructs: "There is more than one kind of

freedom. . . . Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (22). George Orwell's observation about the ways that authoritarian regimes exploit language provides a fitting explanation of this moment. Orwell writes that words like "*democracy . . . freedom . . .* have each of them several different meanings which cannot be reconciled with one another," a flexibility harnessed by political parties to their advantage (132). He offers an example: "In the case of a word like *democracy*, [there is] no agreed definition [and] it is almost universally felt that when we call a country democratic we are praising it: consequently the defenders of every kind of regime claim that it is a democracy" (132). Aunt Lydia adopts a similar strategy. In the phrase "freedom to," freedom signifies the power (or right) to do something as one wishes without constraint. In the phrase "freedom from," freedom signifies a state devoid of undesirable forces. By capitalizing on two competing definitions of "freedom," Aunt Lydia undermines the word's more conventional association with "liberty," while still relying on its positive connotation to portray "freedom from"—the chilling symbol of Gilead's oppression—as something desirable. Language fails once more, enabling a despotic regime to solidify its power. Such failure, though, exposes the violence Gilead commits upon language: by forcing "freedom" to adopt disparate definitions simultaneously, Aunt Lydia shatters the already tenuous boundaries among the definitions, exacerbating language's instability even as she exploits it.

The greatest violence Gilead inflicts upon language appears in its destruction of words' original meanings. As the Commander hands Offred a pen to write the Latin phrase inscribed in her closet, she recalls lessons taught at the Red Center, Gilead's re-education institution for women: "Pen Is Envy, Aunt Lydia would say . . . warning us away from such objects" (184). A pun on Sigmund Freud's infamous theory of "penis envy," Aunt Lydia dismantles "penis" into "pen" and "is," forcefully associating the object—"pen"—with the sentiment, "envy." The disciplinarian reconstructs the deprived "pen"—in place of the penis—as the new symbol for patriarchal authority, the new object of women's desire. Beyond warning the handmaids away from a tool for self-expression, this message further circumscribes them within the phallocentrism underpinning Freud's work, haunting Offred even after her departure from the Center.

Even more radically, Gilead coins new words to serve its political purposes.

For instance, Offred's name. A literal merger of "of" and "Fred"—the Commander's name—"Offred" speaks of Gilead's attempt to trap the handmaid in a relationship based on possession, making her the Commander's property, rather than an autonomous person. Critics, though, have expanded their gaze beyond the regime's logic, proposing other potential meanings for "Offred": "she is off-red, or not quite fully aligned with her role; she is offered up; she is off-read, as in mis-read, and she is afraid" (Macpherson 56). Once again, Gilead's deployment of language's instability to objectify the handmaid fails when faced with that very instability. It enables alternate readings of "Offred" that repurpose Gilead's language of objectification to foreground her suffering under suffocating patriarchy.

Beyond simply adding prefixes, Gilead more outrageously fuses words together, a process that removes parts arbitrarily. "Prayvaganzas," for instance, refer either to occasions when women enter forced marriages or where men honor "military victories" (218). Combining an archetypal religious act—"pray"—and the second half of "extravaganza," Gilead portrays these events as spectacular religious celebrations, attempting to mask their oppressive nature, while suggesting they are celebratory. The contradiction between the solemn connotation of "pray" and the ecstatic undertone of "vaganza," however, imbues the term with the uncanny. The actual brutality of these gatherings generates an unease extending to this new word. Gilead's neologism backfires as the blatant oppositions in both the form and meaning of "prayvaganza" render the word ugly. It exposes the hideous nature of Gilead's abuse of language, thereby exposing the regime's nature.

As Orwell notes, "the worst thing one can do with words is surrender to them" (138). Offred—living in the midst of Gilead's linguistic exploitation—refuses to surrender, instead taking advantage of language's instability to fight the regime. Recalling how people become accustomed to daily oppression, she says, "we lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it" (54). At first glance, it appears Offred warns against the possibility of confusing two similar words, signaling that she too is aware of language's instability. The line "you have to work at it," though, elucidates her intention: by highlighting the difference between "ignore" and "ignorance," and suggesting the former requires a conscious effort, Offred highlights the struggle beneath the superficial appearance of obedience.

Offred's boldest attempts to resist come when she directly subverts words

that express Gilead's ideologies. Contemplating the frugality the Republic champions, she muses, "waste not want not. I am not being wasted. Why do I want" (5)? Offred first breaks down the phrase into two parts—"waste not" and "want not"—then applies each to her situation. She is not being wasted, because her body is used to bear the Commander's children, but she wants, because her unfulfilled personal desires are brutally suppressed. Offred transforms a proverb that articulates one of Gilead's fundamental beliefs into self-revelation, thus challenging the regime's strict censorship on self-expression. Even more directly, Offred subverts Aunt Lydia's words. The disciplinarian preaches: "A thing is valued . . . only if it is rare and hard to get. We want you to be valued, girls. . . . Think of yourselves as pearls" (112). Offred counters: "I think about pearls. Pearls are congealed oyster spit" (112). In this instance, Offred employs ugly language to her advantage. By describing the formation of pearls as repulsive, she rejects Aunt Lydia's romanticized ideas, which are used to coax the handmaids into adopting conservative values.

A new form of writing thus emerges as Offred plays with language's instability to resist the regime's control. She goes even further, however, when experimenting with language, making it not only empowering, but also beautiful. Offred savors the words she puts together while playing Scrabble with the Commander:

Larynx, I spell. *Valance*. *Quince*. *Zygote*. I hold the glossy counters with their smooth edges, finger the letters. The feeling is voluptuous. This is freedom, an eyeblink of it. *Limp*, I spell. *Gorge*. What a luxury. The counters are like candies, made of peppermint, cool like that. Humbugs, those were called. I would like to put them into my mouth. They would taste also of lime. The letter C. *Crisp*, slightly acid on the tongue, delicious. (137)

The italicization of Offred's few plays—coupled with the words' exoticism—confers a sense of luxury to this forbidden game. The luxury continues as Offred describes the counters as "glossy" with "smooth edges," suggestive word choices that invite viewing these inanimate objects as human skin. The series of bold words culminates with her next phrase—"finger the letters"—making the handmaid's sexual longings clear. This wildly imaginative description empowers Offred to express her suppressed desires, but also to

experience them through literary language. As she says “this is freedom,” words have already been made concrete, vivid, so they resist Gilead’s attempt to blur their meaning. Even more importantly, Offred’s words suggest beauty. Orwell asserts that English has become “ugly and inaccurate,” because of the “stale[ness]” of its “metaphors, similes, and idioms” (128, 134). By exploring fresh expressions—in both form and content—Offred rescues language from Gilead’s distortion, breathing new vibrancy into it, restoring its beauty.

As Offred continues to describe the counters, her language becomes synesthetic, with touch and taste blended together in her comparison of the objects to “cool,” “peppermint” sweets. Synesthesia appears again as she uses the “crisp” letter C to imagine its texture and taste. Here, Offred’s desires erupt through words. The series of commas in the concluding sentence—“Crisp, slightly acid on the tongue, delicious”—additionally highlights Offred’s savoring of the letter C. The instability of language affords Offred the creative license to explore expressive possibilities, reasserting language’s beauty. Such beauty rejects the bleak horror of Gilead and signals Offred’s most powerful protest.

Language therefore triumphs through its failure. While it falls short of describing this new reality and fails to resist Gilead’s violent exploitation, its failure paradoxically unleashes its potential, empowering Offred to express herself and fight the regime’s terror. More importantly, while Gilead’s relentless abuse mars language, Offred uses language to create beauty that proudly resists the dystopian reality’s ugliness. Reviving language by reimagining its possibilities constitutes her most powerful protest, and delivers a new, liberatory politics of the English language.

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The Reliability of the Senses: Sight, Sound, and Touch in Louise Glück's *The Wild Iris*

Grace Perry

In “The Gold Lily,” the flower-speaker asks anxious questions, signaling the central concern of the various speakers in Louise Glück’s poetry collection *The Wild Iris*:

How
can they know you see
unless you save us?
In the summer twilight, are you
close enough to hear
your child’s terror? (lines 10–15)

The divine speaker and the human speaker are concerned with how they perceive and how they are perceived by the other. A great deal of scholarship centers on the odd construction of the collection’s voices. William Spiegelman, for instance, suggests that while the voices are “distinct and overlapping,” they all are a single voice projecting her thoughts “into the mouths of others” (6). This interpretation, however, overlooks the central tragedy of the collection: miscommunication amongst the voices. William Davis notes that the collection’s meditations are “introverted, enjambed, almost obsessively repetitive—and, in the end, largely inconclusive” (49). Glück’s use of multiple voices gestures to the tragedy of miscommunication

between humanity and God. Up to this point, though, few scholars have considered the role the senses play in this miscommunication. Throughout the collection, the divine and the human speaker miscommunicate almost exclusively through sights (signs) and sounds (words). In the end, only touch is a reliable sense for understanding eternity or the divine.

In the collection's first half, both the divine and the human speaker seem determined to communicate through sight and sound. "Clear Morning"—the collection's first poem spoken by the divine voice—begins with a declarative statement regarding the senses: "I've watched you long enough / I can *speak* to you any way I like" (lines 1–2). The speaker goes on to complain about humanity's inability to see—to interpret divine signs—and to hear the divine voice. The speaker explains that they have spoken through various images, assuming that people "would cast [them] aside yourselves sooner or later, / thinking matter could not absorb [their] gaze forever" (lines 17–18). Despite God's intention for humankind to see past images and understand the meaning behind them, humanity has grown attached to the images themselves. Frustrated, God asserts that they "cannot go on / restricting [themselves] to images" (lines 21–22). Piotr Zazula argues that in this poem "the speaker is tired of communicating with people in the only language they can understand—the one of signs" (172). The people seem committed to ignoring God's signs, and the divine claims they "would never accept / a voice like mine" (lines 10–11). The poem's form heightens the speaker's sense of frustration: as one long sentence interspersed with dashes, it reads like a rant, as if the speaker has not planned each line, but instead allows them to emerge spontaneously from deep emotion. The speaker is frustrated, because despite their efforts to find a method for communicating that is acceptable to humanity, humans do not accept God's voice and seem intent on misusing the signs.

Despite this frustration, the poem directly following "Clear Morning," "Spring Snow," implies a level of trust in the senses as a means for communication. The divine begins with a sight imperative: "Look at the night sky: / I have two selves, two kinds of power" (lines 1–2). The command to "look" implies a level of trust in humans' ability to see. Then, the speaker demonstrates confidence in their interpretation of humanity's cries:

I have heard your cries, and cries before yours,
and the demand behind them.

I have shown you what you want:
 not belief, but capitulation
 to authority, which depends on violence. (lines 9-13)

The divine assumes they have understood these cries, and that what human's truly want is not signs, but violent capitulation. This understanding of humanity's desire is complicated, however, as the collection continues.

Instead of being stubbornly unwilling to see or hear God, the human speaker actually longs to do so, but claims God has not communicated adequately. The third "Matins" poem begins with an admission of speech's failure: "Forgive me if I say I love you" (line 1). The word "love" seems insufficient to capture what the speaker feels toward the divine, because it is impossible to love what one cannot conceptualize. From the speaker's perspective, the divine "disclose[s] / virtually nothing" (lines 4-5). The signs the divine speaker thinks are so clear appear opaque and divisive to the human speaker:

are you like the hawthorn tree,
 always the same thing in the same place,
 or are you more the foxglove, inconsistent, first springing up
 a pink spike on the slope behind the daisies,
 and the next year, purple in the rose garden? (lines 5-9)

These signs—accompanied by "silence"—seems to suggest that God "must be all things," which implies God "couldn't possibly exist" (lines 10, 11, 13). Instead of signs pointing to God's existence and grace, the images of the natural world only confuse the human speaker, causing them to question how humans can be expected to sort through these sights.

The following "Matins" poem begins with two declarations, one of sight and one of speech: "I see it is with you as with the birches: / I am not to speak to you / in the personal way" (lines 1-3). The poem compares speaking with God to "addressing the birches" (line 12). This metaphor expresses the speaker's frustration that God does not seem to hear or answer prayer; one may as well be speaking to a tree. Resigned, the speaker assumes God is unwilling to respond. Whereas the previous "Matins" poem ends with a question mark, this poem's first lines—confident declarations—suggest two

possibilities. First, perhaps there is a long silence between the two poems, confirming the human speaker's fear that either God intends to fill them with confusion and doubt, or simply that God doesn't exist. Or second, the speaker does not wait for a response, immediately assuming the question will remain unanswered. Either way, this second poem speaks with confidence: the speaker, like the divine voice in "Spring Snow," expresses confidence in their interpretation of silence and the absence of signs.

Examined together, these four poems indicate that, at this point in the collection, both the divine speaker and the human speaker are confident that signs/words are appropriate means for communication. They assume it is the other's fault for failing to communicate with signs, yet never question their own interpretation of the perceived silence, nor consider the possibility that signs themselves are the problem.

Later in the collection, the divine speaker retreats, seemingly giving up on the prospect of communication through these senses. Yet, the divine still trusts their own senses. In "Retreating Wind," the divine speaker's view zooms out and "see[s] [humanity] more clearly," prompting disappointment in humans' inability to communicate with the divine (line 6). Instead of their souls growing and becoming more godlike, they remain "small talking things," a phrase that demonstrates the divine's misunderstanding of humanity's prayers (line 9). Here, the collection imagines a distant God, hearing only the mumbling of humanity's prayers, disappointed by their small speeches. This misunderstanding is primarily one of sound and sight. The divine has the ability to look from a distance, to see the entirety of humanity's journey: a "bird's flight" that "begins and ends, in form echoing / this arc from the white birch / to the apple tree" (lines 19, 21-23). By distancing themselves—"retreating" as the title suggests—the divine forfeits the ability to hear the speaker's whispered prayer, to see their struggle to come to terms with God's perceived silence. Seeing humanity as a whole isolates the individual and clouds the divine speaker's vision of individuals' spiritual desires.

In contrast to the frustration expressed in "Retreating Wind," some of the final poems with a divine speaker seem more peaceful—resigned almost—about the miscommunication. In "Sunset" and "Lullaby," the divine voice is tender, measured, and calm. The form of "Sunset" contrasts vividly with "Clear Morning": instead of the rant filled with dashes, this poem has multiple sentences, appearing more intentional, as if the speaker

has taken time to consider the situation and to formulate a response. The speaker's voice is calm and lyrical, appearing to accept partial blame for the miscommunication, expressing "sorrow / that I cannot answer you / in speech you accept as mine" (lines 3-5). The next line—"You have no faith in your own language"—contains more sorrow than anger (line 6). Rather than hearing only the low mumbling of complaints, the divine speaker affirms that humanity's "voice reaches me always" (line 10). And, this speaker "answer[s] constantly, / my anger passing / as winter passes" (lines 11-13). The "tenderness" diverges greatly from the collection's previous poems, suggesting a divine figure resigned to the inability of their creations to communicate with them through the sounds and words that come so naturally (line 13). The speaker recognizes tragedy: both humanity and the divine attempt to communicate in these ways almost constantly, but they are forever doomed to misunderstand each other. "Lullaby" likewise uses a tender tone, encouraging the human speaker to "rest" and "listen," not to words, but to the "breathing" of creation (lines 1, 7). The sound of "breathing" is soft, like a whisper, and is not indicative of any particular emotion or idea. It communicates on the most basic level—affirmation of existence—and signals that the divine's efforts at conversation have ceased.

While these two poems reveal a shift in the divine speaker's attitude, "September Twilight"—the collection's final poem with a divine speaker—is less consoling. The opening lines—"I gathered you together, / I can dispense with you"—assert the divine's power over humanity (lines 1-2). No longer interested in communicating, the divine announces a plan to "erase" humanity, because they are "finished" with them (lines 21, 24). Referring to humans as a "vision / of deepest mourning," the divine has given up trying to communicate with humanity (lines 24-25). The divine speaker is finished with this "exercise" and plans to eradicate humans, who are no longer of interest (line 23). Taken together, "Sunset," "Lullaby," and "September Twilight," reveal a divine figure mutable and unpredictable, at once frustrated by and resigned to the tragedy of sight's and sound's inadequacy.

Near the collection's end, the human speaker likewise expresses frustration at and resignation to this breakdown in communication. In the penultimate "Vespers" poem, the human speaker seems also to have given up on their ability to communicate. The speaker's confident assertion, "Your voice is gone now," signals the divine's inability or unwillingness to respond with words (line 1). The lament "everywhere I am talked to by

silence / so it is clear I have no access to you” suggests an inability to see past signs (lines 7-8). This poem again identifies silence as an indicator of absence. The simplicity and directness of the lines reflect a resignation similar to that expressed by the divine. No longer asking questions, the speaker notes the divine’s voice is definitively gone. From this point to the end of the collection, the human speakers no longer address the divine. Frustration accompanies this resignation:

you have drawn
 a line through my name
 in what contempt do you hold us
 to believe only loss can impress
 your power on us? (lines 9-13)

Though partly resigned to the divine’s absence, the speaker insists the divine withdrew intentionally. The human speaker does not accept partial blame for the breakdown like the divine does, but does express similar resignation and frustration.

Sight and sound are central to the miscommunication between the divine and humanity. Though both sides initially want to know the other, they are unable to communicate through two senses that seem essential—natural—to them both. The human speaker frequently complains that when seeking God, they find only silence and darkness. Likewise, the divine complains their voice can never be accepted by humanity and that humans misinterpret their signs. Though both express initial confidence in the other’s ability to understand, they eventually realize all opportunity for communication has passed. As both speakers express frustration and resignation, all communication between the two—through words and sights—ceases by the end of the collection. The flowers that appear at the collection’s end, however, offer a different form of communication, suggesting the only way to experience eternity—instead of seeing or hearing the divine—is to feel the glory of the transient, present moment.

Instead of mourning any inability to communicate, the flowers embrace feeling in the moment. “The Gold Lily” seems one of the only flowers to indicate fear of the human gardeners. The flower’s terror—like the human’s—arises from the inability to see and hear. It asks “how / can they know you see / unless you save us,” and wonders if the divine is “close

enough to hear [this] child's terror" (lines 9–11, 14–15) Like the human, this flower receives no formal answer from the divine. Both, however, receive an answer in the collection's final lines. "The White Lilies" speak:

Hush, beloved. It doesn't matter to me
 how many summers I live to return:
 this one summer we have entered eternity.
 I felt your two hands
 Bury me to release its splendor. (lines 14–18)

These lines are more hopeful and consoling than the divine's "Lullaby." Rather than encouraging aural engagement, the white lilies call for touch. The command "[h]ush, beloved" appears parental and tender, calling for speech's cessation. And, if the flowers address the human speaker, the words suggest a connectedness between humanity and the natural world that may be impossible for humans and the divine. The divine speaker is not tangible to humanity; sight and sound have proven ineffective for discourse with the human speaker. Given the human speaker's fear of death and the divine's desire to communicate with humanity, the breakdown in communication feels tragic. But the flowers console, offering the possibility for celebrating the present moment despite the tragedy of miscommunication.

The final, physical image evokes hope, affirming the transient beauty of the present moment. Glück's collection ultimately suggests that, though communication between humanity and the divine has ceased, there remains a type of union, experienced with—if not the divine speaker—the eternal in this moment of tangible glory. Scholars consistently have recognized this theme as central to the collection's conclusion. Robert Baker refers to the entire collection as "a meditation on what it means to inhabit a transient paradise" (145). Instead of worrying about eternity, the flowers encourage humanity to embrace the present. Though neither verbal nor visual communication, the tangible offers a clear picture of temporal eternity. The specter of burial evokes death—which the human speaker so fears—but the "release" of splendor offers hope that death is not something to fear. As Baker explains, "eternity is to be found in the open of transience, in a day or a season, in two hands that in a gesture bury and release" (150).

A concrete image—two hands that bury—affirms touch as the most reliable sense. Where sight and sound have failed, the feeling of these two

hands is reliable, sure, guaranteeing a release of “splendor” essential to understanding temporal eternity. Glück ends her tragedy with the possibility of hope: though communication through traditional methods, like words, sights, and sounds, may no longer be possible between the divine and humanity, there is a deeper, more physical understanding of the eternal to be found in the present moment.

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Contributors

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Shaun Anderson is a graduate student in Utah State University’s English Department. He has been published in *Mud Season Review*, *45th Parallel*, *Nebo*, and *Nightlight Magazine*. He received first place for creative non-fiction in the 2016 and 2019 Utah State University creative writing contests.

Sarah Bliss is a junior at Florida Southern College in Lakeland, FL, where she serves as Secretary of her Sigma Tau Delta chapter. She is pursuing a major in Secondary Education English Literature and minors in History and Dance. Upon completing her degree, she hopes to earn an MA

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Madison Bradley received their BA in English and Media Communications from Ursinus College in May 2018. Madison's previous works focus on the intersection of childhood and queer identity. They also have published an honors thesis focusing on LGBTQ+ representation in children's media. Madison currently works as a communications writer for a non-profit in Philadelphia.

James Braun is a senior at Oakland University, majoring in Creative Writing with an emphasis in fiction. His work has appeared in *The Minnesota Review*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Atlas+Alice*, *The Oakland Arts Review*, *The Main Street Rag*, and elsewhere. He is an editorial intern at Dzanc Books, president of OU's Creative Writing Club, and Secretary of OU's Sigma Tau Delta chapter. He has won 1st and 2nd place in OU's flash fiction and non-fiction competitions, respectively, and is the recipient of the Linda McCloskey Award for Writing Excellence. James lives in Port Huron, MI.

Ashlyn M. Brisley attends Young Harris College in the mountains of north Georgia, and expects to graduate in May. When she is not behind a computer writing or working on a term paper, you can find her travelling the world or in her hometown of Evans, rocking on the back porch with her family. She hopes to further her education by pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing and Screenwriting next fall.

Kymerlin Bush is a scholar with a special interest in examining and telling stories featuring the struggle against toxic masculinity, bigotry, and social norms. Her creative work often seeks to demystify the seemingly banal peculiarity of the habitually conservative American small town. "Bite Down" is her first creative publication. Kymerlin's critical publications include "'We'll cook him up in a stew': Stepmothers and Primogeniture in the Brothers Grimm's 'The Juniper Tree,'" published in the *International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities*, and a forthcoming article titled "'The Sweetest Savor': Active Male Penetrators and Societal Anxieties in Arthurian Legend" in the same journal. When she has time on her hands, Kymerlin can often be found visiting her (small) hometown

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Rosa Canales is a senior at Denison University, majoring in English Literature and German. She recently studied at the Universität Heidelberg in Heidelberg, Germany. During her time at Denison, she has conducted research on post-war German literature, and served both as editor-in-chief of *Exile*, Denison's literary magazine, and as an editor of *Articulâte*, Denison's scholarly publication.

Sean Cho A. recently graduated with a BA in Creative Writing. His work can be found in *The Glass Mountain*, *30-North Literary Review*, *The Mangrove*, and elsewhere. In summer 2019 he was a Mary K. Davis Student Writers' Scholarship recipient for the Bear River Writing Conference. Sean is now an MFA candidate at the University of California—Irvine.

Via D'Agostino, originally from the wilds of Massachusetts, attends the University of New Hampshire, pursuing an MFA in Fiction. She earned a BA in Creative Writing and a BA in Spanish (with minors in Psychology and Literature) from Ohio Northern University, graduating summa cum laude in May 2019. She has over twenty published works, including fiction, poetry, non-fiction, and photography, in journals such as *Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle*, Z Publishing's *Ohio's Best Emerging Poets*, the TownVibe's *The Berkshire Magazine*, and Ohio Northern's *Polaris*. She plans to read and write her way around the entire globe—right after grad school.

Chris Denham is a junior at St. Lawrence University, majoring in English and Government with a minor in Education Studies. He is currently studying abroad at the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand. He serves as the Chapter Liaison for his Sigma Tau Delta chapter. Chris is chief editor of *The St. Lawrence Review* and an editor of St. Lawrence University's newspaper, *The Hill News*, as well as an SLU Research Fellow in English Education. He intends to study political journalism following graduation, and is interested in society's development of civic attitudes and civil discourse through education.

Ryan Drendel is a graduate of Missouri Southern State University and an MFA candidate at Northern Arizona University. His writing can be found in *Big Muddy*, *The Esthetic Apostle*, and *Scribendi*. His brother Nick is smarter than he is.

Courtney DuChene is a poet, journalist, and screenwriter based out of Philadelphia, PA. She is a senior at Ursinus College with majors in English and Media and Communications Studies, and minors in Creative Writing and Film Studies. Her poetry has been published in *Furrow*, *The Blue Route*, and *Oyster River Pages*.

Zachary Erickson will graduate in May from Fordham University in New York City. He majors in Spanish Language and Literature and English (with a concentration in Creative Writing) and minors in Theology. Jorge Luis Borges, T.S. Eliot, and Julian of Norwich are indispensable to him. He has previously published three stories and three poems in campus publications. He is originally from Quincy, MA, and recently spent a semester in Buenos Aires. As an identical twin, doppelgängers are also indispensable to him.

Samuel Ernst is a junior at Ursinus College in Collegetown, PA. He majors in English, with minors in Creative Writing and Computer Science. Sam currently works as a teaching assistant for Ursinus's Computer Science Department. In the past, he has worked on Ursinus's literary magazine, *The Lantern*, which also published some of his short stories.

Catherine Evans graduated summa cum laude from Duquesne University in May 2019. She majored in English (with a concentration in Writing) and Corporate Communication, and minored in World Literatures. While an undergraduate, she served as President of Duquesne's Sigma Tau Delta chapter. She is currently pursuing her MA in Literary and Cultural Studies at Carnegie Mellon University.

Reilly Fitzpatrick is a graduate student at Azusa Pacific University, pursuing an MA in English Literature. She is editor-in-chief of literary journal *The West Wind*, as well as head contributing editor for the Honors College at APU. Her short fiction, poetry, and scholarly work have been published in literary and academic magazines, and she has been a featured reader at

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Amber Gaudet is a junior at Texas Woman's University, majoring in English Literature. She is President of her university's Sigma Tau Delta chapter and editor-in-chief of TWU's weekly student newspaper, *The Lasso*. Her creative and academic work has been published in TWU's annual in-house honors journal, *Off the Quill*, and she is a contributor to the University of North Texas's student newspaper, *The North Texas Daily*. After graduation, Amber plans to pursue a career in print media and editing.

Maya Grubner graduated summa cum laude from Lesley University in May 2019. She double majored in English Literature and Elementary Education, but also enjoyed taking many creative writing electives. Although she is still figuring out her ideal career path, she hopes it includes writing.

Ambar Grullon is an undergraduate at The College of New Jersey, majoring in English with a minor in Creative Writing. She is vice president of All College Theatre, a contributor to *Her Campus*, a writing tutor, a theatre technician, and an aspiring comic writer, among other titles. She would like to thank God and her parents for always reading her writing.

Pacey Ham is a senior at the University of Houston and a member in the Honors College. She is a member of Sigma Tau Delta and The National Society of Collegiate Scholars. Pacey is pursuing a BA in English (with a concentration in Creative Writing) and a minor in Creative Work. After graduation, she plans to pursue her MFA in Creative Writing or her MA in Teaching. She adores her family and Fleetwood Mac.

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Abby N. Lewis is a second-year graduate student at East Tennessee State University, where she is bullheadedly pursuing a master's degree and a certificate. She is the recipient of Walter State Community College's 2015 faculty award for creative writing. She is the author of the full-length collection *Reticent* and the chapbook *This Fluid Journey*. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in over a dozen literary journals, including *Timber*, *The Mockingbird*, and *Sanctuary*.

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Isabela Medina is a recent graduate in English from the University of Oregon. She is passionate about literary theory, particularly feminist and ecocritical theory. Isabela currently serves as a corp member for Teach For America, teaching kindergarteners. Following her work with Teach For America, she intends to pursue an MA or PhD.

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Kylie Mullen graduated in 2019 from the University of Wisconsin—La Crosse with a BA in Rhetoric and Writing and a minor in Creative Writing. Having served as fiction editor of UWL’s *Steam Ticket* in 2017, she adores both the evaluation and creation of literary work. Currently, she works at the *La Crosse Tribune* and is editing the second draft of her novel, *MYTHICS*, with a plan to pursue publication soon. “The Old Man in the Lake” is her second piece published with *Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle*, and she is both humbled and thankful for the honor.

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Grace Perry is a senior at East Texas Baptist University, majoring in English and minoring in Honors and Religion. She loves reading and discussing literature, writing, and exploring the relationship between faith and literature. She is currently working on an undergraduate thesis about the interstices of faith, fantasy, and reality in the fiction of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. She works in her university’s Writing Center as a tutor, and she has been published in her school’s literary journal, *The Beacon*. She aims to attend graduate school in order to earn a PhD in Literature and

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Sydney Roslin is a recent graduate of Carnegie Mellon University, where she earned a BFA in Vocal Performance and a BA in Creative Writing. While at Carnegie Mellon she served as Vice President of the Omega Tau Chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, and received recognition for her poetry, fiction, and screenwriting from the Adamson Writing Awards and the Martin Luther King Jr. Day Writing Awards. Sydney's other projects include the libretto for *On Our Street*, a chamber opera dealing with modern-day

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Rachel Stroia is pursuing a degree in English Literature with a minor in Philosophy at Suffolk University, where she is a member of the Eta Upsilon Chapter of Sigma Tau Delta. She is currently working on her honors thesis, and serves as the president of Suffolk University's English Society, the Intertextuals. After graduating, she hopes to pursue a graduate degree in English and education.

Amanda Tolvaia is a junior at the University of Scranton, pursuing degrees in English and Philosophy, while minoring in Writing, History, and Business. She is production manager of the university's literary magazine, *Esprit*, and has had several short stories published in the magazine. She hopes to pursue a career in publishing.

Alana Truitt is a recent graduate of the University of South Florida, where

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Ashley Walker is a senior at Lee University, double majoring in English Literature and Classics. She is also an officer in her university's Sigma Tau Delta chapter. She has published two essays in *Sigma Tau Delta Review*, including "Fitzgerald's American Epic: Echoes of Homer in *The Great Gatsby*" in the 2019 journal. After graduating, Ashley intends to pursue an MA in Classics and focus on Latin poetry. She then wants to pursue a PhD in Literature, focusing on modernist literature, with a special interest in classical reception studies.

Kieron Walquist is a senior at Lincoln University of Missouri, majoring in English with an emphasis in creative writing. His work has appeared in *The Aironaut*, *Arts & Letters*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Ghost Parachute*, *Gingerbread House*, *Vending Machine Press*, *XRAY*, and more. He is a recipient of the 2019 Cecil A. Blue Award and the 2018 Holman-Teabeau Blue Award from Lincoln University, and won 1st place in the original fiction category at the 2019 Sigma Tau Delta Convention.

Xavier Xin is a senior at Macalester College, majoring in English Literature. He is the literary editor of the online magazine *HOME*, and has served as an editorial assistant for the book review section of *The Journal of Asian Studies*.

Judges

Judges for Writing Awards

Patrick W. Berry is an associate professor of Writing and Rhetoric at Syracuse University, where he serves as chair of the Department of Writing Studies, Rhetoric, and Composition. He has published on literacy narratives, digital media and production, and higher education in prison. His publications include *Doing Time, Writing Lives: Refiguring Literacy and Higher Education in Prison* (2018) and *Transnational Literate Lives in Digital Times* (co-authored with Gail E. Hawisher and Cynthia L. Selfe; 2012), which received the CCCC Research Impact Award and the CCCC Advancement of Knowledge Award. He teaches courses in writing and rhetoric on campus and in prison.

Kristina Marie Darling is the author of thirty books, including *Look to Your Left: The Poetics of Spectacle* (Akron Poetry Series, forthcoming in 2020); *Je Suis L'Autre: Essays & Interrogations* (C&R Press, 2017), which was named one of the “Best Books of 2017” by *The Brooklyn Rail*; *DARK HORSE: Poems* (C&R Press, 2018), which received a starred review in *Publishers Weekly*; and a critical study on poetry and silence, which is forthcoming from Clemson University Press. Her work has been recognized with three residencies at Yaddo, where she has held both the Martha Walsh Pulver Residency for a

Poet and the Howard Moss Residency in Poetry; a Fundación Valparaíso fellowship; a Hawthornden Castle Fellowship, funded by the Heinz Foundation; an artist-in-residence position at Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris; four residencies at the American Academy in Rome; two grants from the Whiting Foundation; a Faber Residency in the Arts, Sciences, and Humanities; a Morris Fellowship in the Arts; and the Dan Liberthson Prize from the Academy of American Poets, which she received on three separate occasions, among many other awards and honors. Her poems appear in *Guernica*, *The Harvard Review*, *Poetry International*, *New American Writing*, *Nimrod*, *Passages North*, *The Mid-American Review*, and on the Academy of American Poets' website, *Poets.org*. She has published essays in *Agni*, *Ploughshares*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Gulf Coast*, *The Green Mountains Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Literary Review*, and numerous other magazines. Kristina currently serves as editor-in-chief of *Tupelo Press* and *Tupelo Quarterly*, an opinion columnist at *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, a contributing writer at *Publishers Weekly*, a staff blogger at *The Kenyon Review*, and a freelance book critic at *The New York Times Book Review*.

Jurors

Rebecca Bechtold is an associate professor of English at Wichita State University, where she serves as the department's graduate coordinator and Chapter Advisor for WSU's Sigma Tau Delta chapter. Her research focuses on the role of sound and music in early American literary culture.

Michael Behrens is an assistant professor of English at Emporia State University, where he teaches courses in British literature and literary studies. His research focuses on early modern women and religion.

Kevin Brown is a professor at Lee University. He has published three books of poetry—*Liturgical Calendar: Poems* (Wipf and Stock, 2014); *A Lexicon of Lost Words* (winner of the 2013 Violet Reed Haas Prize for Poetry, Snake Nation Press); and *Exit Lines* (Plain View Press, 2009)—and two chapbooks: *Abecearium* (Finishing Line Press, 2011) and *Holy Days: Poems* (winner of Split Oak Press Chapbook Contest, 2011). He also has a memoir, *Another*

Way: *Finding Faith, Then Finding It Again* (Wipf and Stock, 2012), and a book of scholarship, *They Love to Tell the Stories: Five Contemporary Novelists Take on the Gospels* (Kennesaw State UP, 2012). He received his MFA from Murray State University.

Shannin Schroeder is a professor of English at Southern Arkansas University, where she teaches world literature, composition, and creative writing, and directs the Writing Center. Her publications include the monograph *Rediscovering Magical Realism in the Americas* and a solicited chapter on the development of Magical Realism in North America (forthcoming in a Cambridge UP series). She has presented on flag culture, superheroes, dystopias, graphic novels, and writing center theory. Her most recent creative writing delves into the young adult novel.

About Sigma Tau Delta

Since its inception in 1924, Sigma Tau Delta International English Honor Society has modeled its mission to confer distinction for high achievement, promote interest in English language and literature, foster exemplary character and fellowship, and exhibit high standards of academic excellence.

In 1972, Sigma Tau Delta was accepted as a member of the Association of College Honor Societies (ACHS). Currently the Society has grown to include over 920 chapters with more than 1,000 Faculty Advisors; approximately 8,500 members are inducted annually.

Sigma Tau Delta has continued to flourish and expand, branching out in 1996 to found Sigma Kappa Delta for the growing two-year college system, and in 2004 it established the National English Honor Society for high school students and faculty. It is now the second largest honor society in the ACHS.

Through hard and dedicated work, Sigma Tau Delta has built upon the strong foundation of its founder Judson Q. Owen, whose initial foresight shaped the Society; two subsequent executive secretaries/directors—E. Nelson James and William C. Johnson—added their own visions to the Society, and many other individuals further shaped the vital, growing organization we are today.

Sigma Tau Delta's Journals

The Sigma Tau Delta journals publish annually the best writing and criticism of undergraduate and graduate active chapter members of the Sigma Tau Delta International English Honor Society.

Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle was founded in 1931 as a quarterly publication highlighting the best creative writing of the Society's members. At the fall 1998 meeting of the Board of Directors, *The Rectangle* went to a once-a-year publication schedule, providing a more professional look and permitting the inclusion of more student writing in each issue.

Sigma Tau Delta Review was added as a societal journal in 2007 and publishes critical essays on literature, essays on rhetoric and composition, and essays devoted to pedagogical issues.

Annual Submissions

The best writing is chosen for publication from hundreds of submissions. Not only do these refereed journals go to chapters worldwide, but they also honor the best writing in each category, with five awards totaling \$2,500. As of 2016, the Sigma Tau Delta journals are catalogued with the Library of Congress. There is also an annual reading at the international convention by any of the published writers in attendance.

All active undergraduate and graduate members of active Sigma Tau Delta chapters are invited to submit their work to *Sigma Tau Delta Review* and *Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle*. Chapter Advisors, faculty members, alumni (including members of the Alumni Epsilon Chapter), and honorary members are not eligible to submit.

Submissions for the 2021 journals are due between April 8 and May 13, 2020.