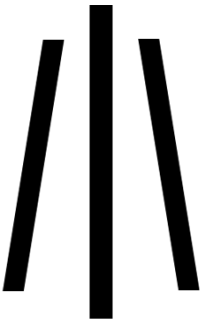

Glass Mountain is a literary journal edited by undergraduate students at the University of Houston. Dedicated to showcasing the work from undergraduate and emerging artists around the world, *Glass Mountain* publishes volumes each fall and spring.

Cover Art

"Fragmented 2: Seasons in the Abyss"
Jacob Garcia

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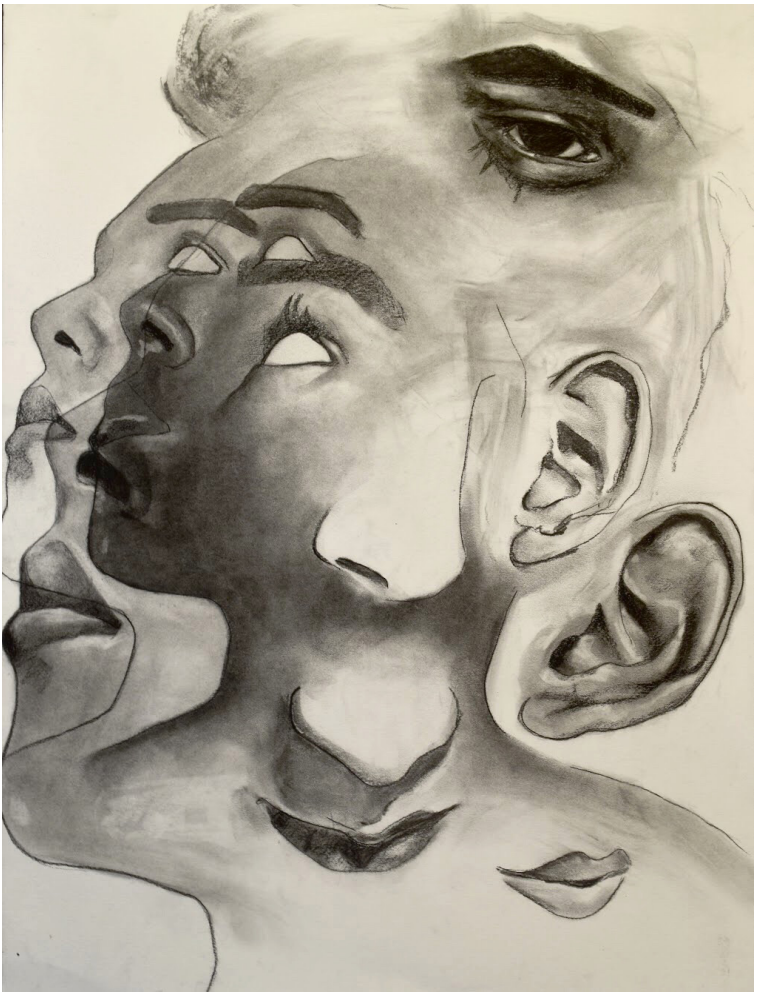

Fragmented 2: Seasons in the Abyss
Jacob Garcia
Charcoal on watercolor paper

glass mountain

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Dedicated to those enacting change, fighting to protect equality, and finding meaning in the present moment.

"To climb the glass mountain, one first requires a good reason."
– Donald Barthelme
1931–1989

Letter from the Editor

Dear Friend,

Somehow, it's always a surprise to me to find time has passed. Despite the inevitability of it, the always-constant state of passing it seems to be in, the fact that before I existed and after I'm gone it will continue, somehow I still look at the time seconds later from when I previously looked and find myself overtaken by an unexplainable weight. Perhaps the weight is existential dread and the fact that someday I actually will be gone; perhaps it is a reverence for those things bigger than I am—Time exercising the subtlest reminder of her control—perhaps it is panic for all the things I should have done in that I super did not do.

Whatever it is, the passing of time surprises me, and now we are here at a pivotal moment in that passing, because Volume 21 has arrived and is beautiful and alive, and I almost can't believe we made it. It feels like yesterday the entirety of the *Glass Mountain* staff was crammed into a classroom trying to figure out what their jobs were. Now they've gone and created something incredible, amassed a wonderful collection of genuine, soul-crushing pieces of artwork and writing that define to me in a subtle way what it means to be human. Not human, overall, because I don't believe such a thing could ever wholly be captured, but human in these seconds, specifically, in this particular moment—if someone a thousand years from now wondered what we were like in 2018, they could look to this and know.

And they should look, because these moments are amazing ones. These moments see the receipt of submissions speaking so intensely to our staff that we felt an unprecedented urgency to accept them immediately. These moments see finger guns and blurry photos of laughter, Jim Halpert, people who share Lone Stars and have cathartic conversations; these moments see humans brought together by a common desire to interact with literature and art, and see those same humans connecting.

It surprises me always that time has passed, is passing, will continue to pass, but if it continues passing populated by these amazing people, the world can only get better. Volume 21 speaks loudly to that.

Yours,

Katherine Hill
Editor, *Glass Mountain*

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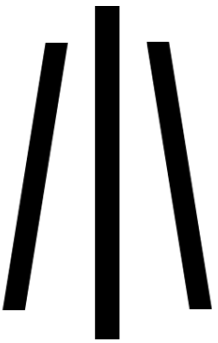

Robertson Prize Winners

Alana Picozzi
Poetry Winner

Alana Picozzi is a recent Allegheny College graduate who has served as poetry editor for *Overkill*, an alternative undergraduate literary magazine. Her work won the Ione Sandberg Shriber Prize in Creative Writing and she has attended Writing Workshops in Greece and the Boldface Conference among others. She plans to move to Guanajuato, Mexico and teach English as a foreign language.

Body with Your Name Found in Irapuato

The forest is a funhouse and everything has a face.
The pebbled worms thrown up onto the beaten path
still grin on both ends. The puddled muck
disturbed by wayward boot becomes
a spitting image of your nude body
bruised in places I have not kissed.
Down the ravine, the coroner wrestles away
the twigs plagued by fungal pox, finds the corpse
face down, bullet nestled where the nape
of your neck tastes blue. Here, sons are named
after saints. My Spanish tongue greets five
Franciscos, my mouth prays for 500 more years
before your body melts into maggots, and my gut chokes up
sick relief that this is someone else's you.

Cassandra Waggett
Fiction Winner

Cassandra Waggett is a Literature M.A. candidate at the University of Houston-Clear Lake. She lives in Houston with her three-year-old daughter, her husband, and their Apple Head Chihuahua. "The Involuntary Invader" is her first published work.

The Involuntary Invader

"Alright, we've got about an hour until they get here," Mom announces as she wrangles the vacuum cleaner with its grey cord. With a quick succession of sharp little jerks of her wrist, she messily tangles the length of the cord around her target and shoves the machine against the foot of the carpeted stairs. Upon impact, it promptly keels over. I think about telling her to slow down, but that's never a good idea when she's in panic mode.

She turns and surveys the tiny expanse of our living room. Her keen blue eyes flash from object to object, scrutinizing every detail. Yes, the thin beige carpet is just as immaculate as it was five seconds ago. No, I have not managed to get dirt on the white sectional—*my* white sectional, the only touch of modern grace in our tacky little townhome. Yes, I did pick up a feather duster just to beat that hideous lampshade, the brown one embroidered with parakeets that Aunt Carol sent in the mail. Her eyes fall on the glass coffee table—No, no I did not remember to clean the coffee table.

"Did you clean the coffee table?"

I unleash a groan and drop back onto the couch cushion, plopping my feet on top of the fraying brown ottoman. We don't usually do this, try to make our home look so clean it looks like no one lives in it. Everything has its place: where we happen to drop it in the whirlwind of work, or where it's useful. That all changed a few weeks ago.

"I really don't think a little dust on the table is going to matter," I tell her, trying to find my place on the page for the tenth time in ten minutes.

Oh, no. Over the cover of *The Handmaid's Tale*, I watch her clench her coffee-stained teeth and struggle to swallow. This happens, sometimes, when I say the wrong thing. I used to think she was angry, but over time I realized it was something else, a kind of intermittent, chronic pain. It's like all the breath has been

sucked out of her airways. She looks like she's about to cry or go into anaphylactic shock.

After a moment, she manages to swallow and murmurs, "It's all that matters with these people." Then she's hauling up the limp, loose-jointed vacuum cleaner and disappearing as she treks up the stairs with it. The cord unravels a little as she goes.

With anxiety seeping into my stomach, I toss the book onto the couch, skirt around the right of the ottoman, loop around the left of the peeling, navy-and-white-marbled bar, and venture into the dark little kitchen to combat the new child lock and grope for the Windex. No, maintenance still hasn't replaced the lightbulb.

Spritzing the table, I wish I could swallow my words, or maybe the glass cleaner. I forget—I'm stupid sometimes. This isn't the first time we've had run-ins with CPS. Only this time we're on the other side of it. Now they want us to take someone in, Mom's niece, a three-year-old named Luna Keller.

I've only seen Luna once, on the day she was born. I was still shaking from the stress of getting through my PSA through half the drive to Dallas. No one ever accused me of having a Type B personality—aced it, though.

Creeping into the hospital room, I saw my Aunt Maggie lying on the hospital bed. She was asleep, or maybe unconscious. Probably asleep, because she was frowning. She looked thinner than the last time I'd seen her, at my thirteenth birthday party, and her grey-brown roots betrayed the revelation that her hair didn't really grow out of her head in bouncy, auburn curls. She had always been the cool, young aunt who got me Victoria's Secret gift cards, and paints, and brass knuckles for my birthdays, until she eloped with some guy who wore boat shoes and left Houston.

I used to love just watching her move. I remember dancing barefoot around the sprinkler with her on some summer break, basking in the unbridled joy radiating from her face. Her eyes were

scrunched shut. Her lips were pressed into a messy grin. She had a bunch of tangled hair stuck to her cheek, a patchwork of different shades of red tinctured by sunlight and saturation level. It was beautiful. The hair, the cheek, the woman, the feeling—and I had never been more aware of how I looked in contrast.

Snatches of reflections and snatches of overheard speech laced together, and suddenly I saw her—me, the pale, serious girl with the flat, brown hair and the sad, smart eyes. I stopped dancing. I never really was dancing. I was just hopping around, hoping to tap into her divine carelessness. And then I saw Dad waving at me to come back inside, and I did, and Maggie went away.

In seventh-grade English class, I learned the word *vivacious* and little else. Alone in my room, I'd say it over and over again, turning it over with my tongue, and I could only ever conclude that it tasted and trickled like a synonym or homonym—some kind of sister substitute—for *Maggie*. In all things, even in the whim that swept her away from me, she had always been everything I envied, everything I longed to embody. But in the hospital that day, she just looked still, and old, and scrawny. Her blankets were bunched up below her feet, and beneath her hospital gown, her belly looked saggy, and deflated, and kind of caved in. It didn't make sense that this gaunt, baggy-eyed body could be the origin of life and the consequence of it.

Mom waved her splayed palm at me and grimaced, and after a moment I realized she wanted me to move away from Aunt Maggie. Apparently, she didn't want to wake her up. I complied, wishing we could leave altogether. It felt weird being there. I wasn't sure where to stand or what I was supposed to do. The baby—Luna—was making tremendous smacking sounds as she siphoned the contents of a bottle held by a beaming nurse with braids.

She looked really small, although I didn't have any frame of reference since she was the first baby I'd ever really looked at. Staring at her as she sucked down the formula, I was reminded of

the kittens I'd helped a grey, swollen cat deliver after she dropped on the front lawn when I was twelve.

That was simple: snipping and unwinding the umbilical cords from around two of the kittens' thin, rigid necks; rubbing them back to life and wrapping them all up in washcloths, half-a-dozen shrieking splats of dough; dropping placenta in front of the mother so she could wolf down its strength and keep from fainting—if she passed out, they'd all die.

There wasn't time for fear or squeamishness. I had no training. I didn't know what I was doing, and yet I did. The mother's eyes rolled around every now and then, and when I saw her fading, I'd grab her head and jab my thumbs against her sinus cavities so that her lip peeled up, showing her sharp little teeth. I'd stare hard into her big, yellow eyes, holding my breath and trembling as I willed her to live, until the pain and weird stiffness refocused her.

At last, again and again, she'd bat me away with a shaky paw that folded against my hand and start pushing again. We were strangers and I was a child, and yet I've never understood anyone better than I understood her in those intense hours: a tough, tight-bodied, ravenous street cat eaten up from the inside by beings she couldn't fathom. She'd wrinkle her nose and flick her ears down, panicked, when I held each new arrival up to her, but she made sure to wearily lick each one a few times.

Newborns are ugly, bald little aliens. I'd get nauseated watching the blind, hairless cats wriggle over each other in the doghouse, suffocating their sisters with their bellies and accidentally shoving their stick-thin legs down their brothers' throats. Sometimes it would take me a second too long to pick them off each other. My breath would catch in my chest as I just watched for a moment, ignoring their miserable mews to see what would really happen without my help. The mother's tawny eyes would flash open, and she'd swish her tail once or twice, watching me watch her offspring,

disinclined to intervene. I like to think it's because she knew better than me, knew that nature had made her babies stronger than I gave them credit for, and that, at worst, a paw down the throat might make one puke.

After she recovered in our vacant doghouse, the mother hollowed out a space at the bottom of our dense holly shrub, and the family settled there. Through my window, I'd often see mother and daughters claw at each other and watch suitors weave back and forth between the three, ultimately preferring the smooth, unnippled bellies of the babies and planting in them, over the course of endless, yowling nights, the promise of nipples of their own. Lying in bed haunted by the cat-screeches outside, I'd feel sick and think back to the little question mark at the end of Grey's swishing tail.

In a little over a year, the last of the cats would slink away, until one of the tabbies trudged back, heaving in her turn.

Watching Luna, this human baby girl, close her eyes and fold her teeny fists over her stomach as the nurse drew the drained bottle away, I felt fear and, shamefully, revulsion. It wasn't anything against her, or a fear of bodily fluids, there was just something about that soft, flabby, baby flesh that made my skin crawl.

The naked helplessness of babies. The reminder that once, I stank of spoiled milk and would have shriveled up and died without another's help. The reminder that every boy I might screw once wriggled around on his back cooing and reaching out for his mama's warm, life-giving body—and yet somehow carries in him the potential to visit one of these pudgy little creatures upon me. I'd rather not remember. I'd rather imagine that all the people who tear and trick and fuck each other are only ever the age they inhabit in the act.

Mom padded over and took baby Luna from the nurse. "Isn't she *sweet*," she whispered, enraptured by the same helplessness

that horrified me. There was something in the way she looked at little Luna that stabbed me. There was joy there, and passion, and also rue, and I became acutely aware of the fact that it had been over ten years since anyone had called *me* sweet. Smart, sure, and strange, and strong, and recently sometimes *sexy*, but never *sweet*. Not anymore.

Still radiating that look, Mom brought baby Luna and all her soft, undetermined freshness close to me. "Do you want to hold her?" she asked excitedly.

I did not.

Something has been broken between Mom and me since then, or maybe it was messed up before and I just didn't notice it. Sometimes, I hate her so much it feels like my DNA is trying to strangle itself, and I blurt out stupid, cruel things about Dad. I say she pushed him to it with all her endless *wanting*, and she croaks that she sees him in me, and then I have to go lie down and cry out the need to rip something.

In those hours, my boiling brain can barely recognize the consequences of giving into the frantic urge to scrape out all my capillaries. I can't keep track of what I hate or why. My head wraps ever-so-loosely around the idea of a messy escape, but I know a softer path to solace. Crying, clenching, silent screaming—they're all covert methods to exhaust the body and sink closer to release.

When I wake up, the aching rage feels distant and incomprehensible. I hold tightly to the faith that once I wash away the cracked mask of dried tears and snot, I'll feel better, stable, sturdy. And I always do.

And honestly, there are times when Mom and I get along, too, like when she picks up our favorite tacos and we watch TV for a while.

Either I've been wiping this table for an hour, or the caseworker

has come early. The instant the doorbell rings, Mom leaps down the steps and runs to the door and freezes. She's done her makeup; I wish I had. I drop the Windex and the paper towels behind the bar, throw myself onto the couch, and pick up my book. The good student—that's who I am right now.

"Open it!" I hiss at her.

She smooths her frizzy brown hair—our frizzy brown hair—puts on a smile, and shakily draws the door open.

We do the usual polite exclamations: So good to see you! So good to meet you! Hello, how are you? Hello, how are *you*? The caseworker is a weary, capable-looking woman wearing slacks that suspiciously resemble yoga pants and a ruffled, purple top. "So, this is *Luna*," she says brightly, ushering in a slim little girl who steals my breath. Flat, brown hair. Sad, smart eyes, only they're greyish green, not blue.

Mom has apparently built up a tolerance to the döppelganger effect; she's seen the new Luna before at a try-out meeting. She's also seen the caseworker a dozen times for all the inspections and interviews. I was always at school or in my dual-credit classes during those, although I did do a couple of phone interviews: Are you a crazy person? *Definitely not; I make good grades.* Well, that settles it then.

Mom mentioned before that Luna doesn't talk, although she understands well—it's unclear whether she was talking previously and some trauma made her stop or if she just never began. And that's pretty much all I know. Out of the four people in this room, I'm the only one who doesn't know Luna's history or why she was taken away from Aunt Maggie and boat-shoes-guy.

I tried to get Mom to spill yesterday, but she wouldn't budge. "That poor little girl has been through a lot," she'd warned me for the third time, scrambling out of one pair of blue scrubs and into another, "so you be nice to her."

"Like what?" I'd asked, handing over her badge. "If she's going to be living with us, I should know."

She plopped down on her bed and began to pull on her clunky white sneakers. "What difference does it make? You've got to treat her good either way. And, with luck, she won't remember any of it when she grows up." Then she did what she always does to dismiss a topic she feels comes too close to tarnishing the innocence she still obstinately insists I possess: she came over and smoothed my hair back, just like she did a thousand times after Dad shot himself, and after he shot my dog, and after I got my period. "It'll be okay, honey," she whispered, planting a cold, soothing kiss on my forehead that left me feeling dumb and content for a while. But after I locked the door behind her, all the anxious questions came rushing back.

Now that Luna is here, she's going to change things, change *me*, and I have no idea how. It's June, and yet someone has dressed her up in an ancient Christmas dress, red sparkles over ivory. Staring at the carpet utterly still while Mom and the caseworker talk, she evokes images of dumb dolls, and I wonder who thought dressing her that way was a good idea.

In too little time, the caseworker is gone, and soon after, impossibly, Mom gets called into work. "Tell them you can't *go*," I whisper, waving toward the other side of the bar where a speechless three-year-old I don't know is sitting on my couch sipping milk and watching cartoons. "You have never been less able to go!"

"I can't," she mumbles around her key ring, "you'll be *fine*." She's shaking graham crackers into a red plastic bowl. This is the first time I remember seeing them in the house. "Here, give her this." She shoves the bowl into my hands and drops her keys into her palm. "Just—sit with her, feed her. I'll be back in like… four hours. She is potty trained—mostly." She gives me a small, half-confident smile, then doses me with another stupefying forehead kiss. "You'll

survive."

And I believe her, right until the door slams shut behind her, shaking the whole place.

When I set the bowl of graham crackers next to Luna, she eagerly seizes it. She likes milk, she likes graham crackers; I know something. Awkwardly, I perch on the far end of the neighboring cushion and try to discretely study her.

After settling the bowl on her lap, she tenderly picks up the remote and clutches it in her right hand while she shovels snacks with her left. She's lean and long and somber-looking for the most part, like Mom in miniature, but her hands, still puffy-looking on the backs of the palms, betray her baby-ness.

And we sit. I try to read. I can't. She may be insulated from the panicked thudding of my heart, but for me the only thing more deafening or distressing is her continuous chomping. I'm terrified that I'll mess up, and I'm terrified that I just don't *know*. I don't know who she is, or what she's been through, or what we can expect from each other. I've never been alone with a small child. This is the first time I've been this close to one.

The show changes, and she doesn't blink. The next episode is violent, fake figures hitting each other and laughing. Does she understand fakeness? Does she understand violence? Why are they laughing? Why do they still air this stuff?

I lean over and pry the remote out of her warm, crumb-coated fingers. Her smooth doll's face wrinkles into rage. Her sea-green eyes suddenly harden, and she grits her milk-white baby teeth. I'm afraid.

After a moment, I find words and run them through the toddler filter. "We're going to watch a better show, okay? It'll be fun!" How can I talk down to someone with this well-founded fury inside her? How else could I talk to her?

Her gaze just drifts back to the TV; that's more real to her than I am. I settle on something I remember watching in the waiting room at the gynecologist, surrounded by babies buckled up in car seats, and babies bundled up in their mothers' bellies, and girls like me waiting to spread their legs just to get ahold of birth control. Gingerly, I drop the remote on the ottoman, and she snatches it up again.

And we sit. I'm thinking about the fact that Luna has crashed into my life again three months before my eighteenth birthday. I am already, in a lot of ways, a woman. I have almost matured beyond the initial term of the child's debt. And yet, here I am, staring across the couch at this specter, this toddler refugee who so resembles the gangly girl locked away upstairs in Mom's photo album. Here is this "poor little girl" who has no voice and owns nothing, not even the clothes she wears or the couch she's sitting on. And neither do I. Technically, "my" couch was a birthday gift. I got to pick it out, but Mom paid for it.

I worked at a grocery store last summer, earning and spending my paycheck there. Proudly, I'd walk the mile home bearing the spoils of minimum-wage labor: milk, potatoes, bread. All of that has been eaten, digested, excreted, and flushed; I own nothing now.

Luna's out of graham crackers. She sets the translucent bowl on her lap and stares into it.

"Want more?" I ask.

Slowly, she nods.

I take the bowl that is not mine to the kitchen that is not mine and fill it with graham crackers that, once again, are not mine, and I offer this gift to Luna. She nods again and takes the bowl. The corner of her mouth twitches, and so does something in my belly.

It strikes me that I don't have any memories of eating graham

crackers with Mom. The only memory I have of her from this age is clinging to her blue pantleg and shrieking while the daycare teacher tugged on my waist.

I'm afraid of graham crackers, of what they mean. Until a week ago, our fridge was full of wine coolers, and Red Bull, and box after box of cheap pizza, things I knew, things that reflected the way Mom and I chose to live. Now, it's full of alien, kiddie things: yogurt pouches, and cheese sticks, and three kinds of juice boxes, items I can scarcely imagine holding on simpler days. I can't remember being the sweet, innocent little girl Mom wants me to be, the one she feels I've encased and cannibalized. Memory, misery, heaps of anti-depressants—I can't see those brilliant baby days on replay in her head. They never happened for me, and I know that's a crime.

Hoping to ensure that I don't completely fail the task I've been charged with, I amass a spread of offerings atop the ottoman, victuals for the involuntary invader. Next, I unwrap the newly-purchased potty seat and set up the step stool for emergency action. Then, I de-leaf and quarter strawberries, a maternal sacrament that the painfully-polished Aunt Carol performs every Easter.

Once I manage to get set up in the dark, cramped kitchen, there's a meditative rhythm to it: *Slice*, CHOP, slide, CHOP, drop, and wash some more. There's a sublime simplicity in it—potentially maddening in overdoses, but uniquely soothing in short bursts. I'm strangely grieved to run out of berries, to watch the last two fragments clatter into the bowl, their falls muted by the flesh of their predecessors.

When I impart my final offering, Luna lets out a screaming squeal. I'm shocked into laughing, although it sounded like she was in pain. But no, she's manically devouring the red fruit, heedless of the pink juice streaming down her chin and toward the inside of her collar. She's making strawberry handprints on my spotless, cream-colored pleather, but seeing her slow down, full to bursting

but not yet satisfied, I hardly mind.

"Think we can wash your hands?" I ask once she slumps back, utterly stuffed, and really looks at me for the first time.

She immediately hops down and shuffles into the bathroom. While I hang back, wondering how much assistance it's appropriate to offer, she slams the door. In my calculations, this was the best-case scenario, and yet I'm left with a flurry of concerns.

Frowning at the door, I remember something that has never been a part of the story I tell myself about who I am. I was small and terrified, having locked myself in some room. My distress was exacerbated by the strange clanging sounds coming from the other side of the door as Mom worked to bust me out. "You're gonna be okay, honey, you've just *got* to stop *doing* this," she said wearily, but I continued to wail. I wasn't aware of the existence of locking mechanisms; all I knew was that I was stuck and that it was my fault somehow. At last, I was liberated by the lady in blue, who threw down her screwdriver and butter knife as I moved to launch myself into her arms.

In contrast, I've always remembered the time when there was no lock. That closet housed a messy mélange of household items: crumpled shoeboxes overflowing with baby toys, heavy quilts that would always be too hot for Texas, a massive mound of my clothes that had fallen off the hangers and had never been retrieved, and a soft, spooky doll with straw hair and a deformed pilgrim's hat that looked positively conical. That particular resident of the hidey-hole seemed likely to morph into a massive mouth and swallow me, but I stayed despite that concern, hoping that the volume of the closet's content would frame it as an unlikely hiding spot for a seven-year-old girl. But the thudding footsteps were perceptive, and the door was wrenched open.

A discreet wiggling of the doorknob confirms that Luna hasn't

managed to lock herself in in spite of the baby-proofing. Everything seems to be going well behind the door; I hear all the right auditory indicators. But when she emerges, she looks bored and angry. Her eyes are red, and they almost look bruised. She looks like the short-fused zombie that appears in my mirror during finals week.

Vaguely recalling Mom spouting math about sleep schedules, I decide to guide Luna up the stairs to her bed, which is in my room—which is now our room. She makes it up the first three stairs fine, and then she starts to look up, and look backward, and wobble. I don't blame her. The two steep, narrow flights of stairs can be intimidating, even for someone three times her size, and while the fact that they're carpeted should be reassuring, the cheap, slick fibers have felled me more than once.

It seems likely that the houses she comes from were single-story: she's paralyzed. There's nothing to do but go back down and grab her hand, only when I do she snatches it away with a tight-lipped glare so venomous I feel like the worst of degenerates.

"Well—you're gonna have to keep going," I shout, angrier than I want to be.

But she won't move forward, and she won't go back, and she won't answer me or accept any help. I'm angry in part because I know that frozen feeling, that flinching fury.

I try to extrapolate how she would respond if, as a last resort, I just picked her up. Carrying her up that way seems impossible and potentially injurious for one or both of us. Then I think about how outrageous, how humiliating and terrifying it would be to have some stranger lift me up, press me against their body, and cart me around.

"Alright, listen," I say, crouching down as low as possible so that I'm only a foot taller than her. "We don't have to go up right now. Do you think you can turn around and make it back to the couch?" The cool, soft cushion was where she settled after arriving. If there was a semi-safe space for her here, that would be it.

Looking just as resentful but slightly less pinned, she wraps herself around the handrail and inches her way down. Once she crawls back into her original spot, I retrieve her plush, pink blanket and tot-sized pillow from the room and set her up on the couch.

I can't possibly head up to my room, leaving her down here, so I make camp in the dim dining room, accompanied by a booklight and a stack of homework. I can tell that I'm not going to get much done; I can't stop seeing those gritted baby teeth and that recoiling, incongruously chubby hand. Those images are joined in the collage of impressions I'm forming about Luna by her sublime squeal and the serene snore now steadily whistling through her small chest.

Before I even finish color-coding my planner entries for the week by priority level, Mom charges in. Blinking at the darkness and reading the room, she creeps over to join me at the table.

"So, what do you think?" she whispers, waggling her shoulders. "Will we survive?" she asks melodramatically, grinning.

The question makes me laugh a lot louder and longer than I'm supposed to. I think through these few rollercoaster hours. I'm exhausted. I'm anxious. I'm too exhausted to be anxious, yet too invested to be depleted. "The prognosis looks… decent," I finally volunteer.

Faith Kressner
Nonfiction Winner

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Exposure

When our mothers birthed us, two weeks apart, and trekked down the same hallway at Carolinas Medical Center to the new mothers' support group meeting, they were not yet considering the dangers of grizzly bears and superheated geysers. Nor did they consider the impact of the American West, stick-and-poke tattoos, or the music taste of boys from California. These considerations constituted a reality nearly twenty years distant, imperceptible from the soft carpet of the nursery where they watched us, their daughters, two smooth, wriggling bundles of terry cloth and plush, gradually learn the difference between mother and not mother, backward and forward, safety and the perilous beyond.

Day 1

Sitting in plastic folding chairs in the lobby of Yellowstone National Park's Canyon Area guest lodge, Lily and I flipped through our training manuals in boredom, pointing out the dopey-looking cartoon people in their huge safety goggles, grinning and offering caricatured thumbs-up gestures to the reader. As the presentation moved from "Exceeding Expectations in the Workplace: A Housekeeper's Guide to Excellence" to "Life in Yellowstone" we straightened in our seats. Here was the reason we'd flown the width of the continent to work a crappy summer job—for the chance to spend three months living in the incomparable wilderness of America's first national park. That was the point in the presentation in which they decided to reveal the average rate of fatality for employees living in the central Canyon area of Yellowstone—one death per year. The operation involved less than 500. We exchanged raised eyebrows, more thrilled than horrified.

Day 3

In tie-dye, beat up hiking boots, and an omnipresent red beanie,

California Evan always managed to appear equally prepared for an impromptu underground alternative rock concert or a 20-mile hike. He carried an expensive camera with him everywhere—some high-end Canon with a multitude of lenses. When the darkness rolled over the mountains and we gathered in the common area of the employee cabin, California Evan would sit in the tattered armchair alone, pointing his camera at our card games and puzzles or at Lily, propped against the vending machine waiting for her Skittles to drop from row C9, her face bathed in the lurid fluorescence of a lone scrap of neon in all the alpine wilderness.

Day 10

The Canyon housekeeping crew gathered in a warehouse that smelled like a combination of rotting compost and the tater tots they served every Friday in the cafeteria. Our training completed, we were deemed worthy of individual assignment sheets. We arrived in uniform: polyester maroon shirts with creased collars and large pockets sewn to the front, perfect for sneaking home with complimentary soaps, tea packets, and the tips we were forbidden to accept (for liability reasons, naturally). Some, like California Evan, pleaded an innate, nonconformist restlessness that required they be assigned to the cheaper outdoor cabins rather than the gloom and sunless monotony of the upscale indoor lodges. Management, agreeing that it was best to assign those with authority issues to a more remote location, happily shipped California Evan off to cabins 51-75.

Cabin crew wore ball caps. Evan insisted upon wearing his beanie pulled down over his ears. A shame, I confided in Lily later. He had hair worthy of the 80's, I thought.

Day 26

The first time we left for a weekend off I found myself in the backseat of Evan's gold sedan, a beater from the 90's, beside a girl I'd just

met from Rolla, Missouri. Lily sat in the front seat, nodding coolly to the beat of an Indie jam quietly pooling out of the speakers. It sounded precisely the same as the song before—same tempo, same slurred, mellow cadence—and perhaps it was the same song. This music had no beginning, no ending, just a seamless procession of chordal angst.

The nearest town, and consequently the nearest Dairy Queen, was about two and a half hours away and the steady beat gradually numbed the car into companionable silence. My eyes settled over the passing landscape as the darkness sank heavily into every crevice and valley. The narrow beams of our headlights were two arms of light, reaching uselessly for something solid to grasp between the flickering pines and swaying grasses. An hour outside of Canyon, we passed between two high walls of rock, fumaroles boiling to either side. Billows of white steam spewed from the superheated springs and collected like ghosts dancing between the mountains. The headlights glowed against the swirling white as we passed through blindly. I held my breath until the thin beams of light once again found the roughly paved road, sure that the deepest pains of the earth hid here, seeping into the darkness from the depths of centuries unremembered.

Day 54

California Evan returned two hours late from a 26-mile hike during which he became separated from the group sometime after the first summit in a series of switchbacks. His name moved up to the second spot in the Canyon death pool during his absence.

Meanwhile, Lily began seeing one of the truck drivers from the deliveries department, a part-time comedian from Connecticut. Evan was understandably distressed.

Day 61

I walked along the winding road about a quarter mile west of the

Canyon, my boots treading through the tall grasses and the yellow flowered weeds lining the shoulder. The roads here follow no logic but the terrain's, only roughly tracing a large bulls-eye shape over the topography of the park. One road runs generally north and south, the other east and west. Encompassing the middle region, a third road sketches a circle intersecting with the other two. I quickly learned that the park is designed for anything but efficient travel. Aside from the meandering routes and the tremendous distances both vertical and horizontal, bison have free reign of the roadways and frequently pause in the middle of traffic to cast disinterested and haughty gazes over the tourists. Bison jams occur at sunrise and sunset when the herds migrate through Lamar Valley. The lines of cars on the Eastbound road back up for miles, waiting with hushed voices for the hundreds of dusty hooves to clop across the stretch of asphalt to the grassy plains beyond.

But bison don't stray too close to the Canyon and the road before us in late July was clear, shimmering in the heat. Lily's ponytail, dark brunette with new streaks of dyed blonde, swung energetically in front of me. "I would get a constellation, above a sketch of the Canyon. Based off Moran's painting, you know? Probably on my right wrist. Nothing basic. Nothing someone else already has."

"Yeah. Definitely," I panted, sucking in the thin air.

A fat bumblebee ricocheted off my thigh and I flinched—immediately imagining the sting of the needle, injecting not venom but ink, black and vibrant. Would it trace the stars between my freckles, cut a slash between my ribs, hidden and pale, or nestle between the joints of a finger, a symbol to be held and cradled and raised up?

"My mother would kill me. We should totally do it."

"Yeah. Definitely," I replied.

My water bottle was already half empty and the dust underfoot filled my lungs and clung to the sweat dripping down my neck. The

trailhead abruptly appeared to our left, a small gap in a dense forest of lodgepole pines. Concerns of practicality, such as cell service and whether it would be pizza or grilled cheese day in the cafeteria, evaporated as we departed from the roadway and proceeded through the shade, our footsteps muffled in layers of needles and moss. As the trees thinned, the trail climbed. The sun attacked with renewed vigor as noon approached. I estimated I had 16 ounces of water remaining, and 5 miles to the summit. I squinted against a sudden glare, surprised to find the world taking on an overexposed sheen. I realized that Lily was speaking, asking what album I wanted to listen to. She thought that playing music might scare off any bears in the area—we'd left our bear spray behind in the cabin. Her phone still had a 50% charge, she assured me.

"Lorde's new album. Or The Beatles. I don't care. Whatever you want," I panted.

The trail ascended at an impossible angle. I became suddenly aware of each step as an act of intense importance and of Lily disappearing above me, her purple boots fading somewhere above the brim of my bucket hat. Around the number 56, I realized that I had begun subconsciously counting my steps. I told myself ten thousand would get me to the top. The undergrowth swarmed with bees, their low buzzing filling my head until it drowned out the sound of "Perfect Places" trickling down the mountain from Lily's phone. Strange, I thought, not to be bothered by bees. The flowers they pollinated were lavender, and their bodies strangely magnified—I saw every hair clinging to their curled legs and the glossy veins running through vibrating wings. Beautiful—maybe one could live on my left calf forever, moving endlessly through fields of purple and periwinkle and dust and emptiness, and water. Waves rose from the ground and the ancient rocks and my skin rippled as it passed through the swaying ocean of grass—each blade a cut traced onto my legs, a scrawling message left by the eternal swaying and buzzing and heaving of the earth, before me

and above me and deep, deep, below. And permanence seemed amusing, as if anything we etch into our bodies or our minds could ever be lasting or indelible when the pulsating earth lies below, spinning out forwards and backwards, imperceptibly advancing toward eternity.

A fallen log. There, inexplicably. Lily waited on the other side, peering at my face under my hat, a look of concern in her eyes.

"I'm fine. Just need more water."

Halfway through the mental process of deciding whether I should crawl under the log or over it, I fainted against it.

When I came to halfway up the side of Observation Peak, dark clouds had begun to roll over the summit above us. Lily was frantically pacing beside me, holding her phone up to the sky like they do in old movies, desperately trying to get a signal. Lorde continued to drift out of the speakers—*when summer slipped us underneath her tongue.*

A long stream of concern and relief poured from Lily's lips, and I tipped my water bottle back, gulping down all the warm, dusty liquid remaining. With startling speed, the storm clouds spun and tumbled against the face of the mountain. Rain began to fall, cold and sharp. Lightning spidered through the clouds.

Something snapped—adrenaline surging across some desperate synapses—and I got to my feet, squatting in the dust quickly being pounded into mud beneath my hands. I stood, leaning against Lily's arm, slippery with sweat and falling rain, and laughed. Stumbling at first, we ran down the mountain, shrieking every time thunder rolled through the valley, our boots pounding down the trail in a frenzy of exhilarated terror.

When we returned for dinner, we discovered that an employee had strayed from a trail in the darkness of the early hours of the morning and fallen into a hot spring. Submerged in a water temperature of approximately 212 degrees, his body was dissolved almost instantly. Every hair, fingernail, ounce of blood, and inch of

skin vanished, absorbed in a shapeless swirl of noxious vapors. A grave, a body, unmarked.

As we washed the dirt from our legs and hair in the shower stalls later, I yelled over the divider, "Let's not," and she knew what I meant. We never got tattoos.

Day 77

My life occurred in two parts, and these parts I strove to keep separate at any cost. The morning hours found me despairing over the impossible task of meticulously cleaning and preparing fifteen to twenty guest rooms to military grade perfection (not an exaggeration: my supervisor was an ex-marine, a huge bald man with a formidable beard and knack for dishing out praise in a way that subtly shamed us). Towards the end, things became unbearable. Temperatures shot up, tourists poured in, management whined and screamed, and three disgruntled housekeepers quit without warning, disappearing quite literally overnight. To anyone who may have stayed in a room on the third floor of Canyon Lodge in the first week of August, I apologize. I probably spilled some tears on your sheets and I didn't mop behind the toilet out of pure spite.

I hated my job with an unparalleled despair. I can make two queen-sized beds—bottom sheet, fleece blanket, top sheet, comforter, quilt, neatly arranged and plumped pillows and decorative throw—in less than eight minutes. I know the most efficient way to sort through trash, recycling, and compost, and have lost all squeamishness over soiled bathroom items. These skills I resent. I will never again be able to enter a hotel room without passing a judgmental gaze over loose bed corners, sloppily folded towels, and undusted headboards.

Another trigger: The particular scent of the spicy noodle bowls sold at Canyon's one and only food store will always recall the unpleasant sight of soggy noodles and broth dumped in the little plastic trash cans provided in guests' bathrooms. Why I

encountered so many noodle bowls disposed of in this manner, I cannot say. Perhaps the pillows were not plumped sufficiently.

The second part taught me smallness in another way. Both ended with a plane ticket home two days later.

Day 79

We woke to the usual scent of pine needles and musty furniture and the usual sound of the Bee Gees's "Stayin' Alive." We dressed in the dark and tugged on our dusty hiking boots. Grabbed Clif bars, brushed teeth, splashed cold water in our faces. We clomped out of the cabin working our jaws around the cold, lumpy protein bars in silence.

When we arrived at the trailhead, a sign informed us that a grizzly had been spotted in the area yesterday. Lily patted the canister of bear spray clipped to her backpack every hundred yards or so but did not break our unspoken vow of silence. The dawning of day 79 was too serious for the well-worn topic of bear safety.

By 5:46 a.m., the world was well and truly grey. With only thirty minutes until the moment of sunrise at 8,000 feet above sea level, morning was quickly trickling through the cracks. As the trees parted before us, the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone welcomed us in perfect stony silence, broken only by the faint white-noise drifting up from the raging river carving through its base. We approached the overlook and stood at its rim, looking down into the inconceivable depth of the canyon. Strictly speaking, the depth is approximately equal to three Empire State buildings, stacked one on top of the other. This fact did not make it any easier to fit the canyon into our minds, and often, while transfixed by the narrow shoelace of whitewater weaving through the bottom, one would entirely forget that the field of vision being processed by the brain needed to be at least tripled by the time one's eyes found the rim of the canyon thousands of feet above.

We did not stand closely to one another. The vastness of

everything demanded a certain intimacy between the wanderer and the found.

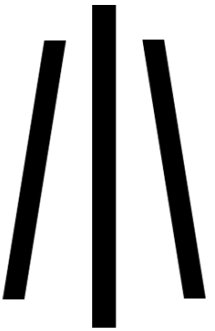
6:10 a.m. A threadbare blanket of clouds still covered the eastern horizon, diffracting the rays of the approaching sun horizontally so that the bottoms of the clouds were limned in white gold even as shadows still clung to the lodgepole pines gripping the sides of the canyon. We could not yet see the perfect sharpness of their blue-green needles. We could not yet see the osprey nest perched atop the stone spire shaped like the helm of a giant. We could not yet see the swaths of rusted red mineral deposits that swept down the sides of the canyon or the brittle dustiness of the yellow stone that so aptly named it.

The minutes fell softly around us, and still the clouds refused to reveal the sun burning behind their thin cover. Rather than a brilliant orange ascent, we witnessed a slow, imperceptible brightening. There was majesty in its slowness equal to the majesty of the canyon's vastness. All of it—stone, water, sweater, boots—suspended in one ageless dawn. Even the raging river thought only of its slow erosion of the canyon's mouth, where the waterfall at its western end inches backward every century, the trillions of gallons gradually eroding its stone mouth. I thought—if I just open my eyes a little wider, stand still a little longer—maybe I'll catch a glimpse of time passing.

Maybe, if day 79 hadn't been the last, I'd still be standing there, counting sunbeams and trees and ospreys and the sound of water.

The mountains faded as we flew across time zones, shedding hours like dreams in the morning. Once more, our mothers folded us into their arms. They wanted stories. Who has their own? I reached backward, fingers brushing over the wrinkled continent, and held up to the dying light each of them in turn—the girl out front, a stubborn red beanie, the messy lives scattered over hotel rooms, a bee queen of lace and ink, the boiling and incessant and insatiable

earth. They slipped from my hands back into the gathering night, leaving in their wake the glittering image of an alpine lake, the water looming black and deep. A sharp wind raised the hairs on my exposed body and I soared, plummeting—some cast-off part of my mind still pacing the ledge anxiously above—but I leapt, in one crystallized eon, alive and dying and effulgent.



Art, Fiction, Nonfiction,
and Poetry

Solange
David Weinholtz
Mixed media

The First of Many

Holly Day

The tiny eggs open and larvae unfurl,
cluster at the edges of the birdbath as though
already dreaming of breaking free.

I try to explain to the assembled that I, too,
am like one of those little black squiggles,
a midge waiting to pupate and molt,

spread wings and fly. They are to ignore
the crumpled husk I leave behind.

Bully Boys

Casey Stevens

Bully boys walk down pine stairs,
creaking into the basement—
smells like turpentine—
a musty, concrete pocket of fetid air.
Fifty boys in the basement.
Red jiu jitsu mats
cover the concrete
and absorb blood
and sweat
and threaten ringworm
from dirty backs.
A Spring tide thunders in
around the Elizabeth Islands
as the moon waxes to full.
A pack of Eastern coyotes,
coy wolves, are moving low.
The alpha tilts her head back
to emit a howl,
and a beta follows with a yip.
The song dogs a chorus of
auditory illusions
which do not belie their small numbers.
While back in the basement,
the boys move each other around the ring—
bleeding and dancing—
numbing the welts
from their father's fists.

But
what if the boys
held hands in the garden
and bloomed purple
with the wisteria
and kissed tulips
with heavy lips?
What if they
wept for the violence
of the carmine ring
and thought of the Earthling children
whose ashes will be laid at the foot of
the mats as a vestige to lost youth?

Model Citizen

Nicholas Keller

"How are they looking?" I asked, taking care to move only my lips.

Pale blue t-shirt kid, sitting at the table in front of me, shook his head. His small fingers were smeared with charcoal, and so was the forearm that he had placed defensively in front of his sketchbook.

"I'm trying," he said, while staring intently at my left earlobe, "to capture a mood."

"What kind of mood?" I asked, allowing the evasion.

He sighed, and squinted down towards his portrait. "I'm trying to capture… *a lot* of moods."

I nodded my head, just barely. It was a good answer. I myself was struggling to think of a single mood that could describe how it felt to be working as a nude model for a class of six 'gifted' fifth graders.

Shame? Discomfort? Gratefulness for flaccidity?

Mrs. April, short and blonde with an impossibly tall beehive hairdo, coughed loudly and glared in my direction. Across the room, Bowl Cut Boy caught a glimpse of his teacher's face as she coughed, and rapidly interpreted the subtext beneath her frown.

"No talking, Maximo!" he yelled at his classmate. "Art time is quiet time!"

I let the rest of the class roll their eyes at Bowl Cut for me and concentrated instead on the stabbing pain in my right calf. The theme of today's lesson plan, Mrs. April had informed me when I'd arrived, was Classical sculpture. We'd eased in with ten minutes of my imitating Michelangelo's *David*: embarrassingly full frontal but at least it was easy on the muscles. Now, however, I was about 18 minutes deep into my wobbly attempt at the *Discobolus* of Myron, Greece's quintessential celebration of the athletic vigor and musculature that's always eluded my lanky frame.

I wondered if any of the students were trying to draw the beads

of sweat clinging furiously to my forehead.

"And… time!" said Mrs. April when the clock finally hit three. "Everyone close your sketchbooks."

I dropped the purple frisbee I'd been holding and then followed it, collapsing into a snow angel against the classroom's dark blue carpet. Stale popcorn and goldfish crumbs pressed awkwardly against my pimply asscheeks.

A flash of white sailed in front of my eyes and then bounced softly against my ribs. My t-shirt. The rest of my wardrobe followed, each wadded garment tossed with impressive accuracy by Mrs. April.

"You can cover up now, Mr. Klein," she said.

The classroom cheered.

I tugged my clothes on quickly, as the presidential portraits that lined the classroom walls gazed stoically upon my Hanes boxer-briefs. While Mrs. April settled everyone down and began to go over a lesson on long division, I made a vow to Lincoln's bushy chin curtain that I would never, ever come back here.

"Oh, Jamie, I'm sure they didn't *actually* cheer," said my mom when I got home, muting *The Price is Right*. "Besides, I bet they were thrilled to have an older student visit the class!"

I thought back to being ten years old. Would little Jamie—obsessed with hockey, Mighty Mouse, and polyester sweatpants—have been excited to see a kid seven years his senior stretch out naked and huffing in front of him for an hour? I guess if the kid was Sidney Crosby, but the fun of drawing hockey players had mostly been in sketching out their jersey logos, not their genitals.

Maybe if I'd been 'gifted.' Smart kids could handle the human form, that was what the superintendent of Greenhaven's school district had said. Or at least that was the message implicit in his controversial new arts initiative, innocuously titled "The Fresh Canvas Project."

Greenhaven had been involved in a Cold War-like rivalry with its affluent neighbour, Hudsonville, for decades now, and like the C.I.A.'s secret funding of Abstract Expressionist painting in the 50's, Greenhaven's higher-ups were desperate enough to look to fine art as a weapon for establishing political dominance. The footsoldiers? Smart (and therefore *mature*) kids in classes like Mrs. April's, holding graphite pistols between trembling fingers as they came face to face with the saggiest parts of humanity. Training for personal (and institutional) glory in the state's first ever Primary School Arts Competition, with the winner guaranteed a handshake and a photo with the governor, as well as a secret mystery prize to be announced when the victor was chosen.

"Right," I replied, sinking into our purple sofa. "Thrilled." I grabbed the remote from the cushion between us and cranked the volume up, then closed my eyes. Someone called my mom's cellphone, "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" blasting from its tiny speakers, and she wandered off to her bedroom to talk to them.

Inside the T.V., Tony the Tiger was describing Frosted Flakes as "Gr-r-r-reat!" with the raw sexual confidence of a young Marlon Brando. How was he so comfortable hanging around children all day, wearing nothing but a bandana around his neck?

It was probably all his muscles, I decided. The commercial ended and was replaced by an ad for Tempur-Pedic mattresses, the camera hovering above a middle-aged couple lying next to each other, gazing into each other's eyes with moving faux-tenderness. I imagined crawling into the space between their squiggled bodies, slowly soaking up their affection.

"That was Wendy just now," my mom shouted from her bedroom. "She said you did a wonderful job, and that you were very brave. Oh, and she wanted to know if you'd cudvme bdchj ncvb wefke."

"If I'd what?" I yelled back.

"If you'd come back next week!" she shouted. "To model more!"

Wendy was Mrs. April, of course. She and my mom had been close before my mom's retirement last year from Crystal Elementary, though I'd never met her before today.

"God, no!" I said, standing up. "I told you that shit was terrible! It felt creepy!"

She emerged from her bedroom, still holding her cellphone in her hand.

"Nuh-uh," she said, scrunching her eyebrows together. "When did you say that? Look, Jamie, if you really think you can scrounge up a hundred volunteer hours in the next two months, then I'll tell her you're busy, but…."

She was right, of course. With the jumble of S.A.T. tests and college applications, plus the weekends working late shifts at Domino's, I'd completely neglected the volunteer work my school required for graduation. My mom had mentioned to her friends that I was freaking out about it. Mrs. April—tasked with carrying out the rigid guidelines handed down by Greenhaven's superintendent (who had somewhere gotten the idea that the nude was the only artistic tradition worth continuing)—was desperate for models, and told my mom that she'd fudge the hours on my volunteer sheet if I came in a few times. I needed the nudity.

"I know," I started, tugging on a hoodie string. "I know I have to but I just…." I trailed off but managed to shake my head no.

I was still shaking my head no as I walked through the doors of Mrs. April's classroom a week later. The presidential portraits that had judged me last week had disappeared. In their place I could make out a series of poorly taped depictions of my scraggly body. This was inhumane. There was time to sneak back out, I thought, and took a silent step backwards.

"Jamie!" barked Mrs. April. "We're so happy to see you again! Come have a look at yourself!" Mrs. April swirled around her students in a blur of matronly authority, nudging them towards their respective drawings. "Now, everyone," she said, "I want you

to say your name and your favorite thing about Jamie's body. Riley, you start." This must have been part of the "breaking down barriers work" she'd mentioned in her email yesterday, an exercise to make my visits "feel more comfortable."

Riley squirmed and looked down at her hands as if they held a button she could press to disappear. "My, uhh… myname'sRileyandmyfavoritethingaboutJamie'sbody is his… clavicle. Its prominence is compelling."

"Thank you, Riley, that was very nice," said Mrs. April, then cocked her head towards me. "Jamie?"

"Right!" I started. "That's… thank you, Riley, it's very nice to meet you. You really did a great job with shading my—" I frantically looked over the smooshy pear-like growth of black lines that hung above her "—my nose."

This awkwardness continued in a more-or-less similar fashion down the line, with each kid deploying an enviable vocabulary and a not-so-enviable ineptitude for artistic expression. That is, until I got to the end of the row, where Maximo (the pale-blue-shirt many-moods kid from last week) was standing. He tore through his introduction and compliment (my spleen) and then stood aside to let me investigate his sketch.

Thank god my English teacher had assigned *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that semester. Without Wilde I wouldn't have had any context for the shock of recognition that ripped through my skin, then spread like boiling butter through the marrow of my bones, on deeper towards the empty in-between spaces I hadn't known existed.

It was all there on the paper, the everything and the nothing, the breakups and the birthdays, the half pauses between brushing my teeth and setting the brush down against the Colgate-stained slab of my sink's countertop, seeing something in the mirror that I couldn't quite place. "This is so—" I started, before my words tripped up against an unseen barrier. A flash of white sailed over

my head and then spread, filling my vision. I was caught.

I was lying in bed two months later when my mom came in with a stack of about five envelopes.

"For you," she said, and held them out to me. I could already tell that they were rejections, too small, too thin, but I grabbed them anyway.

"Thanks, Mom." She stood, her face awkwardly frozen, like she wanted to tell me something, then turned and left my room. As the door to my bedroom closed behind her I swore I could hear a stifled giggle, or perhaps a sob. I flipped over the first letter, return address RISD. I started to work my finger under the sealed backing and then paused—the stamp on the envelope's left corner looked horribly familiar. I held the envelope up to the light to be sure, and yes, there I was, naked and shrunk. It seemed that the secret mystery prize for the Arts Competition was a series of stamps.

The judges had selected a nude from Mrs. April's class but it hadn't been Max's. Instead they'd picked Kerry's, the boy with the bowl cut. He'd translated his mundane sketch of my David pose into oils and it was just as dull in its new form: anatomically correct, conventionally framed, lifeless. He'd painted an American flag over my penis, or maybe the Postal Service had done that bit in the name of patriotic propriety.

I waited in vain for a wave of embarrassment to crash over me now that my oil paint clavicle was crisscrossing its way across the country via swaths of white and blue mail trucks. For the wave of fear for my future prospects now that all eight schools I'd applied to had rejected me. But what was the point of taking on crippling debt for "self-discovery" when access to the whole self was five feet beneath you?

I rolled over and reached down under my bed. My hand— blind, groping—finally found what it was looking for and I rolled back onto my pillow, clutching Max's sketch. When I'd first stared at it

in Mrs. April's class I'd gone blank for about 30 seconds—at least, that was what she told me afterwards. She'd tried to talk to me, but my eyes were staring through the painting, my mouth chewing air, unresponsive. When I finally snapped out of it, she made me promise that I'd visit a doctor.

My mom grabbed her keys as soon as I got home and told her what had happened. Kneading the fabric of her scratchy red cardigan with her left hand and steering with her right, she hurtled down MLK towards the urgent care. I felt confused and embarrassed by her concern and kept my gaze firmly fixed out the smudged-up passenger window, though I could feel her eyes flicking towards me at every red light.

"Something called an Atypical Absence Seizure," said Dr. Rollins, my family's pediatrician since the first grade. I nodded and the strip of white paper covering the exam bench crinkled beneath me. It was decorated, as always, with tiny blue teddy bears.

"Not the end of the world," he continued, pushing his Buddy Holly eyeglasses against his forehead. "It's a bit strange to get your first one so late in the game, but it's not unheard of." My mind began to drift as he listed the various symptoms and risk factors. I was thinking about something much more important.

I walked into the waiting room to find my atheist mom praying in a wobbly plastic chair intended for someone half her size. Without teaching to distract her, she'd gotten much better at worrying.

"Well?" she asked, stepping across the toy littered floor to meet me. "What'd he say?"

"He said it's…. It's all fine, Mom, I'm fine. Can you call Mrs. April for me? I need to ask her something."

She picked up on the third ring, while my mom sorted out the copay cost at the receptionist's. "I need that sketch," I told her, my words coming out strangely crisp and confident into the cellphone's receiver.

"The sketch? Which one?" Mrs. April asked.

Which one. Jesus. “Maximo’s!” I nearly screamed, but stopped myself. “I need Maximo’s.”

“Maximo’s? But it’s just two *squiggly* lines! I almost made him draw a new one, he barely put any effort into it. Have you gone to the doctor’s yet?”

“Just, please, hold onto it,” I’d said, then hung up.

Two squiggly lines. Ha. Maximo’s lines were parallel perfections, each flirting with rigidity, yet still fluid, confident, complex. And somewhere in the space between them… me. I jammed my eyes shut and let the sketch rest against my chest, my head against my pillow. For days now I’d been building up my tolerance, but it still hurt to see my essence in its entirety for more than a couple seconds.

Downstairs, I could hear my mom, humming along with the highway traffic, straightening the folds in her flesh.

Transport
Alexandra Luckey
Photography

Historic Preservation

Eric Rivera

Let me sleep in servants' quarters
against the dual washer dryer
beneath the brown brass staff call bells
hiding the steel circuit breaker.

Let me crack eggs where maids spent days
in clouds of onion steam, dreaming,
now the mud room, where leather boots
and raincoats stitched in sweatshops dry.

Let me find love in a coach house
built to hide a colonel's mistress,
where ghost tours pass by twice nightly,
cameras lighting where she landed.

Let me walk barefoot through grass grown
in a compost of bone and blood.
And because I am equal parts
colonizer, slave, and native,

let me rest in the shade beneath
the noose gnarled boughs of trees long dead,
the ash black branches forever
reaching out to the arcing sun.

Josie, Untethered

Collin Jones

Each morning consisted of the same routine. Open eyes. Visually trace peculiar shapes in the popcorn ceiling. Sit up on the edge of the bed. Watch feet hover some distance above the chilled hardwood. Self-apply polyurethane protectant. Retrieve knife from inside pillowcase. Clear throat. Drive said knife into solar plexus.

This day was no different.

There was no *pop*, and no evidence of deflation. Her feet made a loud squeak-sound whenever she rubbed them together. She loved it. She stuck herself again and again with the aforementioned knife. No *pop*. No evidence of deflation.

She could now proceed.

Her name was Josie.

Josie's polychloroprene epidermis was yellowish-brown. Roughly the shade of bile. She found it sad and depressing. Which is why, at the mild age of eleven, she decided she wanted to be an artist. A painter.

After slipping the knife back into the pillowcase, Josie moved carefully toward a chair on the opposite side of the room. She sat down. It was milky-green, the chair. Very small, too. One fit for a doll. A big leather trunk with an unsecured iron lock lay on the floor beside her. It was an heirloom. Or so she had been told. Centuries old. Perhaps even a millennium. She flipped the latch and opened it. The trunk's interior was incredibly complex. With hidden drawers and shifting shelves and secret compartments. She pulled out a travel-size helium tank first. Next, a few short bottles of tannum-colored paint. And finally, a wooden bowl and paintbrush. She then propped her right foot up on her left knee to access the screw-on valve cap located on the back of her heel.

Josie's dad was Calvin. A third-shift manager at the local retail store. Her mom was Midge. The neighborhood's babysitter.

Together they cultivated a decent living for themselves. They even managed to save up enough money for a week-long (surprise) trip to Paris for Josie's tenth birthday. Josie didn't blink but maybe twice the entire trip. In awe. Determined to see it all. On one occasion she was blown away while Calvin and Midge sat on a bench watching boats pass by on the River Seine. The gust carried Josie upward. She had never been so far up before. The stratosphere made everything seem so small and finite. She noticed how the earth's horizon could bend without breaking. She ran her fingers along the wings of airplanes as they passed by. Passengers waved at her. She waved back. It was a cold, clear night. Her eyes watered. Her brief (overhead) journey lasted close to an hour. She began to deflate. Then the slow descent. Until her toe was punctured by a tree branch on her way down. She spent the night in the tree, deflated and alone, flapping in the breeze. She thought about the bending of the earth. And fell gently asleep.

The next day Calvin and Midge contacted the local police, explaining they had lost their daughter. But fortunately Josie was found. She had, however, lost a near-lethal amount of helium. Dr. Adams, who for some reason kept a helium tank in his office, was able to inflate Josie back to full health. 'You Should Have Seen The Boats, Honey. Just Gorgeous. Luckily Your Father Got Some Pictures.' 'I Sure Did, Honey. They're Back At The Room. You Look Wonderful, Josie Honey.'

The following Christmas break Josie departed for overnight ski camp.

So but then Calvin and Midge keeled over. The same night in December, coincidentally. Cause of death: kinetic energy deprivation. A very concerned neighbor contacted the authorities after peering through her window and noticing long icicles hanging from Calvin and Midge's inoperative kitchen light fixture. A thorough investigation ensued. Calls were made. Tests were conducted. Notes were recorded. Josie was flown home upon investigator's request.

Findings revealed that the interior of Calvin and Midge's home held a temperature of negative seven degrees Fahrenheit. Calvin and Midge were discovered sitting on the couch in their living room, hands laced together, posture directed toward a framed eight-by-eleven photo of little Josie, their eyes frozen open. A series of post-investigative reports were released two weeks later (at which time Josie had relocated to her blind grandmother's house). Said reports concluded that Calvin and Midge's untimely deaths were the direct result of zero funds. Bank statements disclosed that their combined net income had been used for a trip to Paris and an overnight ski camp. Beside each expense was the same memo: A Most Worthwhile Investment.

Calvin and Midge were sent via UPS Ground to Josie per her grandmother's address.

Josie attached the latex nozzle of the travel-size helium tank to her heel's valve. And applied pressure to the nozzle by pushing down. Helium was released from the tank into her heel. Her foot inflated to full capacity. She did the same to her other foot. Then to both of her hands. Her belly button. Her buttocks. Her head. And a few other areas which had a valve. Next she poured the tannum-colored paint into the bowl. But this substance was not just any run-of-the-mill sort of paint. It was a polyurethane protectant which Josie concocted herself. It had taken the better part of nine months to work out the finer details of the mixture. The protectant was to serve three purposes. To provide a pleasant unassuming complexion. To aid in minimizing (helium) diffusion. To increase durability and elasticity. She dabbed the paintbrush into the protectant, and made a broad stroke up her plump yellowish-brown leg. And continued doing so until her whole body was covered.

Then she waited for it to dry.

And eventually it did.

She could now proceed.

Josie removed a shelf from the trunk and pulled out a small box.

Folded inside were two deflated nylon fabric squares. She unfolded them. One was a deflated twelve-foot Calvin. Who was yellowish. The other a deflated ten-foot Midge. Who was brown.

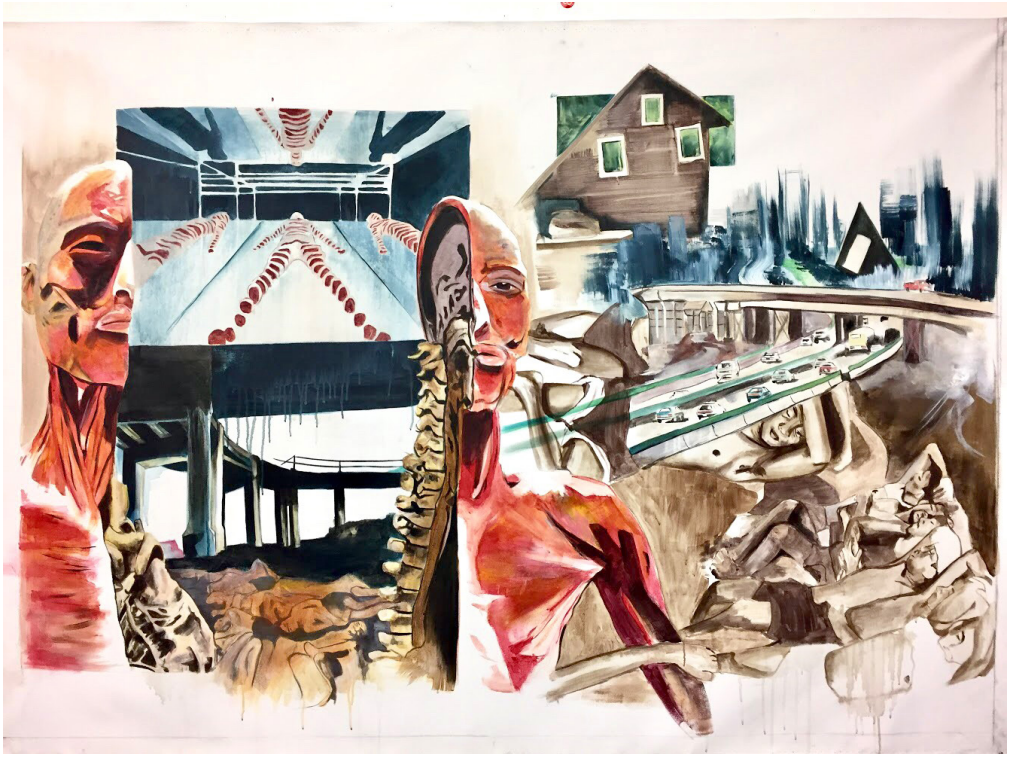
Josie applied her polyurethane protectant to both. Long tannum strokes up. Long tannum strokes down. Then waited for them to dry.

Josie stepped into the front yard with Calvin and Midge and the travel-size helium tank. She started with Midge, inflating each part of her body that had a valve. A thirty-foot Midge began levitating. Until levitation turned to flying. And off she went. Josie then accessed Calvin's valves. A twelve-foot Calvin inflated to a thirty-six foot Calvin. Levitation. Then flight. 'Wait for Dad, Mom.'

Calvin and Midge bumped and tangled and so on and so on into the distance.

'Josie? This Is Your Grandmother Speaking. Up Here On The Roof Snagged On The Drainage Pipe. Josie. Josie?'

Dark clouds moved in from the west. Josie's thoughts stretched way out.



Human 1
Jacob Garcia
Acrylic paint on canvas

56 Brief White Moments

Daniel Edward Moore

At twenty six he could have trusted anything
his union brothers tool belt tongues nailing him to a hard-won world
his Grandfather's patriotic prowl dying on a beach at Normandy
or his wife's ghostly past of liquor and loss transcended in love
through her mother's ash in a funeral home where he worked to save
the wounded left behind.

When asked to go to Temple and be baptized 56 times for souls to enter heaven
he stripped himself of the body's shame replacing it with sanctified cloth
then entered the pool of sacred suds from which all things dead may rise.
Trusting his holy underwear he walked the runway to heaven
saving the lost like the living do in 56 brief white moments.

Hymn for the Holy Incomplete

Olivia Stowell

the three legged dog
sprints so quickly
that i miss what it's missing

it runs like jaguars
like an instinct not yet dead

to make amends
to make amens

to catch a tennis ball
in its mouth like an idol

and my eyes miss it
seeing only the speed

only the fur like a smear
of buttercream on the grass

i see only the abandon
i miss what's been abandoned

and the dog runs
missing nothing.

Frederick Douglass
David Weinholtz
Mixed media

The Death Instinct

Zach Sheneman

xii.

The concept of absolute zero—the lowest possible temperature achievable per modern physics—hinges upon the notion that heat is a quantifiable unit. The notion of hotness itself is the definition of ubiquitous: a lick of fire burns what it touches; an active stovetop sears flesh; a supernova ignites its orbiting worlds.

But science's definition of *cold* runs contrary to the actual human sensation of coldness. If heat is the unit being calculated, then heat energy can be added without limit, perhaps infinitely; at least, heat can be added until an object becomes so hot that the known laws of physics deteriorate. Cold, then, is simply how a being feels once heat energy has been reduced to a certain subjective level. The total absence of all heat within a certain region is called absolute zero—a state that is impossible to reach in a universe so brimming with energy.

The sensation of being cold, then, is actually just the feeling of containing less heat than one did before. Nothing can gather *coldness*. It's the same logic applied when looking at eye color: a person lacking in melanin might have blue eyes, while a person resplendent in the pigment might have amber-hued eyes. With melanin as the quantifiable unit, one could argue that blueness is simply the lack of brownness in one's eyes.

Scientists have come within a fraction of a degree of reaching absolute zero. By definition, at that temperature there would be no heat to measure. Achieving absolute zero means quantifying a shadow. Gauging pure coldness means calculating a void.

xi.

In *Le délire des negations*, neurologist Jules Cotard described the case of Mademoiselle X, a 19th century woman with a severe neurological condition who believed herself incapable of dying a

natural death. Mademoiselle X denied the existence of her brain, her stomach, and numerous other essential organs. It was her explicit belief that she was nothing but a decomposing corpse, and because she was already dead, she found no desire to partake in activities required for living. She believed herself damned for all time. Despite Cotard's continued efforts to convince her otherwise, Mademoiselle X held firm to the belief in her nonexistence until she ultimately died of starvation.

Her affliction has been coined *Cotard's delusion*. It is a delusion of negation, meaning that the sufferer maintains his or her belief in spite of all evidence to the contrary. One man suffering from the syndrome explained to his doctor that logically, he knew dead men could not speak, but his certainty in his own continued state of expiration was absolute. Even after treatment, when the man's delusions subsided, he could only explain the experience as such: "Now I am alive. But I was once dead at that time."

Most of the recently documented cases of Cotard's delusion were successfully treated, and the sufferers returned to the state of normality they understood before they became ill. But because perception is reality—because their brains interpreted their own existence as concluded—to these people, their months spent being dead felt as real as being alive did.

The issue with thinking that you're dead but not being dead is that inhabiting a body becomes quite cumbersome. One man suffering from Cotard's believed himself to have no brain and tried to end his continued limbo-esque existence by killing himself. Another gentleman tried to kill himself rather frequently, at one point throwing himself out of a moving vehicle. It's easy to wonder at the paradoxical reasoning at the core of their decision. Perhaps they were simply trying to kill themselves to stop being dead.

Maybe the strangest thing about Mademoiselle X's particular delusion is that she believed herself to be both dead and immortal. It's a contradiction a healthy brain cannot fathom, an impossibility

that cannot be resolved.

x.

At the risk of oversimplification, the eternalistic view of time postulates that the past and present and future only exist when compared to some other event in spacetime. All things exist simultaneously in time, and our sense that time is moving in any direction at all is a limitation of dimension and perception. According to the theory, the entirety of time is one giant slab of spacetime that will happen, is happening, *has already happened,* and we are destined to experience it moment by moment, slice by slice.

My sixth-grade homeroom teacher aspired to instill in her students the virtue of organization and thus required all of us to keep a weekly planner. Every Thursday morning she would browse them, making sure every homework assignment was detailed thoroughly, that every school event was anticipated and scheduled appropriately. We were required to have a parent sign our planners every week to encourage us to actually fill them out. I typically made up assignments the Wednesday evening prior to the inspection and usually forgot to have my mother sign her name. "You're a mess," my teacher always lamented, scanning my pages of falsified lessons and assignments. It would have been easier to simply fill in the planner as the week went on, but it was always more enjoyable to explore what I would have *rather* learned that week than what I actually had.

The planner did serve one real function for me. At the beginning of the school year, I flipped to December and numbered backwards in mechanical pencil from Christmas until I reached the current date. Every day I would open the planner to excitedly find myself one day closer to winter vacation, to no school and no homeroom and no ceaseless fabrication of my every day. But when Christmas came, the jubilation I had expected to encounter was

absent. Instead, I felt a pang of anxiety, a tinge of grief. Everything I'd looked forward to all year was already passing me by. As hard as I tried to enjoy each moment, I could not stop the moments from slipping away.

When I returned from the holidays, I opened my planner and counted back from the last day of school, finding something new to anticipate; once the day before summer break arrived, I felt distinct satisfaction when I crossed out the "1" hen-scratched into my well-worn planner. The final bell rang, and I joined the throngs claiming victory over the school year in the hallways. But on the bus ride home, I found myself facing that familiar feeling, an unease I could not explain. In my head, I found myself victim to a new countdown: *It's already June. Your summer is starting to end.*

ix.

The majority of Sigmund Freud's work in the field of psychoanalysis was viewed by his contemporaries as being well-researched, clinical, and scientifically sound. Many of his most basic principles and postulations have since been dismissed or otherwise altered by modern psychologists, but even his most misguided theories have profoundly impacted our understanding of the human mind.

After spending years claiming that pleasure could be found at the base of every human thought and action, his 1920 essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* introduced a completely contradictory idea: the death drive. According to Freud, organic matter tends toward procreation and growth, with organisms pursuing pleasurable sensory and cognitive experiences, but, having originally evolved from inorganic materials, each organism also has some deep-seated desire to return to its more simple state of inorganic existence. Freud believed that humanity most frequently expressed these tendencies outwardly, channeling the dissonance between the desire to live and the desire to cease living into various forms of aggression and domination. Even depression was simply the anger

of loss directed internally, a sort of psychological self-harm.

When *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* was released, it was assailed by the scientific community as irrational, irresponsible, and utterly without merit. It was derided by his peers and rejected outright by many of his followers. More than a few believed the psychoanalyst had backed himself into a corner with his own theories and research and simply created a magical solution from thin air. For most people, the idea that mankind could harbor a predisposition toward destroying itself seemed utterly contradictory to accepted notions of evolution and social theory: if the human race had an inclination towards killing itself off, wouldn't it have succeeded in doing so by now?

Several modern translations of Freud's work accidentally equate "death drive" with "death instinct." The two terms are not interchangeable. Freud viewed the death *drive* as an incidental, inessential, and often counter-productive component of human psychology. An instinct, however, was a necessary facet of an organism's continued existence—the instinct to eat, to flee, to procreate. A death drive could be addressed, conquered, ignored. A death instinct could only be satisfied, and it could only be satisfied once.

viii.

If you follow quantum mechanics to its extreme, you are confronted with the theory that every combination of possible outcomes exists in any number of separate and parallel realities—essentially, that all possibilities are actual and infinite. Much thought has gone into what that means about our possible pasts. Alternate reality has long been a favorite topic of science fiction writers, who frequently posit "what-if?" questions about established history and then explore these altered timelines to their literary terminus. Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* presents us with a vision of post-World War II America ruled by the victorious Axis powers. Isaac

Asimov's short story "What If?" investigates the consequences of changing various events in a young couple's collective past. The genre of steampunk is predicated upon retconning the entire 20th century and fueling it exclusively by steam engine.

In theory, our ability to predict the existence of these infinite universes (the *multiverse*, as it's come to be known) is due largely to the indeterminable nature of the momentum of certain subatomic particles. Various aspects of the universe's most basic structure cannot be measured, and not just because our technology has not advanced far enough to calculate them. There is a fundamental uncertainty to our existence that is built into the fabric of reality and, if you subscribe to multiverse theory, *every* conceivable reality. Everything we know is simply one execution of countless outcomes. Everything we are is an actualization of only one possible reality.

In my youth, I remember being enthralled by the immensity of space and time, exhilarated by the endless possibilities of limitless futures. The idea of alternate realities, of the versions of myself I could have been—smarter, stronger, bolder and better and happier—was especially alluring. Years later, my discovery of the very real possibility that other versions of me did exist in some incalculable number of altered universes should have elated me, but to my shock, my knowledge of the theory left me devastated. Out there, across reality, some version of me existed that was finished and whole, and I envied his life. I coveted his existence so unburdened by malaise.

vii.

Absurdist philosophy hinges on the contradiction between the human drive to discern meaning out of life and humanity's total failure to do so. According to the absurdists, the universe exists and humanity exists, but absurdity occurs only because the two exist simultaneously. According to these philosophers, absurdism is a uniquely human experience, and we desperately try to

understand the inherent pointlessness of our own existence, to resolve the disharmony which arises from the war between human consciousness and an uncaring universe.

Some absurdist philosophers attempted to address the issue by introducing the concept of God and the impossibility of understanding his unknowable mind. Albert Camus was not one of them. Rather, Camus embraced the absurd, believing the only way to relieve the tension of searching for the purpose of life was accepting the fact that there simply wasn't one. His principle work, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, describes the pure freedom that comes from existing within a universe without intrinsic imperative. *To live without appeal*, he writes, is to be able to create one's own meaning, to create one's own subjective purpose in an objectively purposeless world. The famous essay describes the mythical Greek figure of Sisyphus, a man condemned to force a boulder up a hill, only to have it roll back down and have to start over again, and then again, and then again for all of time. The key to accepting the absurd, Camus asserts, is to imagine finding joy in that eternal struggle—to imagine Sisyphus happy.

There is a third option, however, behind looking for God, beyond imagining our own meaning. Per Camus, the other option to resolve our existential anxiety is suicide. The entire premise of his essay is predicated on what he considered the only worthwhile philosophical question: in a naturally meaningless universe, with no God, with no worth in existing, why should we *not* commit suicide? Camus dismissed this option, considering self-annihilation the easy way out. It's an escape from absurdity, he claimed, a denial of its universal truth. To him, suicide was the ultimate in absurdity—the termination of a life at its own hands.

But perhaps—in some way—murdering oneself is not an escape from absurdity, but only a different form of acceptance. Maybe Sisyphus really was happy. We all are, really, until we aren't.

vi.

Much of my insight into the teenaged female mind came from the likes of *Teen People, Cosmopolitan*, and any other number of publications targeting young women. Between my two older sisters, by the time I turned thirteen our bookshelves and bathroom drawers were littered with several years' worth of vital information about makeup, fashion, and relationships. And because I'd compulsively read anything in my vicinity, I devoured stacks of tips on better understanding the male mind, on giving better blow jobs, on having toe-curling, hysteria-inducing orgasms. Hopelessly awkward in the way most thirteen-year-olds are, I understood that I'd likely die before I ever got to dabble in bondage or master cunnilingus or blunder my way through elevator group sex.

The most engaging aspect of any particular issue was the surveys. I enjoyed discovering what kind of a man I was based off of which stall I used in a public restroom, or whether I wanted to be dominated by a country boy or a swarthy foreigner based on where I bought my toothpaste. Of course, some of the surveys and articles were serious, well-researched attempts to actually connect to and empower women, but I was thirteen, and I was a miserable dick, and all I wanted to do was find out whether Simon, Randy, or Ryan Seacrest was my secret soul mate.

One of the weightier surveys followed an article detailing a teenaged woman's diagnosis and subsequent struggles with major depression. ARE YOU DEPRESSED? the headline wondered. The prompts that followed must have fit the standard formats—multiple choice questions with some sort of scoring key, or maybe a flow chart—and so I traced the lines with my middle fingertip, following along, realizing the further I went that I was answering every single question in the affirmative. In fact, the only question that didn't track with the conclusion was the final one: *Have you ever had suicidal thoughts*? Because I never had, and certainly not in the way they suggested. At thirteen, I equated suicide to

submission to some ultimate pain, and I wasn't into pain. After all, I wasn't reading *Cosmo* because I found the sex stories unpleasant.

But a few years later, at the height of the television show *House's* popularity, I read another article in a different magazine about Hugh Laurie's recent self-diagnosis of his depression. He was successful, wealthy, and famous, having experiences that should have been life-affirming and euphoric. On one particular day, strapped into a stock-car for a charity race and barreling down the track, a revelation struck him—he was *bored*. "…[I]n the middle of the race," he explained, "with cars exploding and turning over—life or death—I thought: this can't be right. I should either be hating it with every fiber of my being or loving it."

I empathized entirely with him, understood that the joy I used to feel had permanently dimmed to a blur, to a hazy glow, and that the weight on my heart, on my chest, in the pit of my stomach was dull and deep and always. But I believed that depression was still not a thing I could suffer from; because I hadn't reached that nadir, that ultimate zero—I had never desired to actualize my own impermanence. Because for teenage me, that's all depression ever was, ever could be: the dark heart of some stranger's despair.

v.

In Erwin Schrödinger's classic thought experiment involving a cat, hydrocyanic acid, a potentially radiated box, and quantum entanglement, the possibility of superposition comes into play. Essentially, given the uncertain nature of certain subatomic particles, the cat inside the box may be alive or dead, depending on whether the radioactive particles decayed or not. But according to Schrödinger, until we observe the cat's state of existence inside of the box, the cat is paradoxically both alive and dead at once—quantum superposition. Schrödinger believed that it wasn't until the state of the cat was observed that its reality became actualized, that it became either living or dead. In multiverse theory, however, the cat

cannot be both, as reality is split between the two possibilities: in one, the cat is very alive, and in the other, the cat is very dead. Each reality actualizes each potential outcome and continues on as its own separate universe.

One of the chief criticisms of Schrödinger's belief in observation as the key component in actualization was why the cat wouldn't *remember* being alive and dead at the same time, a question that theoretically extends to all of us. It's strange to think about, that absurd and impossible dissonance—because we would remember dying as much as we remembered living. Like Mademoiselle X, being dead would be as real to us as being alive.

iv.

The side effects for any given antidepressant are a nightmare list of discomforts: *Nausea. Fatigue. Constipation. Weight gain. Decreased libido. Insomnia.* Those suffering from major depression, those fortunate enough to diagnose their illness and seek treatment for their ailments, put up with this carousel of small horrors because it's worth it, and they have to. Science has shown us that depression is, at base, a chemical imbalance, a neurological accident—something that can be medicated into dormancy, into imperfect hibernation.

One of the more troubling side effects of regimental antidepressant use is the increased risk of suicide. That taking medication to alleviate a condition could aggravate that same condition to its ultimate extreme initially appears contradictory, but in the guessing game of brain chemistry, it's impossible to predict the consequences of increasing one neurotransmitter or another. Doctors expect that finding the correct dosage for each patient will take a bit of time, a little trial and error, but while dosages and chemical levels are quantifiable and adjustable, it's difficult to determine just how a mind will react to coming out of the opacity of depression.

Two of the hallmark symptoms of major depression are a

pervasive feeling of worthlessness and a debilitating lack of energy. A depressed person feels simultaneously useless and helpless, and without the strength to help themselves, the condition persists indefinitely. Even if the afflicted reaches the breaking point, where only death could save him from his existential hell, his disease will have sapped him of the willpower to act on the impulse.

Antidepressants have been proven effective in treating both symptoms, in helping improve self-worth and increasing energy levels, but not always simultaneously—occasionally, one occurs before the other. A depressed mind doesn't care enough about itself to kill itself.

Until, of course, it does.

iii.

Per Dante's *Inferno*, the Seventh Circle of Hell contains three rings, the middle of which houses the souls of the suicides. Each soul has been transformed into some variation of a tree or a bush and spends eternity having their various plant parts torn off by harpies. For all time, the harpies commit violence unto those who committed ultimate violence against themselves, and with each stripping of bark and snapping of branch, the tortured souls feel pain as if their corporeal forms were being dismembered.

When the time comes—and it comes, always, for us all—I would like to be cremated. While I don't assign any meaning to this predilection, an old Catholic friend of mine claimed it to be my last act of defiance against a God I don't believe in—rebelling against His intentions by burning out of His Creation. If anything, though, I imagine cremation as the most literal actualization of Abrahamic belief: ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.

When I told my wife my hypothetical funeral plans, she balked. She does not want to be cremated because she wants our remains adjacent to each other until the end of time, or, at least, until our world is engulfed in solar fire. I feel her longing, her anticipated

wistfulness; if I think on it long enough, I can already feel the stab of her eventual loss. Because I anticipate blackness, just nullity and sheer void, I told her I would leave the decision about what happens to our deceased bodies up to her.

Not long ago, she came to me with a new plan. We can be cremated, she said, but our remains can be used as fertilizer to grow two new trees. Despite the image of being harangued by harpies in that middle ring of the Seventh Circle, I consented, because the odds are she'll live longer than me anyways and the decision will be hers. So eventually—soon, really, in the grand scheme of things—I will be one sort of tree or another. Some chemical part of me will take root in the dust and clay. In some sacred garden, I will sprout, bud, and blossom, straining in the summers to grow strong and high enough to face the sun; because trees, like all creatures, are always starving for the light.

The Christian Bible describes Hell as a fiery lake of sulfur where condemned souls are destined to incinerate for eternity. This is a mistake only an immortal could make. Dante's Hell is frozen at its deepest, devoid of all warmth and light—a damnation incalculably more terrible than the Christian God's. It's the sort of anguish only a human being could devise.

ii.

Robert Frost's renowned poem "Fire and Ice" suggests that the universe will end as one of the two titular options. Science suggests that the future actually holds a little bit of both. If humanity manages to overcome its lesser impulses—or, at the very least, manages to press on in spite of them—we will find our Sun growing brighter and hotter as it consumes its remaining stores of hydrogen gas. In around three and a half billion years, the sheer heat energy of the Sun's blinding light will turn Earth into an uninhabitable hotbox: a toxic, gaseous greenhouse not unlike our solar sister, Venus. If we somehow survive this first apocalypse, in another billion and a

half years the Sun will deplete its hydrogen entirely and transition into a red giant, either devouring or broiling Earth in its rapid expansion. If humans still survive this second cataclysm, we will see the Sun end its life as a white dwarf—a shriveled, dense thing, a smoldering core held together only by quantum mechanics. And after a few billion, perhaps even trillion, years of decay, our closest star will finally cool itself to death, reduced to blackened carbon. Fire, then, is the ultimate equalizer. By its impartial flame, we are all reduced to carbon in the end.

The Sun's fate is not unique. It will not blink out alone. Astrophysicists claim the current evidence points toward an infinitely expanding universe, meaning that hundreds of trillions of years into the future, all heat energy will reach an absolute equilibrium throughout existence and prevent the continued formation of stars. The most fundamental bonds holding the cosmos together will deteriorate. Matter itself will destabilize into nothingness. The whole of the universe will be an impenetrable darkness void of all matter and meaning.

There's debate about whether or not time only exists when there's something to observe it, some object on which time's force is exerted. Can time tick down with no one to watch the clock? If not, then in that ultimate and icy vacuum—in the eternal void—time might stop altogether. Of course, experiencing such an event is impossible, as to observe timelessness would require time to elapse for observation.

It would be impossible for humans to exist at the extreme end of space and time. But by fire or by ice, the human race will be annihilated long before the death of the universe. On occasion, I imagine experiencing the end of humanity with what's left of us, with whatever endures whatever is to come. We might survive just long enough to watch the frosty darkness settle in. We could name each star as it flickers away.

i.

Oftentimes I've thought about that question from the magazine survey of my youth: *Have you ever had suicidal thoughts?* It's obvious now why I'd never considered it, why at the time it seemed too impossible for me. Suicide meant ending something, ending everything, and my depression had long been informing me that everything new will end—is ending—has already ended. Death was tragic but always and already here, just as tangible as living.

Unlike Camus, the ancient Epicureans did not assign absurdity to their temporary lives. In fact, their philosophy encouraged an embrace of mortality. With absentee gods and no chance at an afterlife, having a finite lifespan made the pleasures of this life all the more wondrous. Accepting and cherishing the gift of death was essential in achieving their ultimate goal of *ataraxia*—an existence of tranquility utterly free of fear.

The Epicureans differentiated between this mental state of *ataraxia* and the physical state of *aponia*. According to their philosophy, for a person to achieve maximum happiness, pain must be removed from life bit by bit. The absence of all physical pain would lead to a continued state of euphoria—*aponia*. A person immersed in both *ataraxia* and *aponia* would actualize to their fullest potential and embrace happiness without limitation. They would know ecstasy beyond pain.

But if humans must remove pain to reach *aponia*, it stands to reason that, at least to the Epicureans, pain can be quantified, can be measured and added and removed. If the fear is removed, if the scars are erased, if the slights and the sorrows and the torments and the tortures are deleted, obliterated; if the enduring hot agony of realized and inevitable losses is extinguished by some miraculous cooling touch, then there can always be happiness, or fulfillment, or purpose. If you scrub out the varnish until your knuckles crack and peel, you can always find the pleasure and the beauty at the heart of all things. You can always find the hope.

Always, of course, according to the Epicureans.

While discussing Epicureanism the other night, my wife suggested that I had my whole interpretation of the philosophy wrong. To her, *happiness* was the quantifiable value. In her mind—a healthy mind—it wasn't pain that needed to be *removed* from a life for happiness, but happiness that needed to be *added* to a life to eliminate pain. I envy her perspective, marvel at what it must be like to see existence with her clear eyes and crystalline heart—to feel *now*, only presence, in this very moment before the next.

Of course, if happiness is the value being measured, then my wife's hypothesis is far darker than anything I've ever formulated. The Epicurean removal of pain suggests that the natural state of humanity is pure pleasure. By my wife's theory, however, we can remove only happiness. Scrubbed of our varnish, we reveal only agony.

Ostrich
Sara Jane Gage
Micron pen on Bristol paper

Anu's Delight

Sally Dunn

Arms flung wide,
legs spread,
I fell backwards.
My naked body sunk
into the earth.
My breasts became hills.

A bear cub sucked on one tit.
A wolf pup on the other.

Spring brought ecstasy.
My upthrust hips
welcomed life into my body.
Tree sap rose and fell—
warm days, cool nights.

Deep within me
life exploded and
green burst forth
everywhere.

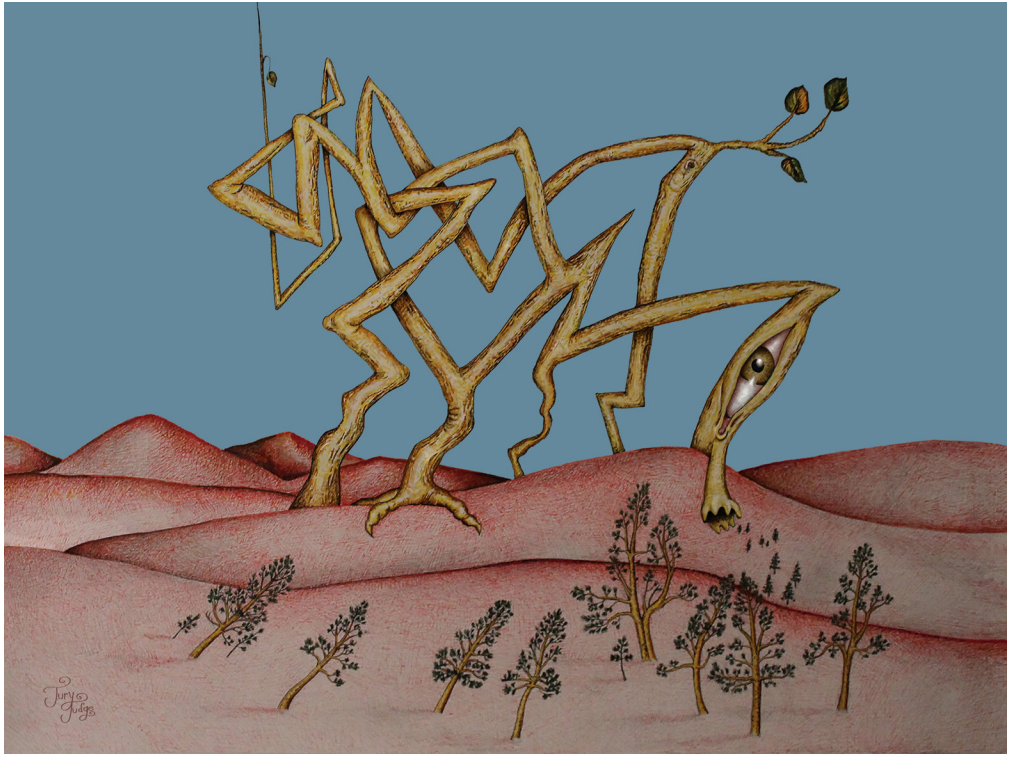
Cootie Loved Be-Bop

Gloria Keeley

Louis Armstrong changed all the brass players around, but after Bird, all of the instruments had to change—drums, piano, bass, trombones, trumpets, saxophones, everything.

- Trumpeter Cootie Williams

his trumpet could chatter like
echoes of Harlem
along the corridors of Nah'Leans
out the mouth of Route 66
the band in sync
the reeds pure weed
blowing notes off key
sublime like jazz
discs spinning
sax on wax
trombone slides
roller coaster rides
up the midway
down the scale
finger zinger
plucking largo, then stretto
snap of skins
like bowling pins
in a back alley
the cats smooth paradiddle
pawing up the fence
man those cats could play



And The Earth Was Good
Jury S. Judge
Mixed media

Barren

Aishwarya Raghunath

I've looked for a poem
in places few would let me look.
I've seen it hidden somewhere. I know.

I've never been good
at holding things in—children, secrets, a song
I heard two monsoons ago; a song I remember
but couldn't hold in; a secret I swore to keep
about a child I believe I loved.

But summer came and then I was older:
I now have a song to remember
and two less things to hold.

Mold is Growing

Sean Ayres

mold is growing from my basement.
mold is climbing up the stairs.
on my finger there is mold,
I left it for its scent. the mold
started in a wine glass. the mold
filled my idle time. too much mold
and it's covering the toilet bowl. despite this
I still tended to the mold. when you
dip into ugly things don't expect to be graceful.
my lover knows how to trick the mold
away
she says, *take a walk.*
there's mold
on the rocks. the sprouting grass

may grow mold.
a squirrel opens a green walnut.

it was filled with mold.
if this doesn't work,

she says, *practice altruism.*
on the way, there are three stores
filled with mold.

beside the sidewalk there are
two glasses that were once rich with mold.

the old woman's house
smelled of mold.

cleaning out her cupboards, I found a bottle of
her late husband's favorite mold.

it is growing everywhere. you are surely sick
of it by now. but I find it so difficult
to be still.

Drag the waters
Jacob Garcia
Acrylic paint on canvas

Amber

Gregory T. Janetka

Amber sat on the mattress, flipping through yellowed, moth-eaten pages. The book had come to her by accident. She'd discovered it in the hole in the wall when her head went through the plaster. Other than a small headache, she was fine. The thick book was filled with haphazardly-affixed black-and-white photos. Some were held by two corners, some by three, but none by four. All were covered by a great deal of fingerprints. However, nothing about the people or the places in the photographs was familiar to her in any way.

It was then, as she began to lose interest, that she found a picture of herself.

At least she thought it was herself. Carrying the book with her to the mirror she examined her reflection. The straight mouth, straight eyes, cleanliness of her lines—they were all there. But it couldn't be. The clothes were different from anything she had ever seen, and she certainly didn't know the other people in the picture. In point of fact, there was no possible way it could be her because she had never been outside of her room. This space was all she knew, all she had ever experienced. To her, nothing else existed.

The room, measuring 8' by 12', consisted of four off-white walls, each ten feet high. Above her was a ceiling, painted blue, and beneath her a hardwood floor, painted green. Natural-looking light emanated from the upper perimeter of the walls. The light began softly when she awoke, grew brighter throughout the day until becoming nearly unbearable, then progressively dimmed until she climbed into bed, after which the room went black.

There were no windows to be seen, and no doors.

When she was awoken by the reappearance of the light, there was food, and the dirty dishes of the previous day were gone. Sometimes with the food she would find a book, or a toy. If she had made a mess the day before, no evidence remained. If she had

soiled her dress, it was of no matter, as she found herself in a new one.

This was how it was, how it had always been.

Within the four walls the only permanent elements were the mirror and the bed. As it was always 72 degrees, the small, plain mattress on a simple four-post frame contained no sheets or blankets. One white pillow (which was always startlingly bright white) sat at the head of the bed, beside which sat her stuffed animal, Cavity. She loved him and he her. It was the only plaything that had reappeared each time she awoke. Every other book or toy, no matter the joy or indifference it brought, would be gone with the next awakening.

But Cavity remained. More of a stuffed monster than an animal, he came to her already missing an eye (which had been stitched up), with a hole in his back, and with a large bump on his head. She, of course, knowing no others, passed no judgment on her friend. He was exciting, and they spent a great deal of time together.

There was not much to do, but she did not know that there was anything else that one *could* do. So her days passed.

She enjoyed the books, but mysterious, nonsensical words often left her puzzled. Most of all, she enjoyed the illustrations, and so it was quite a thrill when she stumbled on the photo album.

How she found it was thus: as the light woke her, she stretched and shook the sleep from her head. She examined her new dress—white with pink polka dots—in the mirror with great approval. Laid out on a pristine silver tray was her food, beside which sat a copy of *Peter Pan*. She gobbled the meal up while reading the adventures of the boy. Amber loved many of the stories that came to her (except the one about the image-obsessed, suicidal duck) and committed them to heart. None of them, however, spurred her to action—until now. She, too, should fly like Peter. And so she went to her bed, clambered to the top of the bottom right post, thought a happy thought (at least she thought it was a happy thought), and jumped.

The thud echoed. Her head, which left a ragged hole through the lovely off-white semi-gloss wall, throbbed.

Once she righted herself and the room stopped spinning, she reached a hitherto unknown zenith of curiosity. Hand over hand she dug through the debris of Sheetrock, wood, and wires. Never once had she even considered a breach in the wall. A dusty black leather corner stood out in the rubble, and so it was she discovered the well-worn album.

And so now she sat, transfixed by the girl who wasn't her. The girl who wasn't her, who came from nowhere, who aged with each successive page flip. Curiosity gave way to terror—would she too look like this one day? As Amber turned to the last page the girl who wasn't her stood expressionless, holding a small baby.

"How very bizarre," she thought, turning to the hole.

The lights began their final descent. Soon it would be time for bed.

Amber slid the photo album under her pillow and laid down. Shifting left and right, this way and that, sleep, for the first time, would not come. Feeling the pressure building under her head, she grabbed the album, felt her way through the blackness and shoved the book back into the hole in the wall. Gasping in short, sharp breaths, she could feel its raw eyes looking at her. Stumbling to the bed, she took the pillow and stuffed it in the hole as well. Covered in sweat she crawled to the naked mattress and fell fast asleep.

Upon waking, the pillow was under her head, and the hole, along with Peter, the photo album, and her dishes, was gone. On the silver tray sat new food, along with a copy of *James and the Giant Peach*. Her new dress was an attractive burgundy number with slight white stripes, yet she made no effort to admire it in the mirror. Instead she dove straight into the book, listening for the satisfying spine crack. At first the premise was interesting, but an adventure that wasn't hers could no longer hold her attention. She ran her fingernails over the wall where the hole had been, trying to

find a thread, a seam, some semblance of the past that could lead to the future—somewhere to begin again. She regretted losing the album. She needed to know more about the girl who wasn't her.

Glancing around at the walls, mirror, bed, stuffed monster—at all of the tangible things she knew and had always known, down to the familiar, soothing patterns in the wood floor, she knew one thing—she had to take flight. With a happy thought in tow, she scurried up the bedpost, closed her eyes, and jumped. Another hole in the wall. Unable to wait for the spinning to cease, she sifted through the debris with a fury, but to no avail. She tried again and again from each of the four bedposts. The room turned into a battlefield but no album was to be found, or anything else of interest, for that matter. Little fists pressed into chubby cheeks to support her heavy head. She sat on the mattress, asking Cavity for advice. His silence was telling. Exhausted and disheartened—two things wholly new to her—she gave up, turning again to *James*. Regaining interest in fantasy, she fell into James' world. As his grand adventure turned to misfortune, unfamiliar feelings arose, sending her body to tingle and eyes to tear up. Shutting the portal to his plight, she stood in the direct center of the room. With closed eyes, she spun around seven times and walked forward, hand extended before her. Upon making contact with the wall she opened her eyes. Here. There was something here. There had to be. This was the hole she would excavate.

As she ripped through the particle board, the lights overhead began to dim. She did not have much time. Amber worked herself into a deep sweat, but the only thing she unearthed was further exhaustion. With the faint glow of the ceiling perimeter petering out, she stumbled to bed and lost herself to sleep.

Amber struggled to open her eyes. Forcing the lids up with her hands and holding them until they stayed, she found Cavity staring at her. She was comforted when he watched her, especially when she was sleeping. They embraced, and together tumbled off the

bed and onto the floor. There was no trace of her previous work—the walls were perfect, the floor was clean, her dress anew. On the silver tray sat a new set of dishes, with a new set of food. Beside it was a copy of *Treasure Island*.

As she ate, Amber flipped through the pages, stopping only at the illustration of a map. Putting down her fork she decided to fly once more.

By this time she was able to scurry up the bedpost with ease, balancing on the rounded top as if she'd been born there. Amber took a deep breath, summoned up every ounce of strength from the tips of her toes to the top of her head, and jumped. The resulting hole was larger than any of the previous others. Unable to hear, she clutched the wall to steady herself. An unpleasant wave began in her belly, rising into her chest, pressing on her throat, leading her to vomit. Before her lay the pile of sick. Things had ever only gone in her mouth before, never come out. Her balance returned, as did her hearing, albeit with a dull, steady ring. The light overhead was only beginning to illuminate the room. It was then that her work began in earnest.

With perfectly manicured nails leading the way, she tore through the guts of the wall. Dust filled the room—and her lungs—as she sent all manner of building materials flying. By the time the light peaked, Amber had a three-foot-high pile of rubble beside her and an opening in the wall large enough to walk through. Taking a short break for food, she discussed her progress with Cavity, belched, and went right back at it.

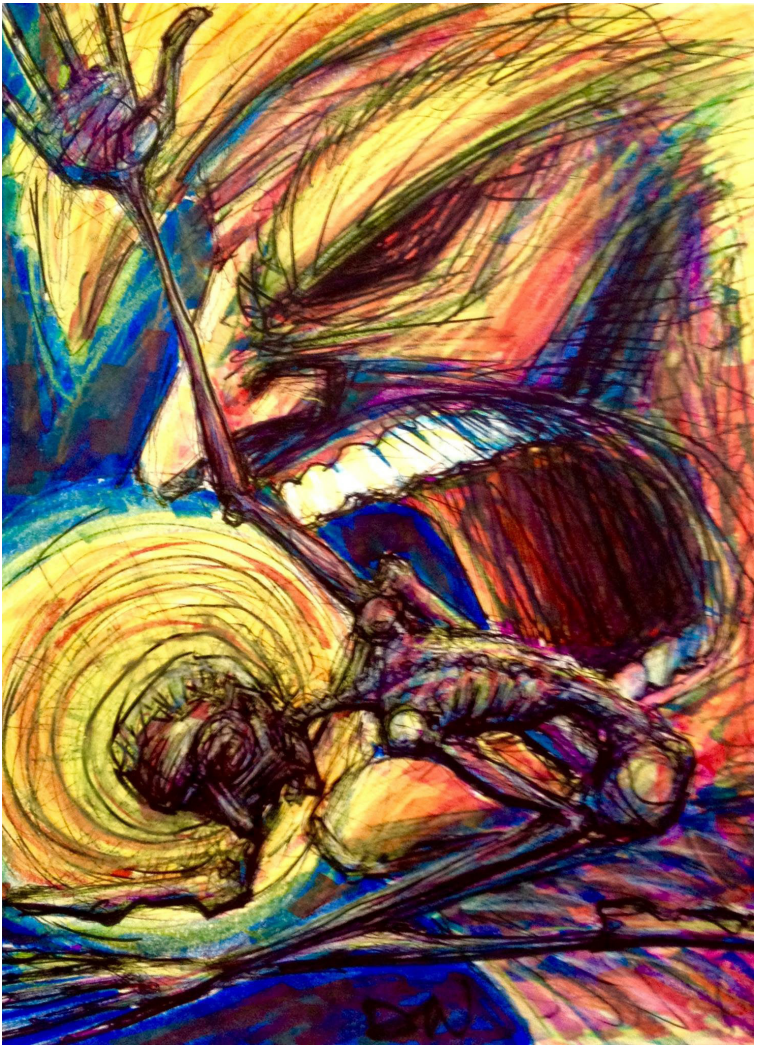
Sometime after her fingers began to bleed it happened. She broke through. There was something after all, and it was well hidden indeed. Amber stood as still as death, staring at the quarter-sized hole deep within the wall. A small beam of light shone through. She stuck her nose in it and sniffed. The air entered her nasal passages, rolled through her body, and entered her brain. It was wholly new, it was mysterious, and it was delicious.

Amber placed each of her eyes to the hole in turn but the light was too bright to see anything. Regaining strength, she backed up very slowly into her room. Cavity wondered if she would ever move again. With a guttural scream she ran at full steam and dove, fist extended, punching through the quarter-sized hole, going in up to her shoulder. Wrenching her arm free she worked away at the edges until tearing enough off to stick her head into the light.

Half blinded, Amber walked back to the bed.

"Cavity, it's time," she said, grabbing him by the hand.

Backing into the wall opposite the opening, she began screaming and shaking her head. Her entire body violently convulsed. Holding Cavity to her chest for dear life, she ran toward the girl who wasn't her.



Fight the Powerful, Not the Powerless
David Weinholtz
Mixed media

Airport Road

Matt Flores

Bruised knuckles on my right hand
from punching the steel beam in a
warehouse. The pulsing and heat
reaches just where I want it to.
An inlet, torn membrane,
to the past.

My family is separated
by thousands of miles now.
Nostalgia is the reaching
out into sitting water along
the gutter. A light rain,
bulbous collection of pine
needles rocking like it could
become a home.

Or is this just boredom?
The lack of faith?

I realize I am trying to con-
jure a pathetic spell. The desire
of getting elsewhere
in all this traffic
is harming enough.
Slam on brakes a few
seconds too late.

Say it three times,
like a wish,
into the quiet and vagrant

space of the city.
Women prefer sharp pains in private,
men prefer bruising that can have
witness long after.

The way I rattle through the days
like a pinball is just so convincing:
death is nothing special.
It was just a quick
hollowing that I once saw.
That is all.
As if every blessing was
spare change placed
inside a tin can.

Varying Ways of Return (a poem for Belize)

Daniellie Silva

I. The Macal River stretches through west to east.
Inception in the Maya mountains
and grasps until its lips touch the ocean's brackish hands
to have its virginity taken unabashedly by
the saltiness of the tainted waters.

II. An incoming gale approaches the reaching canopy
in the track where soil darkens under the sun.
Moisture has become violent.
It falls to become feverish
only to rise into a storm once again.

III. As magnanimous green iguanas scurry
along with the red-beaked toucans,
I bathe and drink from the river.
They hunt for wild mangos,
green enough that their skin blends with the
mahogany leaves.

IV. The underlying currents bury my heritage.
The water moves in my veins,
runs on my skin,
fills my lungs with oxygen.
I breathe under the waters that birthed me.

Experiment 1 (ice)
Jacob Garcia
Watercolor on watercolor paper

Ode to the Ravens Masquerading as Crows (after Eve L. Ewing)

Kelsey May

We, the flower people, made of stems
& petals & blossoming whether or not anyone sees.
We, the misnamed. The forgotten.
The discarded. We, the raindrops sliding along pine
needles. We carve our names in tree
trunks with our own stilettos, count our irises
like tears. There are too many of us
to ignore our existence. We love our hearts cross-
stitched to each other, genitals irrelevant.
It's a tradition that we gather under
starry skies & howl, a tribute to those
whose innocence was maimed under arson &
graffiti. We honor you, lost souls; we
sing your resurrection into ash, into smoke.
We queer the night air & remember.

Victuals and Speech

Bill Ayres

Odd that the lungs and the belly
fork off of this passage,
but food and talk go together.

Either can choke us
or give us a stomach ache.
There is texture to both.

Consider how cuisines and languages
perish in tandem,
leaving no corpses
unless you count those of the people
who spoke them.

Both are learned in the kitchen,
not in the dining room.
A feast or a nibble.
A word or a story.

The hot. The sweet. The salty.
Forgotten as quickly
as you brush them off your teeth.

Here, take this in your mouth.
It is something your grandfather
used to say.
Push it around with your tongue.

You are home.

Untitled
Karen Wa
Acrylic on canvas

Gula, Big and Tall

Reva Russell English

My name, Gula, came not from the Bible like my brothers' but from a heavenly visitation. Before my mother even knew she was pregnant, the archangel Michael came to her in a dream. Thick-muscled, white-toothed, and comely, she mistook him for The Boss until her eyes made it past his faded Levi's and All-American smile to the wings poking out the back of his slim-fitting t-shirt. He pulled my mother toward him in a godly embrace, pressed his holy mouth to her ear and foretold me a scourge and a glutton.

"The sins of the child you carry will be great," he told her. "You will wrestle against her flesh as though it were your own, and your family will come near to ruin."

He then flew her Superman-style to the Red River Gorge, where together, they marveled at the grandeur of God's creation. They saw foxes with kits cuddled close in their dens, watched a bobcat stalk and kill a tom turkey. They joined in the songs of the tree frogs and brooks and grew wistful at the yips of coyotes. Just as my mother turned her dreamy attention to a great horned owl, she was ripped from her reverie by the sounds and reverberations of something massive crashing through the pines. Lo and behold! A godzilla in diapers and pigtails rose like a mountain before them. The archangel lifted my terrified mother into the air to safety, and they watched in horror as I devoured everything my hands could reach—poison ivy and pine, pansy and porcupine. Levitating in space, she begged him for insight, for weapons, for mercy. He shrugged, empowered only to bear bad news, not to relieve it.

When my mother awoke, she recorded the dream in the back of her Bible and dated it. Nine months later she birthed me by C-section. I was, and still am, the biggest baby ever born in our county's hospital—15 pounds even and 24 inches top to bottom. If she'd pulled me out of Herrington Lake, she would've been proud.

I am the fourth of five children and the only girl. My mother breastfed each of my brothers but bottle-fed me. She swears the one and only time I took her breast in my mouth, she felt a mortal fear.

"None of your brothers had that look in their eye," she says. "That look of insatiability."

My father took a second job to pay for the formula I ate, and it was there at the IGA that he met Helen, an acne-scarred Delilah who tore our family apart just as the archangel had predicted. They finally ran off together two days after my seventh birthday on a Sunday afternoon in June. A unanimous vote had been taken, removing my father as pastor of the Freewill Baptist Church. Even my mother had voiced a resounding "Aye!" from the balcony, though it was nothing more than a symbolic gesture since a woman's purview and power were limited to the kitchen and the nursery. Still, I'm sure my father winced to hear it. I know I did.

With God, the church, and his wife officially against him, my father lit out with Helen in our family's only car, a beat-up Chevy station wagon with no radio and no A/C. For three long months, my brothers and I watched and waited, lovesick and dadsick and sick of our mother. Mark wrote letters and burned them in the yard. Luke fought everyone—us, the mailman, his teachers, his friends. Jesse turned to older women, and, if the rumors are true, older men, while Nehemiah, the youngest, cried and cried.

I pretended to sleepwalk.

Night after night, I made my way to our kitchen in darkness and helped myself to individually wrapped cheese slices, spoonfuls of peanut butter, frozen bean and cheese burritos, discounted bologna, and any other edible ephemera I could find in the cupboards and fridge. I polished off entire 12-packs of instant oatmeal, tubs of knock-off Cool Whip and boxes of powdered donuts. I opened diet pre-sweetened Kool-Aid packets directly into my mouth. Over the course of that long, lonely summer, I went from an extra large in

girls' to a women's medium. All the while, our mother prayed and fasted. Whether she meant to or not, she ignored us.

When Dad finally came back, he was cowed. The simplicity of an affair conducted in the poorly-lit stockroom of an over-cooled IGA was no match for 100-degree heat and the hopelessness of a poorly-planned road trip. According to confessions he would later make from the altar and the pulpit, Helen turned violent almost as soon as they crossed the state line, slapping him for wrong turns, pinching him when he took too long to order in drive-thrus, pulling his hair whenever they ran out of cigarettes. When they got a flat in Arkansas, she took a tire iron to his shins after he informed her they didn't have a spare.

By the time they reached the scorching winds of Texas, he was actively seeking escape and redemption, but Helen would entertain neither. She caught him trying to make a collect call home from a rat-ridden motor lodge outside Abilene and knocked him unconscious with the corner of a mildewed and water-stained dresser drawer. He awoke to find that his wallet, keys, car, and girlfriend had all flown the coop. After two weeks of cleaning rooms, he bought a one-way bus ticket and came back home. Within a week, my brothers had ceased their shenanigans. Not me. I continued to eat the night shift until my mother put locks on the refrigerator and cupboard doors.

That was ten years ago. Both my parents now co-pastor the Holy Gospel Bible Church, where there is no nursery and no kitchen, and everybody over the age of twelve gets a vote, regardless of gender. We meet Sunday mornings and Sunday nights: my parents, me, Nehemiah, and thirty or so other people—mostly recovering alcoholics, meth heads, single moms, and immigrants—in the basement of Lizann's Beauty School down on Main Street. We sit on folding chairs and sing praise choruses beneath the acrid scent of nail polish, nail polish remover, and hair chemicals not even Lizann

pronounces correctly. Last summer someone donated a guitar amp and a microphone so you could hear the sermons and scripture readings even when you're in the bathroom. My dad got his old job back at the IGA, and my mother still dreams dreams. I remain firmly in the grip of my fleshly desires.

My mother is skinny. She wears little tiny jeans and little tiny bras, and people always guess her age as being younger than it is, and they never think she's even had one child, let alone five. When she's not fasting to discern the Lord's will or curry His favor, she eats carrot sticks and cauliflower florets for lunch. Sometimes, she dips them in low-fat ranch dressing or Miracle Whip. She polishes them off with a hard-boiled egg—unsalted—and she drinks unsweetened iced tea, even in the winter. My mother claims to have a natural and superior aversion to soda. That gene was not passed on to me.

I do not fast, but I do eat carrot sticks and cauliflower florets for lunch in my high school's cafeteria. I wash them down with two or three Diet Cokes, while I listen to Carolyn and Becky discuss what they did or are going to do at the college soccer games, basketball games, or track meets. Becky gave a blowjob to a Nigerian high jumper three weeks ago. Carolyn thinks she might like girls. She kissed a female shot putter over the weekend but wasn't as into it as she thought she'd be.

"It was alright," she says for the hundredth time. "But I don't think she's my type, like—she's not hot, ya know?"

She is eating a chicken salad sandwich, the kind with mayonnaise and celery and grapes. Becky pops her gum and grimaces.

"Gross, Carolyn," she says. "You're worse than a guy."

Becky turns to me.

"You should come with us to the track meet tomorrow night. It's Regionals."

Becky doesn't eat. I've been hanging out with her since freshman

year, and I have never seen her eat anything. She drinks a lot of Mountain Dew, though, and she chews gum like her life depends on it. She's a lot of fun and has never made one comment about my size. She's pretty, too, although most of the boys around school don't seem to think so. Every day she wears elaborate makeup and giant pieces of costume jewelry passed down to her from her memaw who used to be an actress. Her oldest sister works in town as a hairdresser and she's always trying out new trends on Becky's long hair. A couple weeks back she put yellow, silver, and peach-colored streaks all through it. Now when Becky walks across the courtyard to meet me so we can walk to econ together, she looks like Moses after he would talk face-to-face with God—radiant with Shekinah glory.

"I don't know," I say. "What'll I do when you go off with that high jumper?"

"I probably won't," she says and shrugs. "He started dating one of the runners."

Carolyn asks which one and what does she look like. I nurse my Diet Coke until the bell rings. Becky stands up and puts her hand on top of my head.

"Ask your mother if you can come," she says. "Tell her I have questions about Jesus that can only be answered while people are hopping the hurdles."

She skips off and tosses her empty Mountain Dew can into the recycling bin without looking, off to sneak a smoke before the next bell. I say goodbye to Carolyn and try not to look grim, but my mother doesn't let me go to track meets.

By the end of my freshman year of high school, I was already over six feet tall. That summer I spent a week at a church camp nestled among magnolia and pawpaw trees. Our lifeguard and campfire speaker, a college boy named Stanley studying to be a youth pastor at the Bible College in Vancreve, had wavy brown hair and a dimple

in his chin. He told us we should always carry our Bibles so we could wage spiritual warfare and that it was a sin to masturbate or French kiss or listen to secular music. When camp was over, I sent him a letter about how much his teachings had moved me, and though he never wrote me back, I carried my Bible to school that whole fall semester. Every day I placed it at the edge of my various desks as proof that I was not of this world, no matter what my mother thought. The only person who ever asked me anything about it was Carolyn.

"You read that thing?" she asked.

We were at lunch. I had just taken a bite of salad with Italian dressing on it, Baco's and fat-free Parmesan cheese that could have passed as sour paper. She was pointing at my Bible with a ketchup-covered fry. Unprepared, I lied.

"No," I told her. "I don't."

On New Year's Eve, I went to a lock-in at one of the churches whose youth groups had been at camp with us the previous summer. We'd just sat down to eat pizza when Haley Mangum told us that Stanley from camp had gotten a woman in his church pregnant who wasn't even his girlfriend.

"They're not getting married," she said. "He got kicked out of school and moved back home to Connecticut. I guess she's giving the baby up for adoption."

My chest got tight, and my face got red. I choked on my soda.

"I'm getting another piece," Haley said, standing up. "Anybody else?"

I nodded my head and handed her my plate.

"Pepperoni. Please."

It came out like last words. I never took my Bible to school again.

My mother says one of these days I need to start exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit or else it might mean I am not saved.

"We are to judge a tree by its fruit, Gula," she tells me.

I think she means the kind of fruit that is small enough to fit into a size 10 pair of pants.

Sometimes, during my free period, I walk the four blocks along Broadway to Yum Yum Express. The buffet lasts until 3:00 p.m., and the Chinese family that owns it never looks at you sideways no matter how many times you go back or how many Diet Cokes you drink. Yesterday, I ate two plates piled high with crab rangoon, a plate of sweet and sour chicken, and a big bowl of egg drop soup with fried wontons. Today, I have a hankering for their General Tso's chicken and those little sugar-covered fluffy rolls. Because I'm a senior and on the Honor Roll, I get a free hour to study each day. I'm supposed to be in the library, but no one cares what I do as long as I end up in calculus for last period, and my grades don't dip. If I don't go to Yum Yum, I usually sit under the bleachers in the gym, where it's cool and dark and quiet. I keep chips, Rolos and Capri Sun pouches in my locker. I don't really like the way Capri Sun tastes, but I like that if you squeeze your hands around it, your mouth doesn't have to do anything but swallow.

Lately, when I sit under the bleachers, I think about Becky and her high jumper. I've never even kissed a boy, so a blowjob seems both ambitious and unlikely. Don, a junior who sits next to me in calculus, is quiet and smart and almost as tall as me. He reads Isaac Asimov novels and smells like vanilla and toothpaste. I've tried to picture his penis and think about what it would feel like in my mouth, but I don't have anything to go on other than a drawing in my ninth-grade health textbook. There were so many words and arrows all over it—besides the fact that I don't think it was actual size—that I don't have a very good idea of what's going on down there. No matter what route I take, my brain can't get past his underwear. Then, I feel bad and pray to God to forgive me my lust, and I beg Him to keep me a virgin until I get married, but who

would want to have sex with someone as big as me, who smells like Chinese food anyway?

When I get home from school my mother is seated on the couch, her feet tucked up beside her. Her Bible is in her lap and opened to the book of Jeremiah, near the end where everything the prophet predicted has happened, but it's all so bad he can't even enjoy being right. I clear my throat and start in.

"Becky wants me to stay over at her house tonight and watch all the Indiana Jones movies in a row and in order. Her mom says she'll teach me how to knit if I want, and we can go to Waffle House for breakfast in the morning."

I read once that adding details makes a lie more believable.

My mother sighs but doesn't look up.

"Where do they go to church?" she asks.

Her voice is flat and distracted. I am interrupting her sermon preparation.

"They don't," I say. "You know that."

This is not a good start. The General Tso's chicken in my stomach, so warm and comforting two hours earlier, goes cold and heavy. I wait.

She looks up from her Bible and stares at me without blinking. I do the same, trying to keep my expression mild so as to give the impression I don't care one way or the other. My mother's deep interest in quelling desire ranges far beyond food and sex. Desire of any kind—be it for books, slumber parties, Bingo, or socks—is looked upon with suspicion and promptly squashed.

"You won't go out at all?" she asks.

"No," I say. "Just to breakfast. We're gonna eat popcorn and watch movies."

"Is your babysitting money gone or do you need some?"

She has still not blinked.

"I have a little left," I say too quickly.

My heart starts slamming. A school of fish swims up into my belly from my legs, threatening to turn my body into a whirlpool. Lying to my mother's face is not for the faint of heart. She forced my brother Luke to volunteer at the senior center every day after school for almost a year after she discovered he'd spent a Sunday afternoon at the arcade instead of studying like he'd promised. A stray skee ball ticket had come out of his pants pocket in the laundry and given him away.

She sets her Bible aside, reaches into the front pocket of her jeans and pulls out a ten-dollar bill.

"Don't go crazy at Waffle House," she says, pressing the bill into my hand.

My heart throws up. The fish explode. My face goes hot and red. I back away, so she won't see my backside as I go, and I fall backwards over the coffee table. Rising to my feet with as much dignity as I can muster, I hurry upstairs. I make it to my room just before I start to cry.

I used to play clarinet. My middle school band instructor, Mr. Morgan, told me I had real talent. At our eighth-grade Christmas concert, he picked a medley of traditional carols that featured sleigh bells and solos for clarinet. I stood at the edge of the stage in front of the whole band and played from memory. My mother made me a red dress out of a material that looked and felt like velvet. I wore pantyhose and a pair of brand-new black pumps. She put mascara on my eyelashes and blush on my cheeks so everyone in the auditorium would be able to see my face.

"Your face is so very pretty, Gula," she told me.

She used to say that a lot.

I kept my eyes closed through the whole song and didn't make a single mistake. My family clapped like crazy in the third row, even my brothers, and my mother was crying like somebody had just been baptized. After the concert, we went out for ice cream. We

laughed and talked until the owner of the shop told us to take the party someplace else, he had to close up. I forgot I was fat. I forgot I was tall. I forgot I was a scourge and a glutton.

I quit playing clarinet the next year because of the marching band uniforms. Besides making everybody look like nutcrackers, none of the pants fit me. Mrs. Hager, who directs the high school band, said she would order some bigger ones, that it would only take six weeks, and in the meantime, the XXL's didn't look so bad. I begged her to exempt me, to let me be in band without making me march. I think she was really sorry about it, but she said it was against school policy. Playing in high school band meant marching during half-time at home football games. I turned in my instrument and took study hall instead.

Nehemiah drops me off at Becky's a little after 7:00 p.m.

"Are you guys really just watching movies?" he asks.

Nehemiah is short, with tons of freckles, a broad smile, and broad shoulders. He's the only one of my brothers still at home, and he is tender hearted and slow to criticize. When you look like I do, that's about the only combination you can take.

"Yes," I tell him, pulling my backpack out of the backseat through the open window.

"Nehemiah! Omigod!" Becky yells from the front porch. "They gave you a license?"

He blushes and squeals the tires as he pulls out, waving out the window as he drives off. Becky jumps down the steps. She takes my bag and drops it inside the front door, pulls a tube of lip gloss out of her pocket and smears it across her mouth. Her hair catches the deepening sun in a dazzle of gold, and her lips glisten like a spider web at first light. She smacks her gum and grins.

"Ready?" she asks, undulating her head and hips just a little.

I nod, no undulation. My jeans pinch in at my stomach. It's hot, and I can smell my armpits through my deodorant.

"Can I borrow that lip gloss?" I ask.

She hands it over and tightens her ponytail. It is watermelon flavor, thick as Vaseline. I glop it on and hand it back.

"We'll make the running events no problem," she says, rubbing her lips together enough to start a fire. "Carolyn's already there. Went early to watch her girl shot put."

She holds car keys up in front of my nose.

"Mom says we don't have to be in until two, so if there's an after party…."

She squeals and bounces off toward the garage. My stomach turns over a half-dozen times before landing upside down. I look up at the white slips of cloud scattered here and there across the deep blue sky and pray my most common prayer, a genetic tic passed down to me through the generations.

"Help," I whisper.

Becky and I pull into the gravel parking lot next to the track just as the sun begins to sink past the hills into an orange-marbled sky. I spot Carolyn first thing. She is leaning against the concession stand talking to a thick, round woman with golden skin whose straight black hair is cut into a bob. The woman wears white spandex under red shorts and a white t-shirt under a silky red tank top. She has the biggest calves I have ever seen. Becky nods in their direction.

"The shot putter," she says.

"The one she kissed?" I ask.

The shot putter's hair bounces and shines.

"One and the same."

We climb out of the car's cool air and walk over to the concession stand. The heat of the day pushes at us from all angles, invading my every nook and cranny. The stadium lights are already on, and the whole place smells like popcorn and dust. Everyone is wearing shorts or spandex or both. I wonder if the concession

stand has nachos and whether they carry Coke or Pepsi products and what they will charge me for extra cheese. Carolyn looks up from the shot putter and beams.

"Y'all made it," she shouts.

Becky runs up to her, kisses her on the cheek and turns to the shot putter.

"Hey, Jennifer," she says. "This is our friend, Gula."

I stick my hand out, and Jennifer takes it. Her hand is almost as big as mine, and it is rough and solid like the day laborers I go to church with.

"Nice to meet you, Gula," she says.

Her voice is soft and buttery, not at all what I expected from a lesbian shot putter.

"Jennifer won the shot put earlier," Carolyn says, almost breathless. "It came down to the last throw. Such a nail-biter! I hollered so loud."

She laughs, and Jennifer does, too.

We offer our congratulations, and Becky gets to the point.

"Where the fuck is the after party?"

The after party is in some guy named Glen's basement.

"He's kind of creepy," Becky says. "Tried to kiss me once, and he is not cute. Just be nice, though, and he'll let you drink for free."

I want to ask why is he creepy and do I have to drink, but I keep my mouth shut. I know Becky is hoping to find some college boy to replace the high jumper for at least fifteen minutes at the party, and I am hoping not to look or act like what I am: a virgin. A Christian. A girl who bought and ate two orders of nachos with extra cheese at the track meet, while secretly wishing she had enough money to order a third. When we pull up to Glen's, I feel like I am going to be sick.

"You ready?" Becky asks.

She is undulating again, all teeth and highlights and energy. My

head is a parade of drugs and penis drawings and vomit.

"Yeah," I say, shaky-voiced and shaky-kneed. "Feel fine. Let's go."

When we get to the basement door, Becky puts on more lip-gloss and fluffs her ponytail. We step into music and smoke and a smell I can't identify—kind of skunky, kind of sweet. Becky hears her name, and she heads for a dark corner. Someone puts a cup in my hand, slaps me on the butt and immediately apologizes.

"I am so sorry, big girl," a man's voice says in the dark. "You're real tall. Thought I was just clapping you on the back, okay?"

He moves off into the darkness, and I never even see his face. It is hard to see or hear or think straight, and no one has ever slapped my behind before. I find Carolyn and Jennifer in the kitchen at a table. They are both drinking from red plastic cups like the one given me by the butt slapper. Jennifer is smoking a cigarette. She's changed into a loose tank top, and her gold medal is around her neck. She rests her head against the underside of her palm, a slight smile on her lips, the smoke swirling around her head and face. Carolyn is grinning so wide I can see the fillings in her molars.

"Do you like the beer?" she asks me.

I take a sip from my red cup, amazed at how bad it tastes, and nod.

"These chips up for grabs?" I ask.

I motion toward two bags of chips on the counter, the only food in sight. Carolyn shrugs.

"Isn't this so cool?" she asks.

She shows me her fillings again, and Jennifer kisses her lightly on the cheek, her cigarette hand now thrust up into the air like she is about to break into "I'm a Little Teapot." I think about how my clothes must smell and my hair. I grab a bag of chips—Nacho Cheese Flavored Doritos—open them and stick in my hand.

"Yeah," I say, my mouth biting down on the first chip. "Cool."

Sweat is running down my front and back like I am made of

faucets. Glen, reliable in the ways of beer, is completely useless when it comes to supplying even a single-window A/C unit. Small pools have formed against the undersides of my breasts. Any minute, the moisture will overcome my bra's defenses and soak the front and sides of my shirt.

Jennifer puts her arm around Carolyn's waist and whispers something in her ear. They both laugh and kiss some more. I touch my waist, lick my watermeloned lips and adjust my damp, extra-wide bra straps, careful to keep the deluge contained. I place another chip in my mouth and try to ignore the significant second-base activity happening just a few feet away. After a few minutes they pause, giggling.

"We're gonna step outside," Carolyn tells me. "Becky's somewhere, right?"

She doesn't wait for me to answer. I pull the chip bag into my lap.

People come in and out of the kitchen looking for beer, an ashtray, Glen, and water. I eat all the chips in the Doritos bag and because no one has so much as even looked at me, I lick the tips of my fingers and run them around the inside of the bag, bringing them carefully up to my mouth so as to not waste one gram of chip dust. Then, I grab the next bag—Kroger Sour Cream and Onion Potato Chips—and get started on it.

A tall man comes in and asks me if I know where the bathroom is. He is wearing a blue University of Kentucky t-shirt. His dark skin catches the light from the kitchen's single bulb and seems to hold it. He sits down in the folding chair next to me. He smells like soap and pencils and lotion. He asks me my name.

"Gula," I answer, my voice a prepubescent boy's squeak.

I wipe my chip-sullied fingers on my jeans in case we shake hands.

"Gullah?" he asks. "Like the people?"

I have never heard my name pronounced that way, with the "u"

short and the "l" quick and heavy. I have never talked to a grown man at a party before. I have never been to a party before. I shake my head, suck in my stomach and force myself to look him in the eye.

"No," I say, my voice once again my own. "I don't know what that is."

He holds my gaze, leans back and opens his mouth wide into an easy smile.

"They're my people," he says. "From the islands off South Carolina. Those who would not endure slavery—runaways and rebellion breeders. What about you, Gula?"

This time he emphasizes the long "u." I feel my neck and face begin to burn.

"What about me?" I ask.

I slide the bag of chips off my lap and onto the floor.

"Where you from? What are your people known for? What," he pauses and takes a drink from the bottle of beer in his hand, "are the salient features of your people's more remarkable history?"

I have no idea how to answer him, no idea what he is talking about, no idea how to look away from him, no idea what I am doing in this hot basement talking to this hot man, no idea why I chose this moment to try and scuttle a bag of chips as far away from me as possible with my blind, sandaled foot.

"I'm from here. Kentucky," I tell him.

I close my eyes and try to remember the rest of his questions.

"My people dream dreams," I say and wince, but I keep going. "Our remarkable history is—"

The chips fall over somewhere on the other side of the table beyond my foot's reach. I continue.

"I think the only things remarkable about our history is how filled up it is with tobacco, religion, and lying to my mother."

He laughs. I surprise myself by laughing, too.

"That sounds alright," he says.

He leans forward so his face is just inches from mine. I think about the Doritos and the potato chips, the nachos and beer and watermelon lip gloss all mingling inside and outside my mouth and hope the watermelon is winning. His eyes move around my face, studying me.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" he asks.

I shake my head no, because what else would he believe? I want to die or disappear.

"How come I've never seen you on campus?" he asks, taking another sip from the bottle. "Always in your room? You study all the time?"

I panic now, unsure about whether I should lie or not. He reaches out and smooths a loose strand of damp hair behind my ear, leaving his hand against my cheek. It is cool, like the soft breeze that comes at you in summer when you're walking along a road that passes a deep and shaded wood. He traces my jaw with the underside of his thumb. I shake my head.

"I'm still in high school," I say it like I am confessing to a crime. "I graduate in a few weeks."

He leans back, puts his bottle on the table and folds his hands evenly in his lap.

"How old are you? Old enough to get coffee?" he asks.

I try to keep my voice even.

"I turn eighteen in June."

"So, no," he says, but he smiles. "Gula. Almost the name of my people. You are a pretty girl. Maybe I'll run into you this summer. My name is Phillip."

He holds out his hand. I take it.

"Nice to meet you, Phillip," I say.

There is no handshake. He holds my fingers and palm, and I hold his. Finally he nods, rises to his feet and leaves the kitchen.

No one speaks to me the rest of the night until, a little after 2 a.m., Becky comes and finds me. We exit the heat of the basement

into the night music of peepers and barking dogs and somebody on the backside of Glen's house telling somebody named Jacob to go to hell. Becky chatters all the way home about the boy she made out with, who is the brother of a girl long jumper, who only lives in Paris and doesn't have a girlfriend.

Almost as soon as we climb into her double bed, Becky falls asleep. I lay awake a long time, thinking about Phillip and his questions and what he'd said about his people. I try to feel again his hand upon my hair and face and fingers. I wonder how I might run into him again. I think about where he might work and what he spends his time doing. I imagine touching his dark skin and hearing his deep voice. I wonder how it would feel to kiss his mouth and what he would taste like. I cannot quit thinking of what it might be like to stand close to him, my body against his body, my mouth at his neck, his hands at my waist. A warmth I've never felt before spreads outward from between my legs, up my spine and through my belly and hips. It aches and calls, the hunger of another mouth. I fall asleep sometime after the birds begin to sing.

The house is empty when Becky drops me off the next afternoon. I wash and dry my clothes, take a shower, and close myself into my room, falling asleep before anyone comes home. When my mother comes in to wake me for church, I tell her I don't feel well, that I need to stay home. She places a hand against my forehead.

"Well, you don't have a fever," she says. "Is it cramps?"

I start to cry.

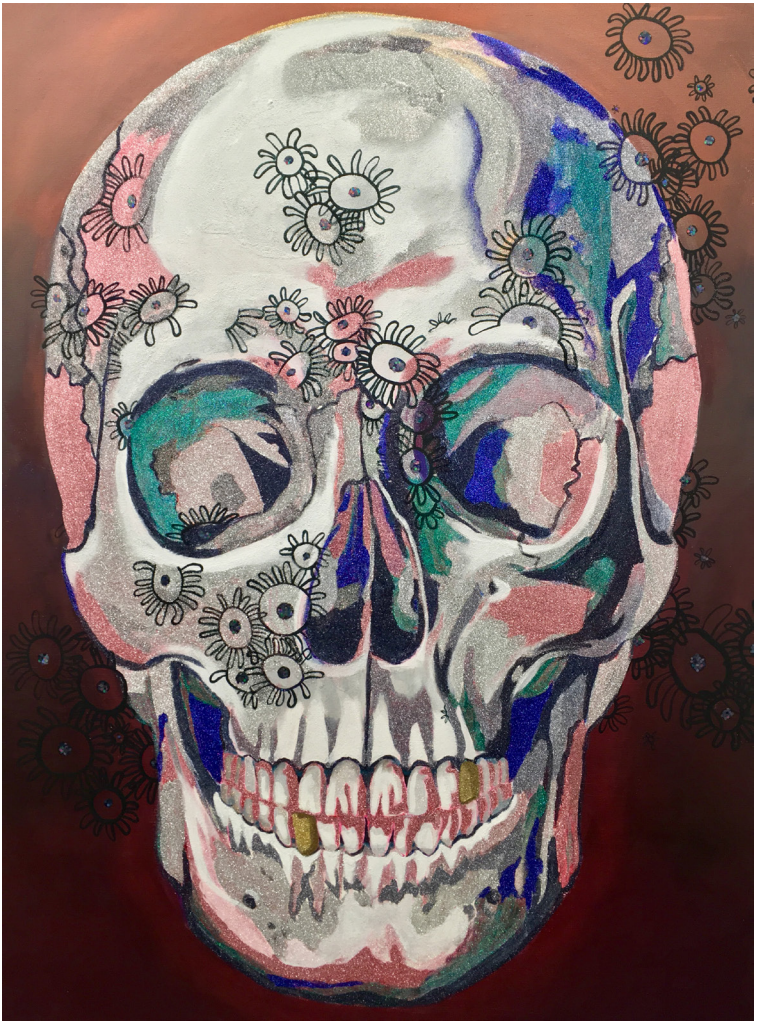
"Gula," she says, surprised. "What's wrong?"

She picks up my hand, lacing her fingers through mine like she used to when I was little and scared at night of demons.

I think of a million lies. I think of pestilence and plague and rabid dogs and homework. I think of brimstone and stomach flu and generational sin, but all that comes out of my mouth is the truth.

"I'm hungry," I whisper.

Her fingers spasm just slightly against mine. It is our oldest disagreement. I let my hand go slack, so she can let go. But she doesn't. We sit a while in silence, and I know she is praying. Finally, she squeezes my hand and releases me.



Crystalline Skull
Estefhania Pineda
Mixed media; glitter & acrylic

Sham

Sophia Hashmi

Damashk:
The women dance behind blouses in reds
that battle with the setting sun for brightness and
bleed onto the brick below their feet,
reds I've never seen. *Carmine, carnelian.*
The words are all wrong;
crimson wrong as cranberry, wrong as cinnabar.
I read the back of my beaten box of crayons, the sides of tubes
of acrylic,
through vermillions and cadmiums and *cochineals:*
a scarlet dye derived from the dried bodies of female beetles.

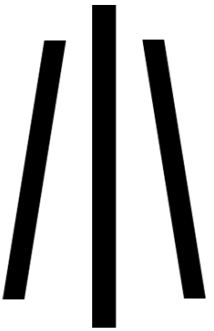
Chefchaouen:
The scarves about the men's ears—
loose weave linen woven with, is it *ultramarine*?
and striped with cream—they flutter
on the wind, tassels reaching for the sky.
I pull down packets of dye at the grocery:
Star Sapphire, Denim, Olympian Blue.
None the more true, and still the scarves
reach for the sky above them,
hoping to find a home in the walls surrounding or else a home
somewhere near the sun, between the stars.

Somewhere between Damascus and Chefchaouen,
the sun begins to vanish
behind thick clouds of cotton wool.
Until the dawn of a new day, the colors,
in the nighttime,
fade from the blouses,
the scarves. The reds and blues

in each and every unnameable hue
bleed into the sky like calligraphy ink
before vanishing.

Somewhere across an ocean of tears,
I turn my damp eyes to the sky, searching,
searching still for those
shades, hiding somewhere in the sunset,
for the colors that dance
on the edges of my vision just as they once danced on fabric.
The face in my mirror mocks me.
It looks too much like my mother's sneer,
too much like my father's eyes,
lips pulled taut over teeth in a saccharine smile,
mocking my brief visit to *home*.

Now, home.
Stumbling forward blindly onto foreign concrete,
my knees bleed the same Damascene red
onto my tired hands, my disbelieving hands,
and my veins run blue as Moroccan walls.
I cease the search
and I make peace with the horizon line,
with the sunsets,
with the reds and the blues.



Essays, Interviews, and Reviews

The House He Built: The Legacy of James Baldwin

Vinh Hoang

Raoul Peck
I Am Not Your Negro
September 10, 2016
Magnolia Pictures

I Am Not Your Negro is a documentary feature film relating the experience of African-American playwright, novelist, and essayist James Arthur "Jimmy" Baldwin during the Civil Rights Era. The film's release came amid heightened racial discourse and tension in America. Baldwin's acute observations cut to the core issues plaguing America during the days of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr., providing an obscure perspective which may lead to newer horizons.

During the later years of Baldwin's life, after his friends' deaths and his own exile, he embarked on writing about their lives. He wanted to return to the homes of his friends, visit their widows and children, and see whether their activism had shaped any change in his homeland—a homeland which had proved hostile and foreign. They influenced his life profoundly, but they all passed away in the unending fight, leaving him behind to remember and rebuild the house. Baldwin never finished *Remember This House*, the manuscript for what would have been his memoir. He left behind a scattered complex of writings, notes, and letters, which Director Raoul Peck unearthed through labored research. This film could be considered collaboration between the dead and the living to write the book that could have been.

Peck's film absorbs the temporal and spatial breadth of America by splicing together elaborate montages that juxtapose colored and uncolored interviews and speeches which recognize Baldwin's intellect. Peck uses Baldwin's physical writings and recordings of actual events—both historic and contemporary, ranging from an

MLK march to the Ferguson riots—to commemorate the writer's relevant critiques in complicated times. Scattered photos of the recently slain, like Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, mix with Golden Age Hollywood's portrayal of African Americans, encapsulating the specters of the past haunting the present. Old commercials with black mammy archetypes, black and white photos of lynched individuals, and 20th century marketing films promoting the integration of African Americans as second-class consumers—each speak to Baldwin's critique of American media and American consumerism as forces promoting racist American culture.

The industry is compelled, given the way it is built, to present to the American people a self-perpetuating fantasy of American life. Their concept of entertainment is difficult to distinguish from the use of narcotics.

– James Baldwin

Baldwin was—and may still be—a tour de force, and his eloquence stirred with a pained passion. The audience hears the film's salient quality in the form of its apodictic writing, the credit for which rests solely and rightfully with the prophetic Baldwin himself. Always in a brilliant and collected fashion, he delivered homiletic diatribes highlighting his disillusionment toward the American public's ignorance, complacency, apathy, and prejudice toward black America and their plight, and white America's idealism ignorant of racism. His critique stemmed from his love for a country which could not reciprocate. This was his America. Falling in love with a white girl who could not acknowledge him in public until they entered the sanctuary of a friend's house. Sitting down with playwright Lorraine Hansberry as she asked Attorney General RFK to have JFK personally escort a black student to an all-white school—a symbolic moral gesture. Driving with Medgar Evers to

the airport one last time before the "music stopped." His reality.

Someone once said to me, that the people in general cannot bear very much reality. He meant by this, that they prefer fantasy to a truthful recreation of their experience. People have quite enough reality to bear by simply getting through their lives, raising their children, dealing with the eternal conundrums of birth, taxes, and death.

– James Baldwin

Samuel L. Jackson narrates the words in a Hamlet-esque Baldwin soliloquy, but to watch the writer invalidate an argument, which downplayed racist paradigms, is to watch genius unfiltered. Baldwin's voice, gravitating between past and present, lends an intimate quality and anchors the audience with an introspective view into Baldwin's mind. By the end, the audience may feel the weight of his views about race in America and know the writer on a personal level.

The future of the negro in this country is precisely as bright or as dark as the future of the country. It is entirely up to the American people whether or not they're going to face and deal with and embrace this stranger whom they maligned so long. What white people have to do is try to find out in their own hearts why it was necessary to have nigger in the first place. Because I am not a nigger. I am not a nigger. I am a man, but if you think I am a nigger it means you need it. And you gotta find out why and the future of the country depends on that.

– James Baldwin

Yet, the lack of discussion regarding Baldwin's sexuality remains one of the film's more prominent weaknesses. An FBI memo questioning Baldwin's sexuality recalls McCarthyist tactics to delegitimize opponents of the government, including African-American intellectuals like Langston Hughes. However, a large

portion of the black community, and of America as a whole, could not accept him as a queer black man—an identity which would influence the literary landscape. An outsider among outsiders, he existed before the word "intersectional" joined the literary lexicon. Its bare mention in the film, then, makes his sexuality like him—another voice abandoned by a racial, literary, and sexual hegemony.

As his own critic, scholar, and arbiter, Baldwin never cared for his readership. His words and letters aim a piercing polemic at the conflicted soul of America. Peck's visual motif of skyward shots sweeping across everyday contemporary America evokes a tone equivalent to a dark tunnel with a questionable light at the end. Like these sequences, we, the people, share in Baldwin's struggle, his sorrow, and his hope for a future always in question.

I can't be a pessimist because I am alive. I'm forced to be an optimist.
– James Baldwin

Death as an Immediate but Not Permanent Reality

Tamara Al-Qaisi-Coleman

Alfred A. Knopf
Love in the Time of Cholera English Trans.
1988

The blurb on the front cover reads, "A love story of astonishing power." As I read through Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*, it was obvious that love is at the core of the story, but to reduce it to a mere love story would not do it justice. Marquez is considered the father of magical realism, a literary genre that utilizes fantastical and magical elements set in realistic spaces. These elements of magic represent abstract concepts such as love or death.

Throughout the piece, Marquez plays with fantastical elements to invoke themes of personal suffering. Love is displayed as an emotional and physical plague, much like cholera to the townspeople. The fear and intolerance of aging and death, suffering in the name of love, and love as a cage to be freed from for the experience of happiness are some of the themes present in the text. These themes are expressed through the narrative, but are more so concentrated in the characterization of characters.

The most prominent of these themes is love as a physical ailment. Florentino, the main character, suffers from lovesickness the way other characters suffer from cholera. The object of his fixation and illness is Fermina, whose husband worked until his final breath obsessed with finding a cure to cholera. The theme culminates in the final chapter after Florentino tells the captain of the ship that he and Fermina boarded to announce a false outbreak of cholera because they wanted the ship—ironically named Infidelity—to themselves. But it is not cholera that eats at his body and mind; his infection is his restless and relentless passion for

Fermina after she rejected him fifty-one years ago. His symptoms mirror those of cholera, and even though the ailments seem self-inflicted, the novel argues that lovesickness is unavoidable in these situations.

By making lovesickness an uncontrollable force within the lives of the characters, those characters are excused of any responsibility for their actions. In reality, Florentino has been lovesick for fifty-odd years, which is the reason he engaged in roughly 600 relationships—not including the various flings and dalliances that weren't serious. The magic in this narrative is the lovesickness itself and how it drives Florentino to have so many affairs. Throughout the novel, Florentino claims to be a virgin. He does not consider his relations with over 600 women to be real relationships. Instead, he feels he is saving his love for Fermina.

Dr. Urbino's death at the beginning of the novel is because of his love for his wife. He recognized her despite the uproar, through his tears of unrepeatable sorrow at dying without her, and he looked at her for the last and final time with eyes more luminous, more grief-stricken, more grateful than she had ever seen them in half a century of a shared life, and he managed to say to her with his last breath, "Only God knows how much I loved you." His love is true yet he cannot understand the flaws in his person and doesn't recognize the dark consequences that come from order and progress. He lacks passion in his love for Fermina. He is naive and blind to Fermina and Florentino's affair in their youth. He even converses with Florentino, unknowing and unsuspecting of Florentino's love for his wife. Dr. Urbino's love affair with another woman leads to his death and both frees and burdens Fermina. She loves her husband; it is clear through how she cares for him. She dresses him, helps him walk, and even helps him use the bathroom. There is freedom in his death. A level of youth is restored to Fermina both in her husband's death and rekindling her romance with Florentino.

The characters, especially Florentino, have an unmatched fear

of aging and dying. The death of Jeremiah Saint-Amour by cyanide introduces this irrational fear to the narrative. Dr. Urbino realizes through this death that death itself is an actual and immediate destiny that cannot reverse. This thought is not only echoed throughout the piece but in the fantastical. "Age has no reality except in the physical world. The essence of a human being is resistant to the passage of time. Our inner lives are eternal, which is to say that our spirits remain as youthful and vigorous as when we were in full bloom. Think of love as a state of grace, not the means to anything, but the alpha and omega. An end in itself." Dr. Urbino's words move through the piece mirroring the thoughts of the other characters. Death is immediate for Urbino, but Fermina's love for her husband helps him live on as a ghost by her side as his old age renders him unable to do things by himself, leaving him heavily dependent on Fermina. This once independent and authoritative figure is a shell of his former self. Dr. Urbino's deterioration and Fermina's apparent aging scare Florentino. He cannot fathom death and refuses to acknowledge his aging because it conflicts with his idealized young persona. When he tells America that he intends to marry she laughs at him because he is an old man. In her view and in popular opinion, old people don't marry. To be in love after mid-life seems against some unwritten social rule. Ofelia, Urbino and Fermina's daughter, even says that love among older people is "disgusting."

Suffering in the name of love is the final theme echoed throughout the novel. This goes in tandem with love as a physical ailment. Florentino's separation from Fermina for the last fifty-one years climaxes in the final scene. The unrequited love inflicts itself in the form of lovesickness and his insatiable hunger for intimacy. With her, Florentino Ariza learned what he had already experienced many times without realizing it: that one can be in love with several people at the same time, feel the same sorrow with each, and not betray any of them. Alone in the midst of the crowd on the pier, he

said to himself in a flash of anger, "My heart has more rooms than a whorehouse." This line reflects that Florentino takes his sickness in stride. He is a slave to his heart and its needs. The sufferings that come from his acts of love are done for Fermina, and those actions play into the Dobler-Dahmer theory because Fermina is attracted to Florentino—his actions are seen as romantic, so he is a 'Dobler'. If Fermina had no attraction to Florentino, then his actions would be seen as creepy as a serial killer, or a 'Dahmer'. His inflated sense of ego and machismo drive him to neglect societal norms. He spends three nights in jail for serenading Fermina with his violin. His reputation is martyred in his eyes and satisfaction comes with the pain sustained for her love. Through the years he continues this self-inflicted torment through his marathon of romances. None of these relationships can satisfy him for long, and the misery maintains him. Dr. Urbino suffers through the knowledge that his wife does not truly belong to him and that acknowledgment leads him to his affair.

Florentino sees the anguish as gratifying and this strengthens the experience that will lead him to Fermina, his ultimate desire. If he cannot be with Fermina, he must feel something even if it is pain. Lovesickness overcomes him and is the reason for his actions. His love for love has driven him psychologically, and eventually, physically ill. He is not satisfied with anything in his life until he secures Fermina's love, which he never truly gets in the end. She loves him, yes, but she can never be truly rid of her husband. Dr. Urbino is a ghost who is always with her. In the end, death is both the driving force of the relationship and Florentino's hope for a future with Fermina, and the reason why they can never truly be together.

Una Nueva Voz: An Interview with Daniel Peña

Miranda Ramirez

Daniel Peña is a Pushcart Prize-winning writer and Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the University of Houston-Downtown. Formerly, he was based out of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in Mexico City where he worked as Fulbright-Garcia Robles Scholar. He is a graduate of Cornell University and a former Picador Guest Professor in Leipzig, Germany. His writing has appeared in *Ploughshares, The Rumpus, The Kenyon Review, NBC News*, and *Arcturus* among other venues. He's currently a regular contributor to *The Guardian* and *The Ploughshares* blog. His novel, *Bang* (2018), is out now from Arte Publico Press.

Miranda Ramirez (MR): As you know, the majority of our readers are emerging writers and as such, are curious about your process—can you tell us a little about it?

Daniel Peña (DP): Well, it's really not magical. First thing in the morning, I have my coffee, kind of hanging out, and I read a lot. That's how I jump into the day; my wife teaches high school and it's always kind of been like this, where she has jobs she wakes up ridiculously early for, like 5 in the morning, and my first class isn't until around 10 a.m., so those hours between 5:30 a.m. and 7:30 a.m. are sacred. And there's something magical about writing in the morning, you know—you're still in dreamscape. If you write in the morning, man, you can get in your licks before the day starts.

MR: You said "read a lot"? Like the amount of time, or number of pages?

DP: That's a great question. I was on this panel for the Bogotá39-2018 doing an interview with Emiliano Monge, who is a Mexican writer, and someone asked a similar question: "read a lot—what is that?"

and he was like, "ya just read, man." But I think it's a little bit more than that: it's not that easy. What do you read? And how do you go down that rabbit hole? What about access to books? Of course, it's easy to say "ya just read" as person of privilege—and this is not intended as a knock to Emiliano Monge—but that advice has always been a little bit troublesome because it assumes that you readily have access to books, even just the access to a cultivated instinct that informs what you decide to read.

As an emerging writer, I didn't know what to read. People would just say, "read anything"—the most useless piece of advice; I didn't know what the fuck to read. You see this shelf? These are mostly anthologies I read in grad school. I started with short-fiction and poetry, and the cool thing about these Norton Anthologies is that academics are curating them. They gave me a way to say, "Oh, I like that *thing*—who was that guy hanging out with, and what movement was that?" or "Okay, so I like Kafka—oh, man, who was he influenced by and who did he influence?"

MR: So, you followed the pedagogical trail of influence?

DP: Yes! Looking at who they influenced and who they were influenced by.

MR: I imagine that also influences your own teaching style.

DP: It definitely does. A lot of it does come from those books. Because you know those are things I've read a gazillion times—I know them back and front.

MR: Can you separate the writer from the work? I'm thinking about a conversation I had with our faculty advisor regarding Junot Diaz.

DP: I think Junot is problematic as a person and more than occasionally as a writer. The one time I met him, he was kind of terrible to me. It was weird. I went with my heart on my sleeve; I had admired him for a long time, and we both went to Cornell, both had the same advisor—and he was just incredibly dismissive. I don't want to get into the full story, but it was one of those things where I could see his instincts for how he treated certain people, and of course the women who we've heard about, and I could see how that eventually turned into indictments against him. To this end, I don't know him and I have good friends who vouch for him and his character who I absolutely trust. But that one time I met him felt kind of terrible. And those allegations make me read his work differently—the allegations of assault. It is wrong to take advantage of people who you are in a position to help, especially when you have a lot of weight over their careers. We build writers up in America and make them into celebrities, but when you travel a lot and see how writers operate in the social fabrics of other places you see that there's not such a huge importance placed on celebrity in other parts of the world. I feel like we do put too much emphasis on celebrity in our writing culture. Emphasis on celebrity can be toxic. I think you see with something like Weinstein that they think they've been given permission to do a lot of terrible things for their "genius."

MR: Who would you list as your influences?

DP: *Paco's Story* (Larry Heinemann) is what I was trying to do in the first iteration of *Bang*. It is definitely what I was reading a lot of at the time, and it's one of those things I really love, could read over and over. Cormac McCarthy is another, and James Baldwin (my favorite writer of all time).

But the first real book that was like a lightning bolt to my life was

The Country Under My Skin by Gioconda Belli. She was involved in the *Sandinista Movement* in Nicaragua, and reading her was a way of looking at *Latinidad* as something that belongs not just to the nation states as they're carved up right now, but to something more profound within the hemisphere with deep historical roots throughout. There is this sort of pan *Latinidad* that extends into the United States as well. Texas is the borderlands. Reading that book, it was the first time I remember thinking of language as colonization, like the idea that there are many Mexicos, and I would say to Latino-communities that even though I speak English, the blood in my veins is still indigenous, is still from Mexico, and that is one of the many Mexicos.

The other one is *The Open Veins of Latin America* by Eduardo Galeano. Then after him it'd have to be Roberto Bolaño, Alberto Fuguet, Edmundo Paz Soldán, and all the people they were influencing, like Liliana Colanzi Serrate, Rodrigo Hasbún, going into that generation. It was unexpectedly Latin-American. You start reading those anthologies and you go down that rabbit-hole, and I thought, "Oh, this really resonates with me." Eduardo Galeano is so good at getting at these really big pictures, these sort of macro-sociopolitical commentaries that convey a certain set of truths through narrative. He's one of the all time greats.

MR: Can we discuss the publication of *Bang*?

DP: Before *Bang*, I was conscious that the drug war was a trope. I tried to distance myself from those tropes. I mean the drug war is violent, but I didn't want to make violence the focus. This is what I was trying to do with *Bang*—most of the world lives in a situation that is not westernized-safe. Most of the world has to deal with precarious water situations or precarious gasoline or energy situations, or they are in a drug war or a geopolitical war. I

wanted to explore the roots of dignity. Where people find dignity, and whether you can blame someone for trying to find their own dignity in a fabric that is actively trying to strip them of it. The little bits of violence that I have in the book, I was very conscious that within each of those scenes the scenes themselves had to speak toward dignity. Getting back to the process, before *Bang*, I knew I didn't want to do the pulpy-Narco novel. I wanted to write literary fiction with a capital L. Then after the publication of *Bang*, I was like, "Oh, wow, that's over." I worked on that book for seven years, so it's weird to just cap it off. I find things in it all the time and say, "I would change that." I think every writer feels this way—you should read from your book, but don't ever look back at it again.

"I wanted to explore the roots of dignity."

MR: What, specifically, drew you to tell this story, to talk about these individuals?

DP: I knew I wanted to tell the story of an undocumented family. In this family's case, a lot happens through luck. The family comes together because of luck—Araceli being at the racing track with her husband, and all these chance interactions they have throughout the novel. We see these people who are coming from Latin America, coming from Mexico, coming from a place riddled with the fallout of the drug war, and in the public imagination they've been internalized as troubled people coming to our borders from troubled places, but you could argue that not only have they had a deeper meaning of life because of those experiences, but that they are more human despite (or in spite) of them. I don't think that is something that has been articulated about the people who have been impacted by the drug war or by forced migration yet.

I wanted to articulate this idea that, yes, people experience trauma,

but that trauma can make for a deeper human experience.

MR: Did you have that in the back of your mind, that this novel could be seen as a statement in regards to the current immigration debate going on in the United States?

DP: Yes. I consider my writing somewhat political. When I write fiction, I think the characters should operate within their worlds—that's what separates fiction from propaganda, right? I don't want to come out and say *this is the only version of this truth*, but I want to show through character the ways that even the war on drugs is a frame. Writing *Bang* was a way of exploring this idea, of exploring how we classify drug wars themselves. Is it an actual war or is it a market problem?

"I wanted to articulate this idea that, yes, people experience trauma, but that trauma can make for a deeper human experience."

It is one of those things we try to treat as a political problem; we try to say these problems can be solved through politics, but really these are black markets running the drug wars and largely catalyzing migration from destabilized regions, and the market will always win. The fallout of that is the destabilization of these regions and the catalyzing of more migration. I think the way the drug war is framed is off-base—it's a war in so much that America calls it war. But I think it's something bigger than that, and I was very conscious of that as I was writing these characters.

MR: There is a specific line in the text, "All of them are cursed to be the same man." This resonates with me because it speaks to the indoctrination of young boys into the machismo mentality. Did you intend for that message to be present? Do you have personal

experience with that?

DP: All the males are kind of dipshits in this book. Ivan is the ultimate dipshit; he's kind of sheltered, and he steals Araceli's pickup at the end of the day. He wants her and he helps her, but he has these ulterior motives when he helps her, doesn't really know what he's doing. He tries to impress her, but he essentially just screws her over. Uli's a dipshit because I don't know if he fully sees June as a person, if he sees Alma as a full person. June is my favorite character, based on these real-life rockin-rolero people that you find in Mexico City who are just fucking tough as nails. They're smart and they squat in places. In Mexico you can squat in places and after sixty days, you own the property. She's one of these people, punk-rock, DIY. She knows how to rage against the machine. Uli, I don't think he fully appreciates that or sees that, and then Alma gets the best of him because she's one able to play everyone. I love her too—she's a little bit wicked, intense. Rather than being the trope of a prostitute with a heart-of-gold, her heart is just black. So, all the men are critiques of masculinity, things I find problematic.

As a Latino man, I was relatively lucky to have some of that diffused. I grew up in Austin, which is sort of a progressive fabric but still in Texas. I felt like, even though misogyny was very latent in the culture, it really wasn't my family. My dad was never a macho man kind of guy. He's very Norteño/East Texan—he keeps it together. You get the vibe he's impenetrable. I was lucky because I had people who facilitated breaking that shit down, but I'm still breaking it down. I think that's part of dismantling toxic masculinity, acknowledging the fact that you're never done doing that. It will never be complete.

MR: What can you tell us about the local writing community?

DP: You know, I wasn't expecting this when I came to Houston, but my career just exploded. Before here I was living in Baton Rouge, teaching at LSU—it was okay. Before that, I was in Mexico City, a city I loved but which really repelled me, and I also wasn't expecting that. I found a lot of writers in Mexico City, but they didn't really want anything to do with me. Houston is the most diverse city in the country—it reminds me of nothing else; there is no literary community like this one, where you can just walk in, plug in. There's this little bit of an MFA vibe, an academic vibe. I think it's healthy. Houstonians, if you want them to, will really embrace you.

"I think that's part of dismantling toxic masculinity, acknowledging the fact that you're never done doing that. It will never be complete."

MR: Are there events or organizations around town that you enjoy?

DP: *Inprint* does some of the most subversive work with the writers they bring, the workshops they do. Also, *Tintero Projects*.

MR: Personally, I'm writing from a place of disconnection with the culture and I've experienced a little backlash writing in Spanish. I think this occurs primarily because I am Tejana, or possibly because I'm of mixed heritage, Mexican and Caucasian. Have you experienced anything like that, being from Austin?

DP: I think it's a weird pressure from the writing community to essentialize anything into saying, "That, and that only are Latino." I mean, you are Latina. No one should negate that experience. You should write from these places—that is a Latino experience. You shouldn't be knocked for that. It's like people that want an authentic taco. I'm like, "What the fuck is that?" Is Taco Bell still

Mexican food—I'd argue, yes. It's not great, but it's an iteration of that.

MR: Who typically edits your work?

DP: My wife. She used to be an editor, but I think a lot of married writers have their spouse as their first reader. It's just natural; they're there and you place your trust in them. She has really different tastes from me, too, and I see her fingerprints all over my work. I'll read a section, and think, *oh, that's a part we did together*, or *that's a part I really fought her on*. Which is why I dedicated it to her. She read a lot of drafts of it. Other than that, very few people. I kept it very close. With the exception of the very beginning when I was still in my MFA, where I started writing it, but as I got really far into the drafts, I kept it to myself. I didn't want to have too many cooks in the kitchen.

MR: Where did you go for graduate school? Can we talk about that time in your life?

DP: I went to Cornell, 2010-2014. I jumped right to grad school for a couple reasons: I used to be a pilot, and I had this job lined up in Mexicana airlines, in Mexico. It completely fell through—the company collapsed at the same time the Great Recession started. And at the end of my undergrad, Sherman Alexie came to Texas A&M and I asked him, "Man, I really want to write—how do you do it? What do I do?" and he said, "Dude, you are just so fucked. There's nothing better to do than to write. You've got the best excuse you could have—your job fell through, and the market is in the shitter—you should apply to a bunch of MFAs and just go. Just write and dedicate your life to it." I feel like the decision was kind of made for me.

MR: Did you have an agent prior to publishing *Bang*?

DP: I did. *Bang* was placed with another publisher and they wanted to change it quite a bit. They wanted to make it more like *Narcos*, and I didn't agree. So I bought myself out of the contract, and then my agent dumped me. I went and sold it to *Arte Publico* and I negotiated it myself. Then got another agent later. She's incredible! But regarding *Bang*, it was one of those things where I said "If I'm going to buy my book back, I want to place it somewhere I believe in."

MR: Was your family supportive of your desire to become a writer?

DP: My dad and my brother are both doctors, and there was this pressure to go into STEM, but I was a pilot. That was going to be my thing. I had a lot of support, once I made that decision. Sherman was right, there was nothing else I could do. I think my parents realized that too.

MR: Now you work for the University of Houston-Downtown—what's that like?

DP: The privilege of teaching creative writing comes with some administrative responsibilities—and some of it I really enjoy, like *The Bayou Review* (UHD's literary magazine). Reviving that was a bureaucratic thing that I loved. I think it's weird when writers who teach only identify as, "Well, I'm only a writer," or "I'm only a teacher." I'm very much both.

MR: Would you say your philosophy for your students is more personal?

DP: Yeah, and I want to keep it this way, as long as possible, that

anyone who comes to me and needs something, if I can do it, I'll do it. There were people like that for me, and I just think it's a good way to be. As far as mentoring goes, it's important to keep one hand ahead, and one behind you, pulling someone younger than you along. I was there, we were all there, and there's no shame in asking for help. I encourage you guys—if you ever need anything, please just ask. Big or small. The most rewarding part of advising for *The Bayou Review* is the students, and I don't mean this in a cheesy way. Undergrads have this level of energy that I will never again see in my own life. They keep me young and honest. Not that I'm too old. I'm 30.

"If you are producing the work you want to produce, that is success."

MR: How do you define literary success?

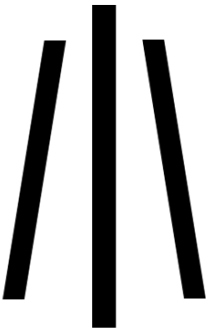
DP: Are you doing the work you want to do? Ultimately, that may sound like an unsatisfying answer, but no bullshit—I genuinely mean it. Are you writing the work you really want to write? It'll happen in your life because it happens to all writers—writers get jealous of other writers, that sense of, *Ah, man, I wish*, and you'll ask yourself is that the mark of success, getting that book deal or that award? A friend asked me once, "Would you want to write like them? Like such and such writer?" and my answer was, "Not really," and she said, "Would you trade your literary career for theirs?" and again, I said, '"Not really," and she replied, "Well, why not?" and I said, "They're not doing what I'm doing," and she said, "Exactly." They weren't doing what I was doing, and she said I was doing what I had to do. That's the name of the game—that's the most important thing. If you are producing the work you want to produce, that is success.

MR: Do you feel like you're there?

DP: I feel like I'm getting there. *Bang* is the book I had to write in my twenties. Things have changed, and so have the things that interest me.

MR: What advice do you have for emerging writers?

DP: My advice is, that, those who make it stick with it. It's easy to get discouraged because you can easily fall out of the saddle, you see the success of others and feel like things are not moving as fast as they should. Going back to that last question—what is success? If you are doing the kind of writing you feel you should be doing and you're actually taking that to heart and trying, putting one foot in front of the other, it will happen. It will happen, but you have to stick with it.



Contributors

Tamara Al-Qaisi-Coleman is an undergraduate Creative Writing and Middle Eastern studies student at the University of Houston. She writes in a variety of genres. Her fiction publications include "Naming the Stars" in the tenth issue of *Scintilla Magazine* and "Akhira" in the first issue of *Paper Trains Journal*. She's an amateur in photography and her work has been published in *Cosumnes River Journal, University of Houston Art Zine,* and *Sonder Midwest Review*. She is currently head editor of *Shards*.

Bill Ayres is working in his 7th bookstore. He loves his work (so there must be something seriously wrong with him). His poems have appeared in *Plainsongs, Jelly Bucket, Commonweal, the Hollins Critic, Bird's Thumb,* and *Sow's Ear.*

Sean Ayres is a college student living in the Midwestern United States. He resides alone in a one-bedroom apartment and sleeps in the living room.

Holly Day's poetry has recently appeared in *Big Muddy, The Cape Rock, New Ohio Review,* and *Gargoyle*. Her newest poetry collections, *A Perfect Day for Semaphore* (Finishing Line Press), *I'm in a Place Where Reason Went Missing* (Main Street Rag Publishing Co.), and *Where We Went Wrong* (Clare Songbirds Publishing) will be out mid-2018, with *The Yellow Dot of a Daisy* already out on Alien Buddha Press.

Sally Dunn's poetry has appeared in *2River View, Rio Grande Review, The Perch,* and *Straylight* literary magazine. Her poetry won honorable mention in the Joe Gouveia Outermost Poetry Contest. She lives on Cape Cod.

Reva Russell English is a musician, writer, and activist originally from Kansas. Her work is preoccupied with seemingly unremarkable people as they negotiate our most common realities: family, technology, religion, compulsion, memory, desire, disconnection, and change. She lives in Lexington, Kentucky, with her partner and child, where they operate a small, urban farm.

Matt Flores is from Corpus Christi and currently resides in Houston. He is an undergrad at the University of Houston and lives with two of his friends and their chunky child.

Sara Jane Gage is an art student in Houston, Texas. She focuses on hand-drawn illustration but her interests and inspirations cross many mediums. In much of her work, she attempts to convey her love for the act of creating art. Her stippling pieces especially convey this aspect of her work, encouraging the viewer to reach the same meditative state viewing the art that she attains during its creation.

Jacob Garcia is a native Houstonian and a graduate of the University of Houston with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting. Much of his work has been figurative, with an emphasis on mental health and the reaction we have to our environment. Being that his work deals within the mind, he sets out to personify various emotions and reactions by showing a fragmented state with the collaging of subject and the environment in unsettling ways. In doing so he hopes to show how someone suffering from a mental illness may be feeling and struggling internally. Some of this work became more experimental and abstract, exploring how to evoke emotion in the viewer by conveying the reaction with elements of color and form.

Sophia Hashmi is an emerging writer based in Houston, Texas where she studies as a high school student. Although her publication history is short, Sophia avidly pursues writing and hopes that the craft will find a place in her future. She has written both prose and poetry and, as she hails from Levantine and Sindhi backgrounds, much of her work serves as an attempt to encompass various aspects of that cultural experience. When she is not working, she enjoys tending to her houseplants and illustrating.

Vinh Hoang dwells, films, writes, and tells stories in Houston, Texas. As of this submission, he is studying Creative Writing at the University of Houston. As a storyteller, he is invested in where the lines blur, seeking the heart and humor. He has one publication in *Glass Mountain*. Stray cats used to slug it out in his backyard, and robots play cards in his bedroom.

Gregory T. Janetka is a writer from Chicago who currently lives in San Diego. His work has been featured in *Gravel, Heartwood, Storgy, Dime Show Review*, and other publications. He is terribly good at jigsaw puzzles and drinks a great deal of tea. More of his writings can be found at gregorytjanetka.com.

Collin Jones is a recent graduate from the University of Alabama with a major in telecommunication and film and a minor in creative writing. He is an independent scholar of both David Foster Wallace and metamodernism, and will be presenting a paper on the aforementioned at the Mid-Atlantic Popular & American Culture Association in Baltimore this winter. He currently lives in East Lansing, Michigan, with his domestic partner.

Jury S. Judge is an internationally published artist, writer, poet, photographer, and political cartoonist. Her *Astronomy Comedy* cartoons are also published in Lowell Observatory's publication, *The Lowell Observer*. Her artwork has been published in literary magazines such as *Northwestern Indiana Literary Review, Permafrost, Amsterdam Quarterly,* and *Typehouse Literary Magazine.* She has been interviewed on the television news program, *NAZ Today* for her work as a political cartoonist. She graduated Magna Cum Laude with a BFA from the University of Houston-Clear Lake in 2014. If you are interested in her artwork, email her at jurysjudge@gmail.com.

Gloria Keeley grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area. She collects old records and vintage magazines. Her work has appeared in *Chiron, The Emerson Review, Bacopa,* and other journals.

Nicholas Keller is a creative writing major attending Beloit College. His lips are frequently chapped and this is his first publication. He thanks you for your time and consideration.

Faith Kressner is currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in creative writing and music at Furman University, where she serves as the Editor in Chief of the literary magazine, *The Echo*. Her work has appeared in that magazine as well as in the South Carolina Best Emerging Poets series.

Alexandra Luckey is receiving her BFA in Photography and Digital Media, as well as a minor in Architecture, from the University of Houston. Much of her work is inspired by architectural forms and spaces. She uses Photoshop to manipulate space in a way that displaces the viewer and forces them to look inward rather than outward to identify a particular place in time. Her source material comes from her own photographs of architectural spaces that she has found interesting or inspiring. Alexandra's goal with this work is to encourage people to recognize a personal identity that comes from within rather than one built from their exterior environment.

Kelsey May is a writer, teacher, and activist from Grand Rapids, Michigan. Her work has appeared in *NonBinary Review, The 3228 Review,* and *Left Hooks*, and she interviews poets and other miscellaneous people at Hyype. She loves birdwatching, going to art museums, and her husband.

Daniel Edward Moore lives in Washington on Whidbey Island. His poems have been found at *Spoon River Poetry Review, Rattle, Columbia Journal, Western Humanities Review*, and others.
His poems will soon be found at *The Museum of Americana, West Trade Review, AJI Magazine, Duende Literary Journal, New Limestone Review, The Inflectionist Review, Magnolia Review, Isthmus Review, Into The Void Magazine,* and *The McKinley Review*. His books, *This New Breed: Gents, Bad Boys and Barbarians Anthology* and *Confessions of a Pentecostal Buddhist* can be found on Amazon. His work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Visit Daniel at DanielEdwardMoore.com.

Alana Picozzi is a recent Allegheny College graduate who has served as poetry editor for *Overkill*, an alternative undergraduate literary magazine. Her work won the Ione Sandberg Shriber Prize in Creative Writing and she has attended Writing Workshops in Greece and the Boldface Conference among others. She plans to move to Guanajuato, Mexico, and teach English as a foreign language.

Estefhania Pineda's recent work explores the relationships of organic shapes. The shapes hover between organic and artificial with the use of bright flat color. She abstracts sources from anatomy books and makes patterned compositions. She was first taught how to observe and render at the age of 10 when her dad talked her out of tracing images. She enrolled in Carver High School's four year art program, and now Estefhania is pursuing her bachelor's degree in studio painting at the University of Houston.

Aishwarya Raghunath is a 25-year-old content writer from Bangalore, India. She enjoys traveling, world literature and cinema, and some occasional baking and painting. Her work has appeared in or is under contract to appear in magazines such as *aaduna* and the *Louisville Review*.

Miranda Ramirez is an artist, and a writer of poetry and fiction. She seeks to marry her passions for literary and genre works. Her passions lie in all forms of artistry, often she combines the visual with the literary. Looking for various avenues in which to express her words through the visual. You may find her publications in Volume 20 of *Glass Mountain*, and Issue 3 of *Shards*.

Eric Rivera is a writer living Philadelphia. His poem, "Smoke," won the *Michigan Quarterly Review's* 2016 Page Davidson Clayton Prize for Emerging Poets. Eric writes screenplays for animated children's shows, which have aired on Disney, Nickelodeon, Netflix, Amazon, and internationally. He's written for SPIN.com, and won the 2012 Set in Philadelphia TV Pilot award.

Zach Sheneman resides in Grand Rapids, Michigan, with his wife, Chelsea, and their two sons. He attends Grand Valley State University and is set to graduate with his B.A. in Writing in the spring of 2019. His essay, "Everything, and All the Time," was published in the Fall 2017 edition of *The Pinch Journal.*

Daniellie Silva is an English major and Spanish minor at the University of Houston. She hopes to the write more about her traveling experiences, personal conflicts, and her interests in Latin American culture. Her past works and art have been published in the literary magazine *Inkling*.

Casey Oliver Stevens is an emerging poet who writes in formal and free verse. Casey is also an aspiring scholar of East Asian literature and culture and endeavors to connect his research on Medieval Chinese poetry with facets of his artistic works. He is currently an M.A. candidate in Regional Studies-East Asia at Harvard University.

Olivia Stowell is an undergraduate student at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California, pursuing a dual degree in English literature and theatre arts. Her previous work has been published in Westmont's literary magazine, *The Phoenix*. Olivia can often be found reading poetry, binge watching reality TV cooking competitions, or finding any excuse to go to the beach.

Karen Wa is currently pursuing her BFA in painting. She finds inspiration in the little and big moments in life and the people who share these moments with her. She has no idea where life, or her degree, will take her next and is more than comfortable with that.

Cassandra Waggett is a Literature M.A. candidate at the University of Houston-Clear Lake. She lives in Houston with her three-year-old daughter, her husband, and their Apple Head Chihuahua. "The Involuntary Invader" is her first published work.

For David Weinholtz, it's as simple as this: he has to create. Whether it be creation via drawing or painting, it is in his marrow, and has been ever since he was a child. Truthfully, he has no clue why or where the impulse began, but he has followed it and tried his best to stay true to it throughout his life. Everything from Logical Thoughts, Observations, Spirituality and Mysticism, Diverse Muses, Messy Complicated Emotions, and Gonzo Curiosities act as impetuses in his creative process, and have resulted in his pursuit of several different drawing and painting genres. Each drawing and painting he creates has a personal story, and if asked, he is sure he could unfurl a flowery digression on the psychology of each piece, but underneath it all, it is very simple: a pure unquenchable desire to create.

Poetry & Prose Contest

Glass Mountain, the award-winning undergraduate literary journal at the University of Houston, announces the annual Poetry & Prose Contest.

$5 per submission
Deadline: January 11, 2019

Each category of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry has a prize bundle of $100 and free registration for the 2019 Boldface Conference!

Winners will be published in *Glass Mountain*'s spring Volume 22. Runners-up will be considered for publication. Participants must not be currently enrolled in a creative writing MFA or Ph.D program, nor hold a graduate degree in creative writing.

For more information on guidelines and how to submit, visit:
glassmountain.submittable.com/submit

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glass mountain
The Undergraduate Literary Journal at the University of Houston

***Glass Mountain* is accepting submissions!**

Glass Mountain is committed to publishing quality art, prose, and poetry from emerging artist and authors. Submissions for Volume 22 of *Glass Mountain* are currently open!

For more information on guidelines
and how to submit, visit:

glassmountain.submittable.com/submit

Boldface Conference

Founded by the *Glass Mountain* staff in 2009, the Boldface Conference is the country's only literary conference specifically geared toward emerging writers. The intimate conference experience includes daily workshops, readings and open mics, craft talks, master classes, professionalism panels, social events, and more. Boldface is an experience for emerging writers like no other!

Boldface is held on the University of Houston campus each May and is attended by as many as 100 writers from around the country.

This year Boldface will be held May 20 - 24, 2019!

To inquire about scholarships or group discount rates, email:
boldfaceconference@gmail.com

THE CREATIVE WORK MINOR

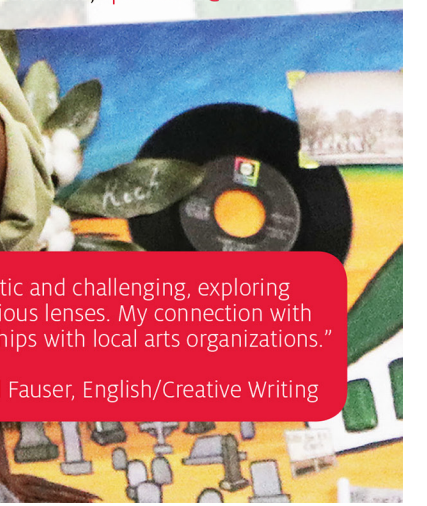
The Creative Work minor is an interdisciplinary program that explores the important role of creativity across all disciplines and professions. Creative Work students engage with the theory, investigation, and practice of creativity, and learn a repertoire of creative techniques they can deploy throughout their working lives.

"Poetics and Performance," the minor's foundation course, is a historical and theoretical study of making and doing in various realms and modes. Subsequent courses reiterate four of the minor's key themes: place and space, narrative, performance, and problem solving. Our capstone course is Artists & Their Regions, in which students explore a place though the lens of its artistic history and legacy.

Our region for spring 2019 is Pittsburgh. We will explore a wide range of creative activity that encapsulates the city's profound transformation from an industrial mecca to a city that honors yet transcends its historical roots. The course culminates in a mid-May trip to the Steel City.

Housed in the Honors College, the Creative Work minor is open to all UH students, regardless of major.

For more information, contact the Director of the Creative Works program, Robert Cremins, rpcremins@uh.edu.



"Creative Work courses are eclectic and challenging, exploring topics intensely and through various lenses. My connection with Creative Work led to two internships with local arts organizations."

— Eriel Fauser, English/Creative Writing