

**THE**  
**FOUNDATIONALIST**  
*a literary journal*



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**THE FOUNDATIONALIST**

\_\_\_\_\_ FALL 2022

**The Foundationalist**

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# EDITOR'S LETTER

05.08.2023

Dear Writers and Readers,

This publication marks yet another significant milestone in *The Foundationalist's* history, as we find ourselves two undergraduate generations away from the founders who established this journal back in 2019. With each passing year, we witness the torch being passed onwards, and it is an absolute joy to welcome fresh perspectives and talents onboard.

We are so happy to present this fantastic edition, a testament to the diverse and vibrant community of undergraduate authors who continue to breathe life into our pages. As editors, nothing is more gratifying than finding such a wide selection of creative ideas celebrating the power of writing.

As always, thank you so much to our contributors, readers and supporters for making *The Foundationalist* possible. This issue is truly special, enjoy.

Sincerely,  
Editors of The Foundationalist

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# Rebirth of a Spider

Kyle Constantin  
*McMaster University*

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It was a plump little thing, fat with flies and beetles, never starved for it nested where they gathered, where there was always carrion to taste. Aloft in rafter webs, below amongst the dust and shadow, it waited, held still in its web as new bodies were unloaded from the wagon; watched as they were set upon the slabs, bringing with them the spider's board. They came in clouds of motion, flecks of metallic blues and greens whirring about in circuitous loops around the necromancer Sen as he ferried bodies one by one from the wagon into the dark cellar of his cottage. With his free hand Sen swatted and shooed the flies, beating at the air above his cloaked head with a flat palm. Sen's boy Urs, too small to lift the dead, assisted as he could, strapping down the soldiers in their battered plate with his good hand after his father deposited them upon the slabs. In between his father's trips, as he struggled the dead off the wagon and up to his shoulder, Urs searched high and low for the spider.

Urs had grown fond of the skittering, web weaving creature and took to playing with it as much as one can play with a spider. To him there was, in its very existence, its being, its function, its nature, an elegance which other creatures, or at least humans, seemed to lack. Eight legs for spinning silk, eight legs for moving expertly along it, eight legs for eating; eight legs for any task a spider might need to accomplish. Always a recluse, it ate what it killed, and it kept to itself; building webs in the dark, unused corners of the world; never meddling where it did not belong.

With a great thud, Sen flung the last of the corpses onto the slab, startling Urs who crouched beneath it in his search

## REBIRTH OF A SPIDER

for the spider.

“Pointless! Fruitless!” Sen began, already out of breath. “Look at this,” Sen pointed to the body on the slab, charred black and without eyes. “Why they send us out to battles lost, I will never know. Their enemies are wise to our intervention; little of the earth is left after they scorch the battlefield. What do they expect us to salvage from this?” Sen lifted the corpse’s blackened, three-fingered hand, then let it flop back down. “I am not a blacksmith; I cannot take scrap, melt it, and reshape it anew. I need substance.”

Urs stood, watched his father grimace at the dead soldier, then looked above at the long planks in the rafters, still seeking the spider; though no matter where he looked, it eluded him.

“How is your hand?” asked Sen of his son.

“Fine,” said Urs staring at the limp, yellow thing, hanging off his wrist.

“Let me see.”

Urs lifted the waxy, shriveled hand sutured to his wrist up for his father to see. Sen took the boy’s forearm, rotated it around, then examined the hand. Green at the knuckles and pale all over, the hand hung bloodless; its long, yellow nails packed with dirt.

“Bend your fingers, all of them at once.”

Urs flexed his forearm, pushing the metacarpus in the dead hand against the near-translucent skin. With great effort, he hooked the fingers of someone else’s hand over the palm, into a weak fist.

“The nerves are already all but dead. We must find you a new one.” Sen released his son’s arm and moved into the pale light shone through the threshold of the door.

Sen removed his cloak then looked out into the hazy morning light, beyond the towering wall of trees which concealed their cottage. Illuminated as he was, with two silver thistles for eyebrows bunched over squinted eyes, his thin hair tied in a short ponytail, and the curls of his beard drained of all colour, Urs saw how old his father was getting.

“Fetch me another cloak, Urs,” said Sen, handing his son his cloak, grown heavy with mud.

Urs disappeared up the stairs with the cloak, then returned

with a new dark green one held against his chest. Sen parted the clasp at its collar, slung it over his shoulders, then reattached the chain so it rested along his collar bones.

“Come, another battle is underway in the grove between Jasmun and Gwynne. We will take the wagon up the hill and watch from above, await a victor, then descend, see if we cannot find you another hand and reclaim a few recruits for the emperor’s army.”

From above, through a thick film of fog, Sen and Urs watched as imperial soldiers skewered warriors from revolting nations with pikes, rode them down with their warhorses, and slaughtered kneeling men, with their hands raised in surrender.

A perimeter of dark, age-old trees as tall as the mountains far off on the horizon encircled the glade. Atop the hill they awaited the faint crash of drums and the biting sounds of horns and then at their command, descended the hill.

Upon the blood-soaked fields, through low ribbons of mist, they trudged, Sen, piloting the wooden wagon, while Urs surveyed the battlefield for salvageable materials. Vultures coiled in the sunless sky and the ground sank and sloshed beneath their feet. The wagon’s wheels too caught in the muddy field; the glade made a marsh by blood and morning dew.

Sen pushed the empty wagon along, lifting it up by the handles and rattling it whenever the wheels caked in mud or tangled with the arm or leg of a fallen soldier, then continued. In the middle of the clearing, in a space unoccupied by the dead, Sen set down the wagon, and sent Urs off to scour the dead for a new hand.

“Do not forget,” his father reminded, pulling his cloak from the mud, “when you find a suitable replacement for your hand, you must cut above the elbow so as not to damage the nerves. Otherwise, we will be at the mercy of the war, waiting for a battle to find you another.”

“Yes father,” said Urs as he walked, head down, examining the fallen.

The dead collected in piles along the battlefield. Most were young men, their eyes wide, arms laid down at their sides, their



## REBIRTH OF A SPIDER

mouths wells of dark blood. The armour the soldiers wore was crude, a suit of chinked mail and a tunic was all most had to protect themselves.

Urs reached into the mound of bodies and sifted through the limbs.

Each hand seemed much too large to affix to his small wrist. He held his own hand beside each as he pulled them from the mound, found that none of them were even close to as small as his good hand, his true hand.

"It need not be perfect!" shouted his father, as he loaded the emperor's men into the wagon. "It will be replaced in the end!"

Urs kept searching.

He passed the trampled soldiers, ridden down by warhorses. He found their hands soft and flat; all the bones mashed and pasted. Rolled thin and stamped into the earth with a hoof, their flesh looked like flattened dough, pressed with cookie cutters.

Urs found those slain surrendering knelt in a straight line. He lifted each of their hands up one by one, but found them all split and cut up, drained of all their blood from where they grasped at the pike which slew them.

"Here!" exclaimed his father. "This should do nicely." He raised a severed arm into the sky, waved it for his son to see, then dropped it into the wagon where it rolled, settling atop one of the dead soldier's faces.

"Come along now, it is best we don't keep the dead waiting too long."

When they returned, they cleared away the charred soldiers from the slabs; Urs unshackling them and his father piling them in a heap beside the wagon. Again, Urs wandered the dark cellar in pursuit of the spider to no avail.

"Do not doddle, Urs," said his father, as Urs gazed up into the rafters. "The sooner we prepare the soldiers, the sooner we may attach your new hand."

Urs hurried back to the slabs, his dead hand limp at his side. He lifted the soldiers' heavy arms and legs, propped them up with his dead hand, pulled the straps under, then over their

limbs, fastening them tightly.

When the slabs were full and all that was left in the wagon was the arm Sen had picked out for his son, Urs unstitched the dead hand from his wrist with his teeth and his fingers; his eyes still wandering the dark cellar in pursuit of the spider.

“Everything is ready,” said Urs, tasting dead flesh as he gnawed away the sutures.

“Would you stop that,” said Sen, the severed arm held at his side. “Perhaps it’s a new brain we should have found you, not a hand.” He rapped upon Urs’s forehead with the severed arm, then placed it on one of the slabs. He took his son’s forearm and cut the remaining stitches with a pair of crooked scissors.

“I have raised a wild animal,” said Sen, shaking his head.

“I am sorry father.”

“You will be lucky if you do not fall terribly ill. Putting dead flesh in your mouth like that. What mistakes I must have made.” Sen shook his head as he eased the hand off his son’s wrist and put a cloth in its place. “Hold that there.”

Urs pressed the cloth against the old stump made bloody again, clotting it. The cloth soon grew wet with Urs’s blood; the cut fresh as the day Urs’s hand was first severed.

Sen raided the cupboards. Hunched over, he threw them open, squinting at all the unlabeled tonics, jars of plant clippings, tin cases full of surgical tools; none of which he seemed to be looking for. Urs watched his father search, wobbling on his unsteady feet, blinking as he teetered. The cloth took on a damp black colour and blood was leaking through the spaces in between Urs’s fingers.

“Urs, where have you put my instruments?”

Urs, grown woozy, had trouble staying upright. Dribbles of blood fell, tapping at the stone floor at his feet. Everything in his vision took on a muddy texture.

Instruments? Instruments? Which instruments?

His father, a smear of motion, at first far, appeared suddenly right upon him.

“Sit Urs,” Sen eased his son to the ground.

“Clean, I meant to clean them,” slurred Urs.

“It is alright, Urs, give me your arm.”

## REBIRTH OF A SPIDER

Urs presented his arm, slick with blood. Sen took it, removed the cloth, and inserted the needle of a brass-coloured syringe into it. A translucent liquid pulsed into the boy's arm. Urs winced at the sting of the needle, shut his eyes as his blood burnt and his whole arm flushed with pain. The wrist ceased its weeping, began to froth.

"You are a brave boy, Urs," said Sen, as he stitched the new hand to his son's forearm. "Brave enough to be a great warrior, but much too smart for that," Sen smiled at his son. Then, retrieving four long pins from the closest slab said, "This is going to sting, okay?"

Urs nodded, then turned away over his shoulder, anticipating the pain.

Sen held Urs's forearm steady as he slipped the pins, first into the waxen, yellow hand, then pushing them deeper, into the soft, pink flesh of his son's wrist. Urs let out a cry, squirming along the ground as his father fashioned a cage around his wrist with pins and metal plates.

"How does that feel?" asked Sen, examining the placement of the pins and the neat line of stitches fusing the lifeless to the lively. Already the candle wax hand suffused with purple, drawing blood from the boy's shivering arm.

Urs looked into his father's eyes, a weak smile formed on his lips.

"I know, I know, but it won't always be this way," said Sen, massaging Urs's back. "Perhaps this will be the last." Sen stood, guiding his son to his feet. "Up you go. Off to bed now, I will be up to check on you soon."

"What about the soldiers?" asked Urs, still disoriented, his whole-body light as air. With his arm cradled against his chest like a child, he fought against his body's desire to collapse.

"I will wake them, there will be work for you in the morning. For now, you must rest, give the hand enough time to set. Now go, Urs. To bed with you."

When Urs woke the next morning his hand throbbed. Underneath the plates, in all the spaces where flesh surrounded the pins; where blood now flowed, it ached and pulsed; burning when Urs tented the fingers, gripping the air with its broad

claw. The hand was setting well, already pink in complexion except in the phalanxes of the fingers, which were still pale and waxy.

Downstairs he went, each step creaking underfoot, to find his father in the process of waking the last of the dead; two sallow faced men in armour, who laid flat, strapped to the slabs with heavy lidded eyes. They reeked of rot, but after years of playing and assisting his father in the cellar, their stench did not bother Urs much, though years of exposure never acclimated Urs to Sen's tonics and tinctures and the ghastly smells which slithered out their thin necked bottles and open jars.

At eye level with the soldier on the closest slab, Urs watched his father sew a long cut from the man's jaw up to his crown; covering the area where an ear once was with another man's flesh.

"How is your hand, Urs? Has colour yet returned to it?" said Sen without looking up from his work.

"It is heavy as a log and pink as a snapdragon," said Urs.

To this his father chuckled, still working the needle in his hand through the man's head, "Good, good."

"Give me but a few moments more with these two and I will have a look for myself."

Urs wandered the cellar. He walked away from the light of his father's lantern towards the back wall, thick with shadow. He looked high and low, in the darkest, dampest corners of the cellar, but still there was no trace of the spider, not even a strand of silk. The small thing had grown shy and lazy, but that would not stop Urs from finding it. He knew the cellar better than the spider; it could not hide for long.

And indeed, little time passed before Urs found the spider on the ground, upturned, with its crooked little legs bent in on themselves.

Urs let go of the heavy, iron-plated arm, then knelt before the creature. He pressed closer to it until he could see nothing else, and with the dead thing in his eye he felt despair. A dear friend laid dead before him under a blanket of dust. The flies and beetles and other pests now flew carefree, without worry of the spider's traps.

Urs scooped the spider off the ground and into his palm.

## R E B I R T H   O F   A   S P I D E R

Death, in its old unfair habit, chose the most fair and elegant of things to die. Purposeful creatures, aligned with nature, unknowing of cruelty died alone and collected dust; withered into nothingness. While men, resolute in their viciousness, survived death to kill again.

He stood, letting his heavy hand fall limp at his side as he ferried the spider with a cupped palm towards the slabs; careful not to move too fast, lest the current of air steal it from his hand.

“Father look,” he said bitterly, holding his hand up for Sen to see.

Sen cut the leftover wire from the stitches, placed the scissors and the needle on the slab, then turned towards his son.

“It is dead,” said Urs, pressing his hand up higher to his father’s face. “We must do something.”

“What would you have us do, Urs? You wish me to reanimate it?”

Urs nodded his head.

“This is not something I have done, nor something I am sure can be done.”

“But you can try.”

Sen found himself powerless against his son’s pleading eyes and his face of sorrow. Impossible or not, he decided at that moment that he and Urs would raise that creature from death; set it back upon its many legs to walk and weave again.

“Very well,” said Sen. “I must attend to the soldiers first, but once they are dismissed, you have my word, we shall bring that creature back to this world.”

Urs’s nose burned, and his eyes watered as the air grew bitter and sharp with the smell of his father’s tincture of revival. He watched his father loom over the dead, as they waited for them to awaken.

“The mind wakes before the body,” said Sen. “They will not remember what has happened to them. From now on they will live only half aware of their surroundings. Awake enough to fight, but unable to do much else.”

“The mind you see, Urs, does not recover from death. Even if only for a moment, once the brain is dead, it is ruined. It

## REBIRTH OF A SPIDER

becomes a slave to the body, which, though decomposed, will shamble on so long as it can. Instinct will carry the body far and for their purpose, it is all they need. Without thinking, the body will fight to preserve itself. Instinct makes a warrior out of anyone. Strategists will point them in the direction of the enemy and the body will sense danger and that is all they need; blind, hollow, unthinking, unfeeling, bodies to thrust at the ranks of their enemies.”

With a start, the soldiers woke, moaning and screaming as if exiting a nightmare. They pulled at their straps and beat their armoured bodies against the slabs, but the restraints held true.

Once they calmed themselves, Sen blew out the lantern’s light and unfastened their restraints. The one eared soldier rose first, looking about in all directions, he stumbled drunk-enly about until Sen led him to the threshold of the door. The other, a stout man with greasy black hair, limped after his one eared compatriot, following him into the morning light.

“How will they know where to go?” asked Urs of his father.

Sen stood in the doorway and watched the two reanimated soldiers stumble down the path, bumping into the branches of great, green trees as they went.

“Not even a dead man forgets his home, Urs. They will find their way, they always do,” said Sen, still staring at the two soldiers, until they hobbled up over the horizon and out of sight.

“Now, let us see what we can do about this spider.”

Sen stared at the miniscule thing; its eight legs folded up like the petals of a budding plant. He Sen, the emperor’s necromancer, trained by the first death-wizards and tutored by the greatest imperial physicians, was to reanimate a spider; and why? Why would he waste the time and tonic?

Urs sat himself upon the slab, beside the spider, examining the shadow it cast against the orange light of the lantern; an eight limbed tree plucked of all its fruit.

The sight forced a smile on Sen’s face. His boy, ever curious, full of wonder at the simplest of things. He supposed then that he would do it, for he loved his son and that was reason enough. A father, no matter how prideful, would forgo anything for his child, for his love was unconditional.

## REBIRTH OF A SPIDER

So, Sen scoured his library for the writings of the death-wizards, for notes he had transcribed himself during their tutelage, searching for any passage referencing the awakening of non-human creatures; of which he found little.

Near the back of the second volume, he encountered a section pertaining to the reanimation of a cob; one of the wizard's own horses, which fell dead mid-journey on his ride back from the northern-most citadel from disease. In another volume, he read a detailed account of an unearthed hog, whose head the sorcerers carried like a lantern to sniff out spores of black fungus hidden in the dirt. These creatures lived for but a few hours, only long enough to serve their purpose. Such unusual experiments, unless undocumented (which to Sen seemed improbable, as the death-wizards were the most scrupulous men he ever met) never occurred again.

After reading each passage twice over, the impossibility of Sen's task nagged at him again. A spider's anatomy shared no resemblance to that of a horse or a hog, let alone a human being. If only Sen could communicate with his masters. Though they were long dead; their ashes cast to the wind, preventing any attempt to wake them.

Sen shut the heavy, saffian cover of the text, then imprisoned the whole stack of volumes in their waist-high cupboard cell.

Looking up from the texts, Sen saw that the lantern's bright glow had dimmed to a yellow flicker.

"Urs," said Sen over his shoulder. "Fetch more oil for the lantern. Only witches worked in absolute darkness."

Urs glanced at the spider then hopped off the slab and jogged up the stairs, holding his stiff arm at the elbow.

Alone with the spider in the damp stone cellar, weak yellow blades of light illuminating the creature's slab and little else, Sen stood in the dark and listened to the drip, drip, drip, of water into the pools at his feet.

He knew of incantations, ancient ones he had never used, said to coax life from death, but to use them felt archaic; would retrogress the whole field of necromancy, which he worked so hard to elevate into a field of medicine, recognized by the empire. Pride again.

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"Here you are, father," Urs set down the tin oilcan, which clicked against the slab.

Sen took the glass chimney from the lantern, still hot in his hands and set it aside. His fingers recoiled as he unscrewed the burner, refilled the tank with oil, then relit the wick.

"There we are," said Sen as a thick jet of flame darted up from the wick, scattering a deep orange light across the cellar.

Sen looked down at his son, his face contoured with shadow, but his eyes bright, gleaming from the lantern's light. He placed a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Are you ready to begin?"

At first whispering then chanting, Sen recited the incantation and Urs followed along as best he could; stumbling on the long-unspoken words of a dead language. Together they chanted in the orange light. Urs watched his father's lips part with each spoken word, then seal together as he trilled out a low, throaty hum, which Urs was incapable of replicating.

They repeated and repeated and repeated the strange, lip tingling hymn, until the air stirred around them, and the shadows dancing about the room seemed to pause, whereupon they took on a menacing quality as if the darkness itself was a beast of many dark shapes roused by their calling.

With his eyes pressed close to the subject of their sorcery, Urs watched the spider twitch, and kick, and shake with life.

One after another, each leg unfolded and lengthened like the stems of burgeoning flowers. Its body leapt about the slab, jumping up, hovering, then tumbling back down like an autumn leaf.

Urs soon lost track of the spider as it moved about the slab, drifting and flitting in and out of the lantern's light. Until, stood upright upon its eight legs, it fell still. Urs stared at it, and it stared back, a conqueror of death, unaware of its triumph.

"Does it know it was dead?" asked Urs.

Sen stood silent.

"Father, does it know?"

Sen took a step forward closer to the spider, "No Urs, it does not know." He prodded it with his wrinkled finger, and it



## REBIRTH OF A SPIDER

skittered away.

“It cannot fathom the journey we have taken it on, from life to death and back again. There is no telling what it thinks has befallen it; if the elapsed time were imperceptible or acutely sensed.

“This is unprecedented work. We must study its habits to see if it behaves differently than an ordinary spider. You must not let it out of your sight. Do you understand, Urs?”

Urs watched the spider crawl along the slab, teetering as its back legs faltered and buckled under its own weight. Though spiders could not feel pain, there was suffering in its skewed shuffling.

“It looks distressed,” said Urs.

“These creatures feel no pain, Urs. It has been given life; we have plucked it from the greatest suffering and given it back its purpose. Do not trouble yourself with these thoughts. It is not a human being, and you must not treat it as such.

“Now begins a time of great discovery, Urs and the first of your tasks as a necromancer in your own right. You will watch the creature and together we will document its progress through unlife; see if we cannot learn a thing or two,” said Sen as he walked up the stairs to his study, in search of fresh stationery.

Rooted in his place, Urs watched the creature limp closer to the light.

Three days passed before the spider left the slab. Each day it crawled forth a few paces, stumbled, righted itself, paused for hours, then tried again. Each time it faltered it seemed not to understand why, as if it forgot each stumble as it happened.

It seemed drunk, confused, and miserable.

At the edge of the slab, it took two steps, then, tumbling, plummeted to the floor. On its back it flailed its legs, kicking and slashing about the air. Urs righted it with the tip of his finger, and the spider again began its sequence of starting and stopping, until it reached a well shadowed corner. There it sat, motionless.

It spun no webs and caught no flies. It did not, in fact, move at all.

Yet, Urs continued to document the skittish spider and its habits, or lack thereof, in the papers his father provided him with; sometimes writing his thoughts when there was nothing else to record.

He wrote of the sadness of the spider; of how death took away its elegance. He wrote of his father's work and of the way the dead moved as they woke upon the slabs. He wrote too of the soldier's heavy hand which he now used to write; penning, in near illegible script, of its clumsiness, and of the strain it put on his shoulder, even after his father removed the pins and plates holding it in place.

Taking the quill in his good hand, Urs thrust the feathered end out at the spider, prodding it until it recoiled, took a few steps back, then froze again. Still alive; though at this point, Urs found the word had lost its meaning.

Living required changing. Living meant putting yourself in motion towards a goal and knowing you were doing so; aware that you exist and acting on that awareness. Without consciousness, without change, without an end, inertia replaced life; stealing away all that made it good. Life can only be precious so long as it is finite, so long as it moves and drifts along with the wind towards death. For what is death but the ultimate change? A transmutation of the self; allowing you to answer nature's call when it beckons to you; telling you it is your time to rest. A spider who never starves needs not spin silk, or crawl. It needs only to hide away in a pocket of shadow, awaiting a death which will never arrive. Soldiers who cannot be slain, who rise from every wound and every battle, need not fight, for their ranks never diminish. What then of a hand that needs not respond to the directions it receives from a brain?

Urs brought his hand down hard upon the spider, striking it flat against the stone.

When he raised his hand, it pulsed and pounded. Under his bruised palm, he saw three of the spider's legs, the rest of the creature lay crushed, dismembered, and crumpled along the stone floor.

Soon enough the soldier's hand too lay crumpled, weeping blood upon the stone floor.

A wedge of moonlight spilled through the threshold

## R E B I R T H   O F   A   S P I D E R

of the cellar door, reflecting off the trails of blood snaking through the cracks in the stone. With his arm severed anew and swathed in soiled rags, Urs stepped into the doorway and admired the soft face of the full moon. There he stood, awaiting his father's return; smiling, for he had much to tell his father of life and death.

THE FOUNDATIONALIST

## M#SSSSAGES

1-#1010?10#

Abigail Kloha  
*University of Iowa*

---

Mezean:

I'm sending this message right after you entered the Hopper. It will hopefully load onto your communicator within minutes of your arrival. Sorry if it's a little delayed.

If it wouldn't bother you, send updates. I'd like information on travel, Hopper lag, and specifics on how the Hopper has adjusted your new dimension to accommodate your presence. I'd also like to know how your communicator works after transforming into a dimensionally appropriate object. The only data I currently have is your vitality recorder indicating that you're alive. Which is good data. Very good. I'm not complaining about having that data.

I don't mean to treat you like a child or be annoying, but please be careful. The Hopper's "minimal hazards" and "minimal dimensional disruption" settings aren't a guarantee that everything will go perfectly. Don't expect to be cemented into reality in just a few days like the animal test subjects were. You—a real, cool, complex human—will take longer. Sorry.

—Rolz L

Dear Mezean,

Rolz doesn't want us spamming your communicator before you arrive, *buuuut* you and the messages take a *week* to go between dimensions so she'll understand my impatience.

*Hiiiiii!!!* We love you, Mezean! Yalor promises to write as soon as she's back. Make sure to drink water! Your Earth's water is generally cleaner than ours, so it'll be really good for you!

Wishing you clean air and real fruit, Santren

My lunardew,

I'm relieved you arrived on your new Earth safely—even if Santren did nearly run me over with his hover chair to tell me the good news. I wish I had been there to say good-bye, but these letters will suffice.

Please take time to adjust. The human brain is designed for patterns so you can't shove all these changes into the back of your head. You'll have to let them breathe outside of your mind, take up as much space as needed until they're large enough for you to find familiarity in them. Changes are like bruises; they ache and look stormy no matter what you do. They fade on their own if they're treated well, but if you ignore them and move carelessly, you'll ache worse for even longer.

I do hope you've found a way to enjoy yourself. I've been imagining what you'll do in your new home during my "breaks" from peace negotiations. Sometimes I wonder if you're reading a book, a real paper one, in a home with more windows than walls. Other times I imagine you're exploring forests that are not locked in neat rows to chop down, but wonderfully haphazard with vines and wild animals everywhere.

Thinking of this has cushioned my sanity through the week. Diplomacy has become increasingly difficult now that the Imuxiats don't send diplomats—generals and merchants don't count. It's infuriating how their view of the galaxy is squished between the x and y axes of their economic growth charts, and while they can understand our desires when I translate them into currency symbols, they're only willing to discuss *their* demands. Imuxiat logic is so insulated by propaganda and pride that any contradiction to their reality is garbled like a message on the wrong radio wave.

Only write to us if you have time and energy—we write to love you, not to stress you.

Yours eternally, Yalor

Dear Mezean,

Hi!!!!!!!!!! How are you??? Isn't it amazing there???

Tell me *everything*—and don't make it all mission report style because I *need* normal conversations with you. Yeah, I

want to hear about the big, dramatic stuff, but I also reaaaally want to hear some rants about the little charms and annoyances you find. It's like what Yalor says about the mentioning and remembering of little details making a true friendship (technically I think she's talking about forming useful *diplomatic* friendships, but we'll focus on the more innocent application of her wisdom, you know?). I need to hear your random stories. Anything. Like, for example, the time you typed "mashed tomatoes" instead of "mashed potatoes" into the food synthesizer. (Your culinary genius is already missed)

Anyway, I'm sure you're bursting with excitement to hear about life in the metal cave we call home:

I tied a cup holder onto my hover chair and it was amazing until I went through the lab doors, and Rolmz and I learned that protein juice cleans surprisingly well from tile. Rolmz has gone through three different nail polish colors (dark pink, purple, light pink) while she's continued research. Yalor is working on trade agreements and finding refugee resources while she's away from the main diplomatic stuff. She also mentioned something about beginning work on a truce. Pretty cool, right?

Once we get a message back from you, we'll prepare someone else to send over. It might be me (that'd be amazing!!) and then we'll start sending the team and the whole base over in groups. Then we'll never have to go into a bomb shelter again *and* we'll be able to see the stars again *and* we'll never have to wear radiation suits again.

Hopefully, the Hopper put you in a place with a good, boring job and some nice, simple people. I write with love when I say that you deserve some boredom. Lots of it. You deserve a gentle routine with tasks that take up no more space in your mind than the time they take to complete. You deserve such an abundance of time, predictable events, and consistency that you can lay on a soft chair, digesting thoughts like food, and realize, "lovely, there's nothing I must or particularly want to do." Doesn't that sound *nice*?

Of course, I hope you *eventually* find some entertainment—maybe explore interesting places or pick up a new hobby. But I think small doses of boredom are good for everyone.

M # S S S S A G E S 1 - # 1 0 1 0 ? 1 0 #

Wishing you warm quilts and pretty sunsets(send a photo!),  
Santren

Mezean:

Are you okay? Your vitality recorder is giving me weird readings. It glitched really bad when you first arrived. Even though you've been there a month, it hasn't become normal. Your average heart rate is around 160 bpm, about 50 higher than it should be. Your metabolic rate and respiratory rates are elevated too. Santren says it's residual effects of Hopper lag or technological disruptions through dimensions. I don't know. It's strange, but not in a broken, random way. The data still kind of makes sense. For example, your heart, metabolic, and respiratory rates all lower for prolonged durations. That's you sleeping. But it's still weird because those durations take up 13 of your day. So you're constantly exhausted and can't respond to our messages it seems. Maybe you lost your communicator? Or maybe you ended up in the wrong dimension or were transformed like that first animal test subject or something else? Sorry if I'm annoying. You're probably very busy and you're going to respond to this message soon. Then I'm going to feel very stupid.

Sleep well! Maybe lying unconscious for eight hours seems lame, but the basic functions of your body like memory retention, mood control, stress management, and immune system functioning find it very entertaining.

Holo-chat functioning is online by the way. Someone will always pick up your call. Yalor, who read this message over my shoulder, wants to add that she would like to see your face because you have a lovely face. I don't know how to add to that. Have a nice day/night.

—Rolmz L

My lunardew ,

I still wish I had been there to say good-bye to you. While I respect Rolmz's technological abilities, I hadn't anticipated her breakthrough with the Hopper and someone being sent away so quickly. Santren and Rolmz don't know why you agreed to it, and even I can't figure it out. I'm not questioning

your decision—just thinking of you. If you did it out of kindness, are you remembering to be kind to yourself? If it was out of fear, do you feel safe now?

Tell me—if your emotions would feel steadier placed in words.

As overwhelming as your situation is, please take steps to make yourself comfortable. You're worthy of a life handled with confidence, though it may require research and boring tasks. Try to make new friends. Put yourself in situations where there's at least a chance to be accepted and cared for. Taking that first step is all I ask for.

A dose of home for you: the base went on lock down yesterday. We sat in the bomb shelter and played Tralloc, but it was strange being partnered with someone else when I'm so used to playing with you. I also reviewed the Direction on Galactic War Crimes—our next diplomatic meetings will focus on convincing the Milky Way to enforce it.

Civilized, isn't it? We have rules on how we can and cannot murder and devastate one another. I don't know if they're a sign of our humanity or a confirmation we have none. It's *sickening*. Imuxiat know the effects of their bombs. Of course, they don't care, so they can simply continue obliterating whatever obstructs their people's inflating egos—because reality pinched between pride and fear is whatever the wealthiest person says it is. An Imuxiat once explained to me, in complete sincerity, that some humans don't have weaknesses like some don't have rights.

I'm so glad you're away from our Earth. I would greatly enjoy a message from you.

Rolmz is too shy to explain how worried she is and Santren can't recognize his own emotions through eyes scrunched in a permanent smile, but we need a message from you. You're scaring us. Even if you're cussing or sobbing, we will take your hell over your absence.

Yours eternally, Yalor

Dear Mezean,

Open your messages, pretty please!!!!!! Pleeeeeeeas-seeeee!!!



M # S S S S A G E S 1 - # 1 0 1 0 ? 1 0 #

Wishing you enough time to respond, Santren

Mezean:

Hi. This message is a sort of test-run to make sure your communicator and the Hopper are still alright. The base was on lockdown for seven months. It was scary. And boring. I discovered boredom gives fear way too much room to grow. We were running on minimum power supplies and we didn't have any access to Hopper tech. But everything should be working well. Turning the tech off doesn't break the connection we have to you, only destroying it would do that. I keep telling myself that, but I'm still scared I'll find something broken.

I made you a playlist during lockdown. You're welcome to consider that a bribe for a response. I think you fill space like music does. So listening to songs that remind me of you has helped me deal with you being gone. And being in lockdown. Probably kind of weird, but at least you're getting some maybe decent song recommendations from it?

I think I'm going to hack the visual controls of your communicator. It's been seven months, no responses, and your vitality readings are still strange. And sorry if my messages seem off. The factory that produced my anti-anxiety patches was bombed. I'm weaning myself off of them.

Sorry my messages are so awkward. I can't read past messages sent to you, but I know that Yalor and Santren are more conversational. Maybe I should be too. Half of my head knows that I'm your friend as much as Santren and Yalor are. The other half feels sort of arrogant for messaging you because I'm not as interesting? I don't know. Like I'm rude to assume this really great person wants to hear about me hacking Imuxiat channels to watch new episodes or taking apart bracelets to make new ones. I hope you're not dead.

—Rolmz L

My lunar dew,

Rolmz hacked the visual controls of your communicator. We lowered the power use of the rest of the base to focus it upon the Hopper, your vitality recorder, and your communicator so Rolmz could do more intricate operations. With most

of the base pitched in darkness, everyone crowded into the lab to watch the main screen fill with your communicator's view. From what we assumed to be the perspective of a shelf, we saw a single room with an unfamiliar adult, a two-year-old, and a plethora of historic objects that are still common on your Earth.

Santren rambled fun facts about those objects while he, Rolmz, and a few others tried to find out where you were. The rest of us had our eyes glued to the screen, waiting for you to enter.

That's why I didn't notice Rolmz comparing your vitality recorder to the baby.

I didn't see her nails being stripped of nail polish and repainted with blood. I didn't see her frantically recording data—not until she brushed a trembling hand against my arm and slid the holoscreen full of data to me.

Baby sleeps? *Your* heart rate lowers. Baby is cuddled? *Your* temperature increases. Baby walks? *Your* respiration rate increases.

We thought the tech was broken, we thought a gas leak was distorting our minds, we thought the Imuxiat hacked us—silly little human brains insulated in silly little human excuses.

Two hours have passed since then and, regardless of how we check, your strange vital readings match those of a baby, specifically *this* two-year-old. Santren and many others are still comparing the data, and Rolmz is in her room praying for the first time since her father died.

I'm sorry, Mezean. I hate war. It's a damn disease and I don't know why the most lethal pestilence has the least researched cure.

Yours eternally despite this absolute bullshit, Yalor

My lunardew,

I know you can't access these letters, but I need somewhere to write down my thoughts and get a vague feeling of someone listening. Perhaps, when this situation is resolved, you'll enjoy seeing these messages.

Rolmz left her room long enough to organize the research on changing you back—there's a variety of options.

M # S S S S A G E S 1 - # 1 0 1 0 ? 1 0 #

Though this situation begs to differ, the Hopper is still working perfectly. From its perspective, it perfectly achieved “minimal dimensional impacts” and “minimal hazards”. Morphing you into a baby meant starting you off on a fresh slate—far less dimensional alterations—and babies survive with little effort on their own—very safe. If nothing else, I’m relieved we have working tools to save you.

I promise you’ll be okay. But even if you could read this, that means nothing. The impermanence of suffering does nothing to change its nature. Whether you’re scared and disgusted or oblivious and thinking you’re a normal toddler, you’re helpless—now and if memories of this incident shadow the rest of your life.

We should’ve set the machine to “maximum dimensional impact”. We should’ve made their dimension tremble and shake with your arrival, twisted an entire forest into your home and carved mountains into your guards. We would’ve restrung the planets for you and changed the laws of physics to obey you rather than gravity—pressing the “maximum” button would’ve been an effortless action, consequences of dimensional collapse be damned. You deserve to take up space, to not be filtered into whatever is most convenient—you were not made to be convenient, it’s not in *any* human’s nature to be convenient. The confines of blind machines or closed minds should not be the walls of your existence, all three syllables of your name should be carefully held in people’s mouths—but your name isn’t even Mezean now. I don’t know your name.

You don’t know why I call you lunar dew.

Yours eternally, Yalor

Dear Mezean,

Yalor sent messages with explanations to your friends and family outside of the base. There were only so many details she could mention without breaking confidentiality, but she constructed a story held together by fancy words and white lies.

Since Hopper evacuation has been canceled until we better understand everything, the team is busy researching—mainly how to change you back or prevent a repeat of your

situation. Rolmz is so busy she hasn't even had time to paint her nails (it's such a small but incredibly strange thing to see her bare fingernails, you know? There are weirder things—like you being a baby and Yalor investigating war crimes in hopes of making a truce—but Rolmz's unpainted nails are all I can focus on??). Rolmz is stressed and complains about the lack of resources for scientists who aren't researching luxury goods or lethal weapons, but the team is managing.

We were all talking about how bizarre it is to think of you as a baby. We feel like older siblings or mentors with you now, but that relationship doesn't really *exist* between us, you know? We've always been *friends*. So now we have to do this awkward balance of technically sending messages to baby-you, but we know that it's going to be back-to-normal Mezean actually reading them, and we can only guess so much about the future and... you get it. Even Yalor—the *diplomat* with words that are magnets for *anything* she desires—doesn't know what to say sometimes!

But don't worry about it, alright? Everything will find its place in your life, even this crazy stuff. You may not like certain parts (and that's totally okay), but I hope you'll appreciate how different parts of your life complement each other, even if their matches are decades apart. And I hope you'll be proud to know that you're the one who stitched it all together.

If I focus on just the screen as I can type, I can imagine you're on the edge of my peripheral vision and responding to what I say. It's really nice.

I wish we'd played one more game of Tralloc before you left.

Wishing you good luck practicing walking (I'd offer advice but, you know, *hover chair*), Santren

My lunardew,

The Imuxiats have called a galactic summit for negotiations—they couldn't be bothered to let the dust settle from their 7-month bombing expedition. *Oh*, but *pardon* my ignorance. I'm *sure* if we waited any more than *five weeks* the Imuxiat generals' new *medals* would've lost their shine before they had a chance to debut themselves at a *fancy* galactic summit.

M # S S S S A G E S 1 - # 1 0 1 0 ? 1 0 #

You can imagine how optimistic I am.

I'm still unsure how to write to you, though I certainly wish to do so—even mimicking our conversations is a joy. I've settled on writing to your future self, which I hope you will enjoy.

Of course, writing to your future self requires me to address the issue of your memory. Although Santren won't hear a word about memory loss, that's exactly what Rolmz has confirmed. She's included memory concerns into her reversal research, and has so far concluded that the memory loss was not the fault of the Hopper, but your undeveloped baby brain. Few memories could form, and childhood amnesia will deteriorate them until they surface as nothing but an overactive imagination, vivid *deja vu*, or an attraction to fictional worlds. Rolmz certified this during the few times she's observed you, as, based upon your behavior, you think you're an average toddler in your normal dimension. Even if you were to read these messages right now, you'd have no way of realizing that *you're* Mezean—I suppose that, even with your memories returned, you may doubt that these letters are for you since we seem to write more for ourselves at times. I promise, however, that every line is written with you in mind.

The concerns of your memory have made me wonder if we *should* transform you back. Currently, you're on your new Earth with absolutely no guilt from leaving us behind. The stress of trying to live two lives in two dimensions is gone. You're completely free from the problems and memories of our dimension and our Earth.

Regardless of your current state and memory, I hope you're taking care of yourself. Whether it's you or someone else doing that caring, it's important, especially after your ordeal. Maintaining yourself isn't a set of motions to be carried out, but rather a lifelong process to be learned, adjusted, and enjoyed. Treat it like one of Rolmz's holo-games if you must.

Yours eternally, Yalor

Dear Mezean,

Research is busy but *amazing*!!! We may have found a way to change you back!! There's a lot of trial and error (es-

pecially with trying to prevent another transformation. We sent a cat through the Hopper on some lighter settings and it appeared as a dog... so that might take longer than anticipated. It's alright, it was getting boring anyway). Yalor sends her love. Negotiations are super drawn out. She's worried about your memories, but I'm sure they'll be returned once Rolmz and I figure out the entire reversal process.

Anyway, that's all *bleh* stuff. By the time you're back to normal and reading this, you'll be sick of hearing it. You should be having lots of fun to make up for the baby mishap —but that's not to say that you only *now* deserve fun, or that you have to meet some suffering quota to have fun. That'd be stupid. Fun, relaxation, happiness —they're supposed to be the main pillars of life, and *bleh* things like productivity and grief are just there to add some contrast and support to those main pillars. Humans are too strange and funny to live focused on the *bleh* stuff because it's as simple as the fact that you deserve to feel good, you know? You remember that study Rolmz once did? The one about how fun increases serotonin which improves sleep, concentration, and energy levels? See? Even *science* wants you to have fun!

Wishing you lots laughter that fills you up, Santren

My lunardew, (written by Yalor, but copy and pasted into the communicator by yours truly, Santren. I think Yalor had... a *rough* day)

Trying to enforce the Direction of Galactic War Crimes is testing my patience to the point it may be a war crime itself.

At bare minimum, I want to contain the fighting so that the base can function as usual, but I am everyday astounded at how hatred warps facts until agreement is impossible—we can hardly agree upon our varying realities, let alone our varying opinions.

Some people on either side tell me that if I truly cared about the bombed children and nuclear fallout, I'd sell all my things and fight. They say the best way to make a difference is to make an explosion. I want to scream or sob until they realize that being a pacifist is not advocating for inaction nor the result of a cushioned life. I'm just as angry as they are—if not

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angrier; the angriest in the room, every room, because in either victory or defeat, *there is so much death*—yet my beliefs require me to be perfectly calm. The contradiction is bending me to the point that I am staring at two separate, unconnected parts of myself.

I know you have a good heart, but trust my experience when I tell you not to overdo it. When you're older, or however you are when you read this, fight enough to firmly plant your feet in the ground, but not so much that you blind yourself with all the dust you've kicked up. Don't settle for the status quo—I'm sure you or someone else is uncomfortably squeezed between those two words—but don't sacrifice your life to fighting. Don't.

Yours eternally, Yalor

Mezean:

Hi. Long time no write. I've been really busy. I felt bad. I couldn't face you until I had an answer. I'm so, so, so sorry. I had no idea. You deserve better. You deserve people who listen and know how to program your favorite breakfast into the food synthesizer. And you deserve to feel safe in silence or with a room of people. I know those are really small things, but I'm not good with the big, grand stuff like Yalor. Sorry. For everything.

Anyway. We found a way to un-do your transformation. All we need is a nebula reactor. It will strengthen the Hopper's reach and energy capacity. That will allow me to access your dimension and adjust you to, mostly, how you were when you left. Honestly, I'm not completely sure how it'll work. I might experiment with abiotic material first. That'll be really easy to weave in and out of dimensions.

I hope you're doing okay. If you're not, that's okay. We could cry together, if you like? Wait, that's weird. But I don't know how to rephrase it. It's really nice that Yalor is level-headed and Santren is optimistic, but it'd be really, *really* nice if I had someone to cry with. Maybe you feel the same. We can look at this message, know we're both crying, and then not feel so bad.

—Rolz L

My lunar dew, (copy and pasted into the communicator by the usual. I was bribed by real apples)

Knowing that you're safe usually gives me comfort. I can ignore the long hours and my radiation suit's scratchiness because you're a victory the Imuxiats will never have a chance to ruin. However, now that we have an attempt to reverse your transformation, the situation seems more complicated. We have no right to make such a large decision for you. You may very well be happier as you are. Don't mistake me—I'm not necessarily glad that you're a baby, but it's reality now. We may be hurting you by refusing to accept it, clinging to the Mezean we know and not adjusting to this new Mezean. We love you, and that means we take care of you as you are—once the Hopper is developed enough to avoid unintended transformations, we could send someone to your Earth, where you're safer.

I should preface that this suggestion does not come from an ignorance of the imperfections of your Earth nor a disregard for them in comparison to our Earth. You have difficulties there and I have no wish to shame you for being naturally distressed. The existence of worse problems does not diminish your own—rather, comparing your problems can complicate your stress far more than ease it. You must let your problems pass with whatever emotions accompany them, excluding guilt for feeling them. Guilt, especially this type, is quite useless. There's not much it can do that love couldn't do better. And while utility is a foggy lens to see emotion through, I still see no sense in drowning yourself in a feeling like that.

I expect to be back in a few weeks—without a treaty, of course, because why would the Imuxiats sign something that doesn't put their names in the *Milky Way Today's* gore obsessed stories or buy them a sky home for each planet and its moons?

Yours eternally, Yalor

DEAR MEZEAN,

THE IMUXIATS SIGNED THE TREATY.

*THEY ACTUALLY SIGNED THE TREATY.*

WE HAVE A *TRUCE*!!!!!! I'VE NEVER BEEN SO HAPPY IN MY LIFE.



M # S S S S A G E S 1 - # 1 0 1 0 ? 1 0 #

WISHING YOU THE BEST TIME OF YOUR LIFE AND  
THAT TIME MOVES FASTER SO I CAN TALK TO YOU  
AGAIN, SANTREN

My lunar dew,

Based on what Santren told me, he already sent you a celebratory message about the treaty. Yes. Yes, yes, yes. We have a treaty and it's real. The Imuxiats were stubborn brats about trade route agreements and established borders right until their fingers glided over the holo-screen's contract, but they *signed* it. I sobbed pure gratitude the moment I was alone in a bathroom.

Yours eternally, Yalor

Dear Mezean,

(I still can't believe we have a *treaty* woooooo) Rolmz wanted me to message you saying that finding the nebula reactor for the Hopper upgrade is more difficult than we expected. They're usually quite easy to find, but the market is looking sparse for some reason.

When Rolmz mentioned this, Yalor brought up what she said in an earlier message—about *not* changing you back. I read over what she said when I copied and pasted it into the communicator, and I disagree.

You didn't sign up for becoming a baby—you stepped into the Hopper thinking you'd continue being *that* Mezean on your new Earth and that soon your friends and family would join you so we'd all be safe. So shouldn't we do everything in our power to give you what you *actually* signed up for? You know what I mean????

Yalor suggested we take a break from messaging you, put some space between ourselves and “clinging to the old version of you.” I think she's just nervous about Rolmz and I's research going wrong. Or maybe she's not sure what to do with herself now that we have a treaty. I think she's paranoid—about the research, about the treaty, about everything.

Wishing you some good soup (I just ate some, it was delicious),  
Santren

My lunar dew,

I don't know what Santren has told you, but please know that I truly do have your best intentions at heart. I know, despite our disagreement, that Santren does too. I think I've convinced him and Rolmz to take a break from messaging you, which will allow us to see the bigger picture and its full array of options. Rolmz and the team are going to put more effort into figuring out how to send someone through the Hopper without unintended transformations. Perhaps we could send someone to care for you until you're an adult. You could decide for yourself then if you wanted to attempt the reversal—after, of course, the interesting conversation explaining that you're an interdimensional refugee. At the very least, we could continue the Hopper evacuation and ensure that you're cared for.

Yours eternally, Yalor

Dear Mezean,

So technically we're on a break from messaging you so sshhhhh. This is our little secret. The order for the nebula reactor *finally* went through. We have no idea why it took four months to order something so simple (Yalor suggested supply chain issues even though she couldn't pinpoint an exact problem area), but there shouldn't be any delays now.

Rolmz did a check-up on you—don't worry, we aren't *constantly* hacking your communicator's visual controls—and you're nearly four now! It's strange but nice to see how similar you are. Despite the memory loss and babyfication, you're still the Mezean we know. Same favorite words, same favorite colors, the inklings of the mannerisms you used on the day you went through the Hopper. That was about two years ago. Wow. Time is wild.

I wish we could do something sooner. Anything. Like somehow reach into your dimension and cushion your life with soft words and softer plushies, raise your gaze to the stars so you realize, "there is a dimension full of people who would implode the stars to give me enough light to play by." Even if you aren't thinking about that, you should look at the stars. They're so *pretty*, you know? And their light has traveled so far to say hello to you. A few blinks is all the greeting they need.

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Wishing that you somehow feel all our love, Santren

Mezean:

We received the nebula reactor! Yay! Now we have to decide exactly what we're going to do with it. I agree a bit with Yalor and Santren. I'm just really uncertain. I'll let them decide.

—Rolmz L

My lunar dew,

Rolmz has partially installed the nebula reactor into the Hopper. I'm still unsure what to make of it. I've been planning to argue that we wait until you're an adult and then ask what you want, but it'd be somewhat pointless—this current situation would repeat. Again, you'd be torn away from a life you're well established in while

Shit.

Evacuation—Imuxiats broke treaty. Bastards.

They have a fleet of photo-nuclear powered ships and they—can't explain all but each ship needs hordes of nebula reactors

Shit

My lunar dew,

We have to destroy the Hopper. It's built into the lab—there's no way to transport all this equipment, and just turning it off leaves too large a chance of it falling into Imuxiat hands. Rolmz is trying to send these messages to you before we leave. Even with the nebula reactor only half-way integrated, weaving in this abiotic material should be easy. It'll be introduced into your reality so that somehow, whether it's days or decades after this moment, you can read our messages. If you're seeing this, it worked. These messages are for you—yes, made for *you* and sent for *you*. Reread that until you realize that every thought, every piece of advice, every word is for you. You're wondrous enough to be from another dimension though you haven't a single memory to corroborate it.

Please know that we love you. We nestled you into a different dimension to keep you safe. Surround yourself with

people who care for you like we would've. I know, like us, they can't be perfect and you'll have to forgive people at times, but remember that forgiveness should be an affirmation of your standards, not a denial of them. I understand if you don't forgive us.

Hi, Rolmz here. I really hope you get these messages. They'll send in a few minutes. They probably won't mean too much with your memory loss. I just hope some part of you knows they're for you. Don't wiggle out of the idea, please. This. Is. For. You. I wish I wrote to you more. I never knew what to say. Now I don't know how to say everything in just two minutes. I'm sorry.

Santren typing now. I love you so much!!! Don't forget it!!! You deserve unlimited second chances for yourself, unlimited, okay? Remember to eat and sleep and exercise however you think is fun. I can't stand the idea of being sick with your Earth's deceptively undeveloped medicine. Remember sunblockers. Wait. Your Earth can't even cure cancer properly. LOTS of sunblockers then. Take up space, be loud, live your life. If dimensional barriers can excuse you, people can at least respect your presence. Yalor: balance is everything, lunar dew. A variety of friends, food, hobbies, everything, indoor and outdoor time. Enjoy and protect the clean air for me. Your body is good because it keeps you alive, not because it's attractive. Balance. Balance. Santren: SPen money on what make u happy, your home should be a shrine of reminders of why u wan to live. Your best effort won't be the same everyday and that's how it's supposed to be. you're amazing and you deserve to think that about yourself. don't pick at pimples or scabs or anything. i love you i had to make sure you knew (from rolmz) Your happiness is everything. don't force yourself to be happy. saving yourself is saving someone. Walk with a friend at night. i can hardly see that i'm typing in crying, i'm so sorry sorry sorry don't be like me, only brave in retrospect. we love you. Doing a little is better than doing nothing. we won't forget you, rest please ressst, don't spend your life saying i can't wait until whatever happens\_\_001100111010011110101

C()MMMMPLSTE\_@(\*\$&

# "Birthday, 1945"

Orana Loren  
*The University of Sydney*

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*Vyatskoye, USSR*

Kim Jong-suk tipped the bowls into the sink. It had been a real success, her dinner – the last night on Soviet soil. It had been a real feast. The fish, perhaps, had been a little overdone, and the noodles were rather too slippery with vinegar. She had used up the last of the white rice tonight, and there was not a thing left for tomorrow's breakfast but a little brown rice, a radish and a tin of ham. It did not matter. Her dinner had been worth it – a real success – a real feast.

Now, the remains of that feast were floating in water. It swilled around her forearms, greasy and lukewarm. Every now and then, a strip of cabbage or a crumb of hard-boiled egg would slide between her fingers and make her shiver. The steam from the washing-water rose and settled on the window-panes until the glass ran slick and streaming as Jong-suk's own hands. It was bad for the children, Jong-suk knew, but it would be worse to open the windows. There must be snow somewhere, though it was only a week into September – there must be some frozen tundra to the north, or the wind would not run so sharply through the hairs behind her neck, or over her wrists when she collected the morning water.

In the next room, a thread of laughter died away. One of the officers had broken out into song. Another officer, perhaps Jong-suk's husband, was beginning to hum a harmony. The laughter rippled again.

"Have you finished packing for tomorrow?" asked Ri Ok-hui. She sat on a crate in the corner, bouncing Shura gently on her knee. Jong-suk rinsed a bowl and set it aside to drain.

"Almost," Jong-suk said. "Don't touch that, Yura," she added, as her son leaned towards the stove. "I was going to finish this afternoon, but Yura came back for lunch with a huge tear in his trousers."

"Oh, yes?" said Mrs Ri.

"He'd been playing with the chickens, he said. And, of course, there's still Shura's winter jacket to make – but it shouldn't take too long, he's still so small."

"It must be like making doll's clothes!" said Mrs Ri.

"But much harder to measure!" Jong-suk said. "The way he squirms. And in a few months' time, he'll have grown so big I'll have to make another. I sometimes wonder whether I hadn't better just pin a blanket around him and be done with it."

Behind the door, the officers had started to dance. Their steel-capped boots clattered heavily over the bare board floor, as the man with the hum began to stomp and clap in time. The tune they were singing sounded vaguely familiar. Jong-suk's husband had been singing something, the first time she had met him, far away in the Manchurian camp. She wished she could remember what.

"Mother," said Yura, "I'm hungry."

"You can't be, you just ate," Jong-suk said, but Yura was not listening. "I want to hold Shura," he said to Mrs Ri.

"I don't think so," said Mrs Ri. "Why don't you sit down and tell your mother about the chickens?"

"I'm the best brother, you know," he said, hopping a little on one foot. "My mother says –"

"Don't touch the fire, Yura! Look, Shura is sleeping nicely – why don't you have a little lie-down, too? We have a big trip tomorrow."

"But I can't fit on Mrs Ri's lap, Mother. I'm much too big." Yura hopped again. "I'd fall off," he added.

The kitchen door opened. For a moment, the officers' singing came strong and clear, but it faded again as the door clicked shut. Jong-suk's husband strode across the floor. He was still in his uniform, but he had taken his cap off and his jacket was hanging carelessly open. "Where's my Yura?" Kim Il-sung asked. "How are you feeling?" he added, to Jong-suk.

"It's like an engine-room in here!"

"I want to see an engine!" Yura said. Kim Il-sung leaned forward and opened a window. His shirt was creased a little around the collar, and the cuffs of his jacket were damp with sweat. In the stove-light, his forehead glistened faintly like some strange sun.

"I hope you don't tire yourself out," Kim Il-sung said to his wife. "If you're finding it hard to stand, just let me know. I'd be happy to take the boys, and Mrs Ri could finish the washing up."

"I'm feeling fine," said Jong-suk.

"I want to see an engine!" Yura repeated. Kim Il-sung strode over and swung him up into the air.

"Do you want to see an engine?" he asked, as Yura shrieked. "How about a steamer? A huge, big, shiny steamer with smoke pouring out of its – what do you call it? – its funnel? Would you like to see one?"

Yura shrieked again. "You'd better put him down," Jong-suk said. "He'll wake the baby."

"Well," said Kim Il-sung, setting Yura down on the floor, "if you're a good boy and settle down quickly tonight, we'll all go and ride on one tomorrow. How does that sound?"

"Did you find out what the ship is called?" Mrs Ri asked.

"It's the *Pugachev*," Kim Il-sung said. "I believe it's the same one that you're going on, if your husband told me correctly."

"Oh, wonderful!" Mrs Ri said.

"Are you looking forward to going home?" Kim Il-sung asked his wife, and his smile was broad and bright. Inexplicably, Jong-suk found herself beaming, too, filled suddenly to the brim with joy. It was like a huge horizon, she thought, right across her mouth.

"I am," she said. "I am looking forward to it." And she imagined that word, *home*, rolling like the sun from his mouth to hers.

Kim Il-sung asked her the same question again, in bed that night. "Are you looking forward to going home?" It was au-

tumn, and the sheets were thin, but his bare shoulders were still damply gleaming. Beyond the window, the River Amur glinted black in the moonlight. The wind had died down, and a cool, midnight hush lay over the valley.

"Are you awake?" Kim Il-sung asked.

"Yes," said Jong-suk. Her husband laughed gently. He laid one hand on her swollen stomach.

"Are you awake, Mother?" he said.

"Don't say that," said Jong-suk. Kim Il-sung laughed again, and his voice smelled of kerosene. "Were you singing something this evening?" Jong-suk asked.

"What?" Kim Il-sung said.

"Weren't you singing a song?" she said. "I thought it was the one you always sung in the camps."

"As I was leaving home ..." he murmured. His whisper tickled her stomach.

"Yes, exactly!" she said.

"That wasn't the one I was singing," Kim Il-sung said.

"*Mother in tears at the gate ...*" Jong-suk continued.

"That wasn't what I was singing," Kim Il-sung said.

"You're in a nostalgic mood tonight, Mother," he said, and he rolled back onto his pillow and grinned.

The *Pugachev* arrived in Wonsan Harbour on the nineteenth of September. Kim Il-sung clutched Jong-suk's arm gaily as they stepped across the gangplank and onto the wharf. "Right foot," he murmured. "Left foot." Korean soil.

Above them, the sky was clear and blue. It was strange to walk shadowless beneath the midday sun, it was strange to be so warm and invisible. The sun loved Jong-suk's husband – it seemed to linger on him. Striding through the crowds, Kim Il-sung did not seem at all cowed by the many-faced shrieks of this metropolis. A shipman pushed hastily past them; Kim Il-sung only smiled and stepped neatly aside to let him through.

Jong-suk could not feel as glad as he. Like two fat hands, her tiredness pushed her down from her shoulders, crumpling and weak. It had grown worse since they left Vyatskoye. Perhaps she had been sea-sick; perhaps the thing inside her had been – it wriggled enough, that was certain, it



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had writhed and kicked all week long. And Jong-suk had been struggling to think clearly. But Kim Il-sung had been so good to her, minding the boys, grabbing Yura's belt to stop him falling overboard, rocking Shura when he cried. Jong-suk had forgotten to pack gloves for Yura, and Kim Il-sung had taken a pair of his own socks from the bag and wrapped them warmly around Yura's hands. Yura had not wanted to take them off, even at night. Jong-suk had seen them bobbing red on his hands that evening, as Kim Il-sung put the children to bed.

"*Sleep, sleep well, my baby,*" her husband had sung, bouncing Yura vigorously on the mattress,

*"Grow up quickly and shoulder your  
gun,  
And fight, you in front, I behind you,  
Shouting cheers of national liberation."*

With this last line, Kim Il-sung had jiggled Yura so violently that he fell, shrieking, onto the floor, and Shura had woken and begun to fret. Now, as Kim Il-sung guided Jong-suk through the docks, the thing inside her stomach gave a huge lurch. The floods of people seemed to spin a little, dizzy or drunk under the hot sky.

"Did you remember to bring all of the bags?" asked Jong-suk.

"Don't worry," Kim Il-sung said. "Comrade Ahn's already taken them down to the station."

"What about the small green bag? The one with the food in it?"

"It's all taken care of," said Kim Il-sung. "The bags will be ready and waiting when we get to the train."

Mrs Ri must have gone on ahead with her husband. It made perfect sense, of course – and it was kind of them to take the bags, so that Jong-suk would not have to. She would not have wanted to slow them down. Yet it felt strange, still, without Mrs Ri there beside her. Each of the faces Jong-suk passed on the street were cold, and alien.

"Where are we going?" Yura asked.

"We're going to the train station," Jong-suk said.

"Where are we going after that?"

"Home!" Kim Il-sung answered. "Home! Back to the borderlands! Wouldn't you like to see a river?"

"I've already seen a river," Yura said.

"This one is better," Kim Il-sung said. "This is a better river," and he squeezed his wife's hand and smiled.

The train, when they found it, was slick and new. It was easy to find their carriage, to make their way to their compartment, to check that the bags were stowed beneath the benches. And everything was there, waiting for them, just as Kim Il-sung had said. The green bag was resting beneath Jong-suk's own seat, the handle facing carefully upwards.

Jong-suk sank down heavily onto the bench. The boards beneath her were wide and gold, like everything else around her – the sun, and the window, and Kim Il-sung's broad smile. Jong-suk wished she knew when this would end. With each passing year, it seemed that her pregnancies were getting worse. She could hardly remember a time when she did not have children, so thick-set was her memory, so slow-moving was the sun. Outside the window, a single man lugged his trunk up the platform steps. He gazed up at the notice-board, and squinted.

It had never been warm like this in the Manchurian camps. "Fetch the wood, Comrade" – she remembered them calling her that. "Use the dark yarn." And it had always been dark back then, even at midday – dark with the dead light of the northern winter. When the wind blew, the branches scraped against each other, dry and cold. Without their lichen, the trees all looked the same. They were like graves, Jong-suk had thought. They were like dead things. And there was nothing in between them, no leaves, no roads; nothing but a stump, here and there, or a footprint half-sunk with snow. She had gotten lost there, once. She had been going to fetch snow to melt down for the washing, and she had forgotten to wear her gloves, and she had thought she had better go back for them. But she could not find the camp. As she wandered through the snow, gripping her two pails, her palms had begun to bleed a little. Between the trees, Jong-suk had seen a grey glimmer, and she had raced towards it, thinking it was the river – but it was not the river; it was only a small stream,

and beyond it a clearing strange and bare. No wind blew. In the centre of the clearing, a boulder stood alone, black against the untrodden snow. And, as she stepped across the stream, Jong-suk heard a revolver shot. A young man's voice shouted indistinctly. Jong-suk looked to her left, and a bullet was lying in the snow, a few inches from her foot.

"Fool!" said Kim Il-sung. "Fool!" And Jong-suk had never been sure whether Kim Il-sung had been referring to her, or to the soldier who had shot at her. She had stumbled across a training field, she discovered later on, but she had not known it at the time. She had only stared at Kim Il-sung blankly, and a single red drop of blood had fallen from her palm onto the snow.

Jong-suk fell pregnant with Yura one year later. It had been disconcerting, seeing it happen for the first time. Her small, flat stomach began to balloon strangely. It looked like an insect bite, Jong-suk had thought, or like a mosquito had laid eggs inside her – though the eggs, of course, were already inside her; they had been hiding there her whole life, and she had known it, and yet somehow until then Jong-suk had never quite believed it. Jong-suk knew, too, that the big ball of her stomach would sink again once Yura was born, but it never did. At the end of that first long birthday, as the gold clouds tore their skins and the sun cut rivers through the window, Jong-suk looked down and her stomach beneath the sheets was as full and heavy as ever. She continued to grow, in the weeks and months that followed. The sky turned red; Jong-suk fell pregnant with Shura, bore him, gave birth to him – her stomach only grew two times huger. No longer did the maternity dresses she used to wear fit her: Jong-suk had to alter them all, stitching carefully by hand, because she could not lean over to use her sewing machine.

Now, as the train pulled away from the station, Kim Il-sung touched Jong-suk's stomach gently. "Are you tired, Mother?" he asked.

"A little," Jong-suk said. "Did you manage to find out what time we'll arrive?"

"No," Kim Il-sung said, "I'm not sure."

"Will there be anybody there to meet us?"

"I'm not sure," her husband said. "I didn't get a chance to ask."

Outside the window, the train was leaving the suburbs behind. They passed over a bridge; the gardens grew longer, wider; the train crossed a river. There were fewer houses, here, and fewer roads. In the grain-fields, the millet heads hung white and heavy. They trailed, pearly, between lines of grass and milk-gold corn.

"What a warm day it is," Kim Il-sung said. "Almost like late summer."

"Yes," Jong-suk agreed. "Like summer."

Kim Il-sung woke her early the next morning. "We're here!" he announced.

Jong-suk rubbed her eyes blearily, and a huge wave of nausea racked through her body. She looked out the window. "Are you sure?" she asked. Her husband only grinned.

"What about the bags?" Jong-suk asked later, as the family stood alone on the empty platform. The thing inside Jong-suk was heavier than ever. "Where have all the bags gone?" she repeated, cradling her stomach gingerly.

"Don't worry!" Kim Il-sung said. "It's all taken care of."

"Have they been sent up to the house?" Jong-suk asked.

"Don't worry!" Kim Il-sung laughed. "Why worry? It's such a fine August day."

Kim Il-sung was right. It was a glorious day, the most gorgeous summer's day that ever was. The very earth smelled of it – each tuft of grass, each shrub, each thicket, was alive and stirring. Yura wanted to scramble around in search of beetles; Kim Il-sung said he did not mind, he was happy to wait – it was so lovely to be outdoors, in this weather, and there was no need to rush. There was no need to rush, in the light mountain breeze, in the bright clearings and the green-striped woods. The trunks of the trees were pale and slim, each limb a blanket of leaves and silken buds. Jong-suk's stomach gave another thick heave.

"In September, this whole mountain will be covered in snow-pears," Kim Il-sung said.

"In September?" Jong-suk asked.

"It's quite a walk up to the house, you know," Kim Il-sung said. "Do you think you'll be able to make it?"

Jong-suk did not think she could make it, but she did not really have a choice. She walked slowly up the mountain, bearing her stomach with both hands. Ahead, Kim Il-sung and the children were walking quietly: Yura holding his father's hand, Shura sleeping peacefully in Kim Il-sung's other arm. And it was strange, Jong-suk thought, as she walked up the mountain, how familiar the woods looked. One of the firs to the right of the path had a cleft in it, and a hollow centre. There was a clump of stumps, too, four of them all squashed up together, and all four cut to the same height. At one point, as they walked, a stream cut across the path. Kim Il-sung swung the boys over, one after the other, then helped Jong-suk across. There was a small clearing beyond the stream, and a single boulder. An old bullet lay point-down in the grass near Jong-suk's feet. When Jong-suk looked up, her husband was smiling at her.

"Don't worry," Kim Il-sung said. "It's not far now."

"I think I need to rest," Jong-suk said. "I'm not sure I can make it."

"It's just over the next hill," Kim Il-sung said. "A few more steps, and then you can rest as much as you like."

As they rounded the last bend, a low log cabin began to appear through the trees. It was a new building, with bright sap-stained wood and two bought-plank doors. Hundreds of nails had been used to secure the roof-tiles, and the heads of these glinted silver in the sun, as Jong-suk stepped slowly up towards the door.

"Is this it?" Jong-suk asked.

"This is it," Kim Il-sung said. He marched up the step boldly and opened the door. It was not locked, she noticed. Jong-suk helped Yura off with his shoes, then slipped off her own, and stepped carefully through.

Three foreign men were already seated around the kitchen table. Two of the men were dressed in uniform, one blond, one dark; the other wore a square black suit. He was older than the others, and squatter, with the beginnings of a

hunch around his shoulders and creases sitting fat in his forehead.

"Il-sung –" Jong-suk began, but she stopped, for here were her own pots and pans, here was her own set of tea-bowls, the bowls that had once been her mother's, that Jong-suk had carried with her as a teenager all the way from Hoeryong. She had chipped one of the bowls two years ago when she was doing the washing-up. This chipped bowl stood now in the centre of the table, as one of the uniformed men leaned forward and stubbed his cigarette against its inner rim. And Jong-suk had not invited them in.

The blond man stood up. "Kim!" he said. "You're here at last!"

"You didn't half take ages!" said the second officer. "Tic and I were beginning to wonder if you'd missed the train or something."

"And after all our work unpacking, too," said the blond man.

"Il-sung –" Jong-suk began. "Il-sung –"

"It was good of you to get it all ready for us," Kim Il-sung said. "I know my wife will be glad to get settled in."

"Il-sung –"

"Who are all these people?" Yura asked.

"Why," said the blond man, "don't say your father hasn't told you about us?"

Kim Il-sung laughed. "Yura," he said, "Jong-suk, this is Colonel Charles Bonesteel, Colonel Dean Rusk and Mr Andrei Gromyko. My wife," he said to the men, "Mrs Kim Jong-suk, and my son Kim Jong-il. My youngest is still asleep."

It was difficult to make out their faces in the dim half-light. Unstripped logs drained the colour from the ceilings and walls and hung the air with the hot, dark scent of pine. Around the sink, a few stray beams of sun danced through the open window, but the light and wind could not penetrate the centre of the room, with its dark wood floor, and its table, and its tea-bowl of cigarette butts. A few tools lay by the cold wood-stove – a small axe, a pail of shavings, a large, new saw. As Jong-suk counted them, a wave of red twisted into her stomach and wrapped around her back.

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"Mrs Kim looks tired," said Gromyko. Beneath his spectacles, his brows were thick and brown. "Mrs Kim," he said, "why don't you sit down and have something to drink?"

"Whatever are you saying, Gromyko?" Bonesteel said. "There's no time for that!"

"What do you mean?" asked Jong-suk. Kim Il-sung gripped her hand gently.

"It's time," he said. "It's time."

"Time for what?" Jong-suk asked. "Please, Il-sung, I wish you would sit down for a minute and tell me what's going on. Please, Il-sung. I feel so sick." But her husband only smiled at her.

"It's time," he said again. "It's time. Don't you feel it, Mother?"

"Mrs Kim," said Rusk, stepping slowly towards her. "Lie down on the table."

Jong-suk backed away. "Why?" she asked.

"Please, Mother," said Kim Il-sung, and smiled at her with his wide sun-smile. "It's time to come home."

The men had pulled their chairs away from the table. They stood with Kim Il-sung, a little to one side, looking at Jong-suk expectantly. The thin blond man took out a lighter and held it to the end of his cigarette. The paper curled.

"Do you want one?" he said, to Kim Il-sung.

"Come on, Mother," said Yura. Jong-suk's stomach heaved sickeningly. "It's time to come home."

Jong-suk stepped towards the table. Nobody helped her, as she pulled herself up, hesitated, slid herself slowly towards the centre of the table-top. A thin ribbon of smoke wafted from the end of Bonesteel's cigarette down to Jong-suk's nose. Slowly, Jong-suk lowered her body down.

The pain rose instantly.

It was time – Kim Il-sung was right, of course he was. It was time, after all these months, after all these years, after all these nights of waiting. And her stomach was so tender, so pale, so flesh and full, as she glanced down the table: it was too tall to see past, it was too tall to see their faces or the dim window-light. A long, hot fist clenched itself around her spine and pulled its fingers through her uterus. Jong-suk closed her

eyes. She opened them. All she saw was churning pink.

"Are you going to be sick?" somebody asked. A baby was crying in the background – she could not recognise the sound. She could not breathe.

"Cigarette," Jong-suk said.

"What?"

"Cigarette!" She could not stand it! She could not breathe! Her whole, huge stomach was washed with pink light, and rising, and streaming. Her forehead was running pink – or hot – hot sweat – hot blood –

"Somebody fetch a towel!" A lighter clicked. "Yes, that will do –"

The pink-stained glass was sinking in the sky.

"You know," said the blond man, "my wife Peggy was much worse when she was having our eldest." The lighter clicked. "You should have heard her yell!"

"Oh, what's your son's name?" said the man in spectacles.

"Shirley," said the blond man.

"Oh."

She could not breathe! She could not feel! Her whole self from her breasts downwards was splitting pink! Pink blood –

"We need another!"

A frypan sizzled. A thin sliver of beef fell blood-downwards into a pool of smoking fat. A lighter clicked.

"You're doing so well," said Kim Il-sung, in the moonlit sun. His mouth was close, his lips were shivering. "Keep going, Mother. Keep going –"

For she had never felt anything like it. It was like granite pouring out – it was like earth, or sand. The water could not mask it. Its sharp edges grazed the soft flesh of her vagina, pushing out blood.

"I can't –" Jong-suk said, pushing out blood. "Come back inside –" Sharp rock, sharp steel. And Kim Il-sung beamed.

"It's coming!" he cried. "It's coming! It's coming out now!"

With the last push, an island burst from between Jong-



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suk's thighs. It was perfectly flat, perfectly circular, ringed by reefs and beaches, filled with soft, wet grass.

"Keep going!"

An ocean, shimmering green. It tumbled on the island's shores in white, beating waves. A fishing-boat rocked upon it, trailing a plastic net – no catch today, not yet.

"Keep going!"

And Jong-suk pushed out seashores, she pushed out shells, she pushed out deep-scored cliffs of magma two million years old. The cliffs rose and faded, the sea-shore dipped beyond the horizon; Jong-suk pushed out green fields and dripping paddies, rivers, lakes. A woman stood alone in a ploughed field, bending to lay her seed. On a lake, three geese sailed by gleamingly. Hills rose and filled the horizon, roads appeared and disappeared; Jong-suk pushed out villages, towns, railway-lines, a sprawling city.

"Look!" said somebody. "Gyeongbokgung Palace! Don't the people look small?"

The landscape changed. Jong-suk pushed out factories, belching smoke and glowing with electricity. She pushed out schools, apartment blocks, grey plains, grey fields; she pushed out forests. The trees were thick, the needles were dark, the moss was green and springing; Jong-suk pushed out sheer cliffs, and spiny mountains. She pushed out boulders, she pushed out streams, she pushed out camps and snow and bullets, she pushed out stumps and beetles and a huge, green mountain.

Jong-suk fell back. She breathed in once, slowly. She breathed out.

No longer was her stomach taut and round. Its surface was much huger now, more deeply contoured. Instead of veins, her body was threaded with rivers and winding roads. Trees and grain sprouted on her skin and hung around her navel, which was deeper now, and filled like a bay with saltwater. A train chugged along the left curve of her body, from her hip to her ribs to her throat.

Somebody held a bowl to Jong-suk's lips, and she sipped obediently. It was warm, and tasted of ocean.

Jong-suk could feel the breath of summer in the sea

that lapped around her feet. Beneath her head, the folds of Mount Paektu were pillowy with wildflowers and gold with afternoon bees. And above her stood Kim Il-sung, gleaming like the sun. His gaze broke through all the clouds and all the shifting sheets of blue.

"Thank you, Mother," Kim Il-sung said.

"Thank you, Mother," Yura repeated.

"Il-sung," Jong-suk said, "Where's the baby?"

Her husband leaned down and kissed her cheek. He smiled. "Don't worry," Kim Il-sung said. "It's time to rest."

"Where's my baby?"

Somewhere around her waist, Jong-suk heard a faint shout. "How about this one?" Gromyko stood far below, calling out across the room, calling across her stomach, calling from sea to sea. "How about this one?" and he held up a long, bright saw.

"Sure," called back Bonesteel, at Jong-suk's other hip. "It looks alright."

"Let's just get this over with," said Rusk.

Kim Il-sung smiled again. "Don't worry," he whispered. "It's time to rest."

And he stayed smiling over her, as the officers laid the teeth over Jong-suk's stomach and began to saw her body in half.

# Rot

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*Emerson College*

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The sky outside is a milky gray the night a Worm writhes inside of my stomach, and I have leftover pasta for dinner. My cat, Binky, curls up to me as I eat dinner on the couch, and I can feel the Worm inside of me, curling into the shape of a cinnamon roll before unfurling again, roughly the length and width of a pencil. Dull noise droning from the television drowns out the dissonance of living alone. The Worm cozies up to my intestines like a child might curl up to a teddy bear. Maybe it thinks it has found a friend. Maybe the Worm is enjoying my dinner with me, mushy old pasta and tasteless red wine. Vaguely, I wonder if the Worm is twenty-one. Is it responsible for me to be drinking alcohol when the Worm could very well be consuming it? It could be a child, for all I know. Although I assume drinking laws don't apply to the Worm coiled up in my stomach, I switch to water for the rest of the night. Binky butts my hand with her head, staring up at me with wide brown eyes. "I'll feed you later," I promise, lazily scratching behind her ear. I'm tired, though, and as I find myself dozing off in front of the television, I wake periodically to see Binky scavenging my pasta scraps, long tail swishing in front of the screen.

In the dead of night, an excruciating pain rouses me from my sleep. My skin is fire, my neck is stiff as a board, and as I sit up, I can feel every joint in my body cracking and groaning. A patch of my stomach throbs and burns, and when I lift my shirt, I find a growth of Rot leeching off of my skin. The size of a half-dollar, it oozes with sticky dark blood and pale yellow pus gathers around the edges of the cracks. A patch of Rot; small, but Rot nonetheless.

I can feel the Worm inside of me too, and when I examine my stomach closer, I can see it moving underneath the Rot, the width of a pen now, rather than a pencil. For a moment, I fret over whether or not the Worm will be hurt by the Rot, but it

seems healthier than I am, dancing ballet with my large intestine. The night swallows the light from my apartment, and my body is a shadow. I feel too sick to get up to further examine the Rot, so I fall back asleep in a feverish haze.

When the sky is a deeper heather gray, cut by slivers of white clouds, I call in sick to work. Food poisoning, I tell them, and no, I don't know when I'll be back. As I walk to the kitchen, I note the dishes from last night's dinner, left to collect dust in the living room. Binky is perched on the coffee table, licking the plate with her scratchy tongue, and I realize I forgot to feed her last night. I make a mental note to clean up and feed Binky later but for now, I have work to do. I toss the remains of the pasta in the trash and pour the wine from the other night out the window, watching blood-red liquid splatter onto concrete five stories down. I hope that a glass of water might make my mouth less dry, but when I turn on the faucet, it runs muddy brown and pools in my clogged sink. I scream, kick my wall, and end up with a stubbed toe on top of it all. I order a Brita on Amazon. It will arrive in six days, and I'll be dead of dehydration by then.

The food in my fridge smells rotten. When I open the door, I swear I hear a buzzing sound like a choir practice for a group of flies. I find no evidence of bugs, but the food in the fridge is going bad. A brown spot stretches across the skin of a tomato, and when I press my thumb into it, the fruit vomits out seeds and guts onto my hand. I spend the day cleaning out my fridge, carefully examining each bit of food. The leftover pizza from the other night has hit puberty, a peach fuzz of mold gathering near the crust. The milk is sour, and when I pick up the egg carton, I swear I can hear chirping, as if chicks are pecking at the smooth interior of the eggs, trying to break free. It takes me ten minutes to break all of the eggs into the sink, and when I'm done, I haven't found a single chick. Yellow yolk drips down the drain, the serous fluid of the egg white clinging to the metal of the sink.

Even the cat food reeks, and as I toss out brand new cans, I feel Binky's eyes on my back. "It's no good," I tell her, squatting down to her level and scratching her head. "I can't feed you right now, I don't want to make you sick. But I'll get you more

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food when I go shopping later, okay?” She meows and prances off to chase the mouse that’s been terrorizing my kitchen. Maybe she can kill it and eat it. Maybe the mouse hasn’t been contaminated by whatever is souring my milk and turning my leftovers into mold. My kitchen is a mess once I’ve finished clearing out my refrigerator. I’m standing in the midst of empty plastic containers and condiment bottles that have had their contents squirted out into the sink, but I kick away the trash and make my way to my couch.

I call my mom, leaving a voice message asking for her expertise. “Hey Mom, all the food in my fridge is rotten. It’s weird; it was fine a day ago. Any tips?”

“Hey Mom, can pasta go bad?”

“Hey Mom, do you know how to get rid of flies?”

The sun sets beneath the block of gray sky, I can tell the Worm is hungry. Most of my food has been destroyed in my quest to find the source of the Rot and the elusive band of flies, so I brave my way through the mess in my kitchen, finding a bag of chips in the pantry, and ignoring texts from concerned coworkers as I nurse my meager meal on the couch. The crumbs tumble down my collar, and that’s when I feel the sting. I lift up my shirt to see that the Rot has spread to my entire stomach. Cracked skin exposes the raw innards of my body: soft pink and bloody. The scent of the Rot is overwhelmingly nauseating, and I choke up a chip as the stench reaches my nose. I’ve been busy that day but now that my search for rot in the fridge is over, I have nothing to distract me from the pulsing burn of Rot. My fingers scratch at raw skin, the chip falls out of my mouth, the Worm inside of me contorts, hungry for something I can’t give it. It asks for something more than chips. I press my stomach, hoping that pressure will calm it, but it slams against the walls of my stomach. Its head butts into the wall of my stomach. I fall asleep to ignore the pain, the chip crumbs cast over my chest, the lackluster light from the television spilling onto the floor, the chatter of the characters creating the illusion of company. Inside of me, the Worm grows hungrier, and the Rot grows bigger.

The next day, the sky is a cloudless slate gray, and I wake up in the afternoon to a knocking on my door. Sweat sticks to

my shirt to my skin as the Worm does cartwheels in my body. I sit up and see that the Rot has spread to my arms, my skin a mottled purple as cracks on the surface make me look like shattered glass. It has spread downward, too, Rot the color of an eggplant hugging my hips and making me look bruised. As I get up to answer the door, I leave a trail of skin flakes in my wake.

Gemma, one of my coworkers, is standing in the hallway, humming obnoxiously to herself as she balances a tray on her arm. She's in her work dress, an ugly navy blue piece with plastic buttons held on by a fraying thread. Garish red lipstick shows on her teeth when she smiles, and I can see the roots her cheap hair dye failed to cover. She interprets my glare as an invitation to whisk past me into my apartment, the tray still perched on her arm.

"What happened over there?" she asks, nodding to the remnants of my fridge purge still scattered across the kitchen floor. Blueberry jelly has crusted to the tiles, and trodden-on chips have been pulverized underneath wayward feet.

"Cat must have gotten to it," I mumble. "I've been a bit out of it."

"I can tell. We missed you at the office," she tells me, setting the tray down on my table. I can already smell the decay on whatever food Gemma has brought me but Binky pads up to the table, wet nose pointed towards the dish. "I'm surprised food poisoning can last more than a day."

"It's looking more like the stomach flu," I respond. I meander over to her, too weak for an assertive walk. As I sit next to her at my kitchen table, the Rot crawls down my arm, hugging my bicep like a hideous tattoo. Gemma makes herself busy in my kitchen as she gathers plates for whatever dish she has brought. She unveils a tuna casserole that she clearly made herself if the mold frosting the surface is any indicator. I wrinkle my nose like a petulant child as she puts a plate in front of me.

"Maybe this will help you feel better," she says, forking a bite into her mouth. She chews with her mouth open and I wince as I see patches of mold slide down her throat, mashing with fish and noodles to form a yellowish-white sludge in her

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mouth. A piece of tuna falls off of her fork and before I can stop her, Binky is darting after it, sitting on her haunches underneath the table and feasting on Gemma's scraps. "After all, you're coming to Terri's dance recital on Saturday, right? Gotta be better by then! But I'm sure you will be. You're very hardy."

"Right." I pick at the tuna fish casserole. I swear I see a fly crawl across a noodle but when I blink, it's gone. "If I'm feeling up to it."

"I'm sure you will be," Gemma says. "You seem like you're doing better." I itch my bicep, and flakes of rotten skin fall to the ground.

"Yeah," I say. I push my plate of tuna fish casserole to the middle of the table. The sight of mold slowly marching across the plate makes me nauseous, and if I were to vomit, I'm not sure what would come up. A family of Worms, maybe. "Much."

"Well, that's perfect!" Gemma chatters on, shoveling tuna fish casserole into her mouth as she talks. Lipstick stains her fork. "Terri is really excited about it, you know. She's been practicing for weeks. And I'm sure she'll be happy to see you. I've invited so many people, though, so you might have a hard time finding a place to sit. Oh, and the parking lot is small, so you may need to walk a bit. But you'll be fine." She drones on, and I pick at my casserole, staring at the dizzying circus of mold. Gemma notices me picking at my tuna casserole and frowns, already on her second plate. "Is something else wrong?"

"I told you, I have the stomach flu."

"I know, but you just seem so quiet. I mean, you're always quiet, but not this quiet. You're abnormally quiet today. And I just thought that after everything that happened with your mom—"

I drop my fork on the plate and it clatters against the dish. Binky startles, slowly backing away from the table. "Jesus, this isn't about my mom. Everything's fine, okay? I'm just sick."

"I was just asking." Gemma's voice drops an octave, and her vibrant eyes dim. She scrapes the casserole with her fork, and I bite back a sigh.

"So, uh, what are Terri's dances like?" This brightens her up immediately, and the overly-cheery smile is once again plas-

tered on her face, almost as if she's flipped a switch.

"Oh, let me show you. I have some lovely videos of her practicing, she does such a wonderful job." She turns her phone towards me and narrates every second of the video as her daughter clunkily twirls across the stage. "Look, that's an arabesque. That's a glissade. Doesn't she do a lovely job with it? And that one—"

The constant drawl of Gemma's voice doesn't make me feel much better and when she leaves, I abandon the tuna casserole on the table, staggering to the sink and spitting up remnants of noodles and fish as chip crumbs and jelly stick to the bottoms of my feet. My mouth is sour, and I spot a maggot wriggling in the remnants of the casserole. I have to shoo Binky away from the dish multiple times; she keeps jumping up onto the table, mayonnaise coating her whiskers. The Worm wails, but all the food is moldy, and the Rot on my stomach makes me nauseous. I go to bed early, hungry, passed out on top of my unmade bed, shivering from prickly heat that burns on my stomach and sweating from the chill that dusts my back.

Slate gray skies turn to charcoal, and I dream. My teeth fall out of my mouth, rattling onto the floorboards one by one, and I go to a dentist whose face is blurry and whose voice sounds miles away. He wordlessly hands me a sticky bottle of pink Elmer's glitter glue, and I spend a day methodically gluing each tooth back into my gums until they stick out at every odd angle and cut my cheeks. As I work, I feel excess paste dripping down my throat and clogging my intestines with shimmery glitter. It coats my lips like garish chapstick, and when I cough up excess glue, it splatters onto the floor like iridescent pink vomit. When I'm finished, I realize that I've accidentally glued my lips shut. The glue doesn't hold for long. My teeth fall out again, tumbling down my throat and landing in my stomach. As I move, they clatter around like a baby rattle.

I traipse to the bathroom when I wake up, the burning pain in my body momentarily relenting as I grab a pair of pliers and yank out a tooth. My amateur dentistry leads to five minutes spent spitting up blood into the sink before passing out on the bathroom floor. When I wake again, I'm curled up like a worm on top of my soaking wet bath mat. Blood is still spat-



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tered across the porcelain bowl of the sink, and I've left the pliers on the floor, still flecked with red. I hope Binky doesn't cut her foot on them. I find myself dialing my mother's phone number, my fingers shaky and unsure. She doesn't pick up, so I leave an array of messages.

"Hey Mom, I'm not feeling great. My stomach's all messed up, and I'm sweaty. Do you remember that soup you used to make me when I was sick?"

"Hey Mom, do you remember that dentist I had when I was younger? The really creepy one? What was his name again, I just had a dream about him."

"Hey Mom, you'll call me back when you get these, right?"

That night, I don't make it to my bed. I'm hot now, boilingly, blindingly hot. I force myself to the kitchen, trying not to slip on the trash that carpets the floor. The scent of mold perfumes the air. Binky is picking at the tuna casserole that's been out for over a day now, but I don't have the energy to pull her off. If she wants to poison herself with mold, I'm too weak to stop her. When I go to get a cup of water, I forget that all the tap dispels anymore is mud. I fling the cup against the wall and it fragmentizes into a thousand shards of shattered glass that flutter to the ground like the first snow of the year. The heat becomes unbearable, the pain in my stomach excruciating. My face stings with Rot and the Worm celebrates my discomfort, and I think I'm starting to hate it. I collapse onto the kitchen floor, slivers of glass slicing into the lesions on my cheek. The kitchen floor is cold, the scent of the tuna casserole infecting the air, and I wake periodically in a haze of pain. At one point I feel Binky standing over me and when I open my eyes, she's licking my face, mayonnaise paw prints leading a trail to my body. I fall back asleep and when I open my eyes again she's gone, another set of paw prints disappearing into the living room. My cheek burns, my stomach aches, and I can still taste irony blood on my tongue from where I pulled my own tooth, and from the rivers of blood that run down my face from the cuts on my cheek. Throughout the night, I bleed.

When the sky is the color of wrought iron, I am once again a child. I wake up to heat, soaked in sweat and filth and grime, blood smeared across the Rot on my cheeks as the Worm

dances a sick ballet in my stomach. When I find I'm too weak to lift my own head, I scream at the top of my lungs, a part of my body I still have control over. I beat the floor with my fists, break a hole in my cupboard, smash the remnants of the glass that still lays scattered across the floor. I reduce it back to sand, scraping up my hands in the process. Beads of blood pop up against my skin. My breathing is labored now, and I can feel the worm starting to move up into my lungs, taking up more space than the air I breathe. I'm surrounded by wood chippings and glass shards and trash from days ago that I still haven't cleaned, surrounding my head like a halo. I think I see a maggot crawling across a cheese wrapper, and I know I have to get out of there.

I finish with my temper tantrum and try to crawl over to my living room, which, while still housing my dishes from the other night and random junk Binky decided to drag in, doesn't reek of tuna casserole. I'm a soldier in an army as I escape from shattered glass and bloody tiles, trying to ignore the Worm as it thrashes in my body. The living room offers a view outside, of a rooftop cityscape and a gray sky. I don't think I'll ever see the sun again. I will die underneath an ash-colored sky as my body rots and the Worm chews up my corpse. I shiver on the ground, sweat dripping from the curves and folds of my body, pooling in pockets of flesh and Rot. The harsh carpet underneath my body scratches at raw skin, and scabs flake off of the most tender parts of my body. When I lift up my shirt, my stomach flesh stretches and shifts with the movement of the Worm. Binky slinks up to me, her mouth covered in mayo, and she slowly starts to lick my cheeks, her tongue scraping at my skin. Her tail flicks around my neck, soulful eyes searching my face. I scratch her stomach with one hand as I pick up my phone with the other. Binky settles next to me as I dial my mother's number, unbothered by the endless monotony that has turned into our lives.

"Hey Mom, something's really wrong. I think it's a skin thing. Or a stomach thing. I'm not sure. Do you remember that salve you used to make us when we got poison ivy in the woods? Do you think that could help?"

"Hey Mom, my body really hurts. I don't know what's going

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on. Do you think I'm a bad person? Maybe I'm a bad person. Or maybe I just ate something bad. I'm glad I'm your daughter, Mom."

"Hey Mom, please call me back. I need you." I haven't said those words in ages, and once again, I'm met with silence.

Later that day, I hear the phone ring. I've been napping on the couch, and I lazily turn my head to watch it buzz on the coffee table. When it finishes, I play the message, wincing at Gemma's voice cracking through the speakers. "Hey, listen, I don't know if you still have the stomach flu, but we're all a little worried. If you need help dealing with what happened, I can—" I delete the message halfway through her sentence, and for the rest of the afternoon, I think about Gemma's voice disappearing into the unknown ether of the phone message graveyard. It brings me some comfort, at least.

I count myself lucky that I make it through the night. I curl up in paralyzing pain, rotted knees tucked to decaying chest. My chest aches and the source of my pain is clear when I cough up a handful of slimy white maggots, drenched in my saliva and tinted with blood. When I see them, I gag, which only brings up more maggots, these ones coated in bile and stomach acid the color of dead grass. I wonder if they've met the Worm. Binky coughs, and I swear the tuna casserole is killing her until I see it's nothing more than a hairball, and I hear her paws tapping the kitchen tiles as she jumps up onto the table.

A fly buzzes over my head, and it settles on the rug next to me, kaleidoscopic eyes staring me down. I don't I'm strong enough to kill it, even if I wanted to. I fall asleep, kept company by the Worm and the Rot.

By the time the sky is licorice black, my fingers are almost too weak to pick up my phone. Rot cakes my fingertips, making it slippery in my hands, and it hurts to open my mouth as decay blooms around my lips. Binky has been rearranging the house all day, dragging me old tee shirts and odd trinkets and bits of tuna casserole. I think she's trying to get my attention, but all she's doing is making the house dirtier than it already is. I shoo her away, and she jumps back to the kitchen to gnaw on the tuna casserole. I pick up the phone.

"Hey Mom, I need you. I don't feel well. I think this is it for

me.”

“Hey Mom, there’s something inside of me. I can’t get it out. I want to get it out.”

“Hey Mom, do you remember that song you used to sing to me when I was younger? Could you sing to me again?”

“Hey Mom, I think I’m going to die.”

“Mom, please, I—” This time, someone picks up. I wait with bated breath, listening to the crackling on the other side of the line. “Mom? Is that you?”

“Listen, I don’t know what the fuck you’re on, but this is the wrong number, and if you call my daughter again, I swear I will call the cops on you for harassment. You hear me?” I tear up when I hear the brash voice of a man I don’t recognize, and a trail of blood seeps out of my ear canal. “Don’t call this number again.” He hangs up, and I hear the dial tone again.

*I need you, Mom. I’m going to die today. I need you.*

I sob, raw and guttural and primitive, begging for the impossible comfort of my mother.

At this point, I’m swimming in a puddle of sweat on the floor. Rot and sweat glue my limbs together, and I can feel the Worm swimming in my lungs. Binky drags me an old tank top that would probably cool me down if I had any energy to put it on but I don’t, so it joins the collection she’s been building in the living room as she’s had free reign of the house.

My breaths come out in tiny squeaks and I know that if the pain doesn’t kill me, suffocation surely will. A breeze filters in through the open window which shows the sky, pitch black at noontime. The breeze calms me, soothes my burning skin, dries the sweat into a sticky paste on my back. Then it’s gone again, and the pain returns, white-hot and blazing, attacking me on a level that feels molecular.

I know I’m close to the end but still, my body begs for relief. I can’t walk anymore, but almost on instinct, I start to drag myself to the bathroom. It’s a long process, but I have the time. I pass the mess of the past couple of days, the half-empty dish of tuna casserole, the pile of dirty clothes on the floor. I’m not sure if I smell worse or if my mess does, but it doesn’t matter. At this point, the smell of Rot is so overwhelming I can’t think of anything else. Binky follows me to the bathroom; she’ll be

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the only witness to my death. As I drag myself, I leave a trail of flesh and rot and decay like a slug. I'm not even an animal anymore but an insect, crushed underneath the foot of a Worm that stretches throughout my body, hungry and growing.

When I undress for my final shower, my body is unrecognizable. Every inch is rotten: blotchy chunks of flesh in brown and red and yellow; oozing blood and pus stings my body. I'm a disgusting patchwork quilt. I'm a living, breathing, corpse, maggots already crawling around inside of me. I hack up another colony and they splatter onto the shower, a patch of curdled blood and stomach acid staining the wall. Instead of being the tiny white pills from last night, they're already small worms, falling to the floor and flailing around in a puddle of water. They're bone white, roughly the size and shape of a pencil, and just before I get to touch one, they slip through the drain, leaving a thin, gooey trail of blood in their wake. I'm almost curious about where they're going to go until a wave of pain and nausea hits me, and I'm stumbling into the shower, shaking hands scrabbling at the air as I try to turn on the water.

I know that this is where I die, but it doesn't make it any less painful. I'm fully nude, curled into the fetal position on the shower floor, letting cold water hit me and wash away the sweat and blood that tarnish my body. Rot blisters off of my body, entire patches of skin that fall to the shower floor before being pummeled into a pulp by the water pressure. This time when the Rot comes off, it reveals exposed, pink skin, bloody and raw. It looks like uncooked chicken, glistening in the freezing water of the shower. Still, more Rot surrounds it, crusty and cracked. The worm begins to stretch into my limbs, curl around my bones and take up space in my arteries.

Although I've never been a religious person, in my final moments, I pray. My voice is weak and I don't think I can get a sound out, but the naive parts of me wonder if someone will come, scoop me off the floor and gently deposit me into a hospital bed where I'll be fed ice chips and jello and be reassured that everything will be okay. I wonder if I'll survive this, if the worm will be extracted from my stomach and if my body will go back to being solely my own. Maybe they'll put me in

a medical journal or a newspaper article: *Breaking News! Girl with flesh-eating/flesh-Rotting/body-destroying Worm inside of her stomach lives!* It would be a miracle. They would all cheer for me. Vaguely, I see something shimmering above me, a nebulous outline of a person, the long hair of my mother, and a voice like a cloud. I swear I hear murmuring: “*I miss you, I miss you, I’ll see you soon. You’ll be home soon. You’ll be safe soon.*” I swear I see someone reach out, an opalescent hand reaching for my own. If I could lift my arm, I might be pulled off of the floor, but I’m too weak, and the figure fades into nothing. I feel its absence more than I felt my previous loneliness, and the single tear that slips down my cheek stings my rotten skin. I don’t even have the strength to wipe it away.

My body belongs to the Worm, and the Rot crusts over my lungs and cakes my heart, slowing it to a stop. I die wondering if the figure will return, wondering if I’ll still be saved. I die hopeful.

It’s the most painful way to go.

The coroners are dark spots on a bright day, marching through the hallway as the neighbors peer out of apartment doors to catch a glimpse. At the doorstep, one kicks aside an Amazon box and the Brita filter rattles inside. The other frowns as something crinkles at the bottom of his shoe. When he lifts it up, it’s an invitation to a dance recital, with the blurry image of a little girl in a ballerina outfit printed on the top. In case you’re feeling better in time is scrawled out over the back, as well as an address and the current time and date. The coroner flicks it off the bottom of his shoe as if it’s dog shit, and the RSVP flutters to the ground, leaving the little girl’s picture facedown in a muddy footprint as the coroners step into the apartment.

One wrinkles his nose as he watches a thin cat gnaw at a mostly empty dish of tuna casserole, and the other kicks aside my pile of sweat-soaked clothes. “It’s a pigsty in here,” says the first one, tall with curly brown hair and hard eyes. “No wonder she’s dead. I’d be dead too if my apartment was this gross. Probably some fungus growing in here.”

“Haven’t you ever heard the phrase *not to speak ill of the*

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*dead?*” asks the second one. He’s shorter, greasy blonde hair swept across his forehead.

“Relax, she can’t hear me. She’s dead, remember?” Curly and Blondie step over the pile of clothes, coming closer to the bathroom. Binky curls around their ankles and Curly kicks her away, eliciting a sharp hiss. The light from the window misses their skin, leaving their faces in shadow.

“Wonder what killed her,” Blondie says, crouching down to poke one cold, limp arm. “Always so weird to see young people, you know? She was probably younger than I am.”

“Don’t get sentimental,” Curly says, setting up the stretcher. “Just get her on here.”

“I’m just saying, it’s weird,” says Blondie. He picks up the arm, inspects the skin, and lets it drop back to the floor of the shower with a dull thud. “She’s in perfect condition, too.”

“What, you got a crush on a dead girl? You’re sick.”

“Hey, I never said that. All I’m saying, maybe we get her to one of the local colleges, see if they need any cadavers. Might be nice for the students.” Blondie picks up the body, and the head rolls to meet his chest. “I mean, she’s perfect. She’s barely even begun to rot.”

# Begin Again (and Again, and Again)

Joey Rougas  
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When they get home from the airport, he lets his mother bring his bags into his bedroom. She sets a green canvas duffle on the linoleum floor as he sits on his bed. He strokes his suede comforter, making little lines in it with his finger. Up, down, up, down. His mother lingers at a ballet photo on the wall—some performance he can't remember from when he was a kid, framed in black metal. He's in a gaudy red coat and white tights, brown hair slicked back, down on one knee with his arms extended to the sky. His mother sighs, turns, and notices his high school diploma on the dresser. With her bony pinky, she carefully removes a layer of dust from the blue leather before walking out of the room.

He plops onto his back, letting a mountain of overstuffed pillows cradle his head. He picks up his phone and texts an old friend that he's back in town, unexpectedly. He asks his old friend if he's up to anything and locks his phone. Then he pulls a shag blanket up to his chin and goes to sleep on top of his comforter, without changing out of his clothes from the day.

On his way home from his small, liberal arts college, he had chosen to sit on the right side of the airplane so he could look at his old high school on the descent. It's an all-boys school his mother had wanted him to attend. He shifted in his leather seat when he saw the white adobe in the distance, the green football turf, the red shingles on the roof of each building. And then the school was too far back to see. Still, he kept his eyes out the oblong window. He could imagine the boys who go to that school now—their polo shirts, their chino pants, their ap-



athy as they slip past a kid like himself, unwilling to look him in the eye, but always okay to stare at the back of his head and gawk. Always okay to rib each other with their muscular arms when that kid like himself wasn't looking.

He let his attention drift to his hometown sprouting up below him. Spanish-style homes, towers and lush gardens in Balboa Park. Finally, steel skyscrapers sprung up on either side of the plane as it glided through downtown and touched down in San Diego.

In the kitchen the next morning, his mother pours him coffee in a ceramic mug. He takes it the same way as her—two sugars and a bit of cream. They take the same pills, too. Little blue capsules from a yellow bottle. He notices the time: nine-thirty.

“Are you going into work late today?” he asks.

“I'm not going in at all,” his mother replies. “I thought you'd like me around today.”

“All I have is the appointment. I've been a million times, you don't need to come.”

“But I want to.”

He smiles at her and looks down at his coffee. Pale little clouds of cream swirl around like the clouds of guilt that materialize in his brain. He adds the day of work she's missing to the list of things he owes her, along with yesterday's emergency flight home, his days away from the liberal arts college that she's helping him pay for, the therapy appointments, the Catholic high school. He looks up and his mother is smiling back at him. They have the same strong jaw, the same round cheekbones, the same button nose.

She starts washing her own mug in the sink and continues, mindlessly, suds on her bony hands. “All I can think of is when you were little,” she muses, “you never wanted me to come to ballet, but I could tell you were always glad in the end that I watched you dance.”

He forces a chuckle just to give her a response. It always comes back to ballet with his mother, though he quit years ago. He worries that it's the only thing they'll ever have to talk about. He removes himself from the wooden barstool to go take a shower.

At his first ballet class he clung to his mother. He was six. She sat in the corner with the other moms. She had set her black Tory Burch tote on the leather sofa to prevent someone from sitting too close to her.

“You’ll never learn if you keep coming over to me,” she said sweetly, cupping his cheek with her left hand. Her hand was warm except for the cool, golden wedding band on her ring finger. The tiny sliver of metal felt like it was burning a hole in his cheek.

“But mommy, I don’t want to learn, I want to go *home*.” Tears threatened to break over his eyelids. He cried a lot as a child.

“Promise me you’ll try. Then we can go home.” She narrowed her eyes and extended her long, slender pinky. He wrapped his own grimy little pinky around it and promised to at least try. He shuffled back across the gray dance floor and jammed his heels together in first position, the way his elderly dance instructor showed him.

His therapist works in this cool, dimly lit room with a beige sofa and paintings of dogs all over the walls. She has a kind face and soft eyes framed by rose-gold glasses. Even so, he finds it difficult to make eye contact with her during most of their sessions, so he always looks directly past her head at a portrait of a boxer sitting back on its hindlegs.

“Walk me through your support system when you’re away at your college.”

He pretends that the boxer is speaking to him instead of his therapist.

“I don’t know, I talk to my roommate and our friends,” he says back to the boxer.

“And do they know that you feel this way?”

“Not really, I don’t want to worry them.”

“Okay, what about here? Do you talk to anyone at home?”

He looks up at his therapist. She’s sitting upright in a blue armchair. He likes that she doesn’t take notes during their sessions, like other therapists he’s had would. It makes

him feel like he's just having a conversation with her, not being examined. He knows he should be honest and say he really only talks to his mother, but he's not in the mood to talk about her today. Who else does he talk to? His sister and his brother, sometimes. But they're older and moved away. He sees his phone, face down on the end table by his sofa. No new notifications the last time he checked.

"I have an old friend from when I did ballet," he says. It's not a lie, just not entirely truthful. "I always enjoy seeing him."

"I'm glad you have that. Listen, I know you've sworn off ballet, but have you thought about taking it back up? I think it might be good for you to have something."

He gives his therapist a half smile. He doesn't really know what she means by "having something," but he doesn't care to push it any further. He's fine to keep his head down and just keep pushing forward. Besides, with all this ballet talk, it's really starting to feel like a conversation with his mother.

Once, when he was sixteen, he and his old friend—just a friend at that time—were alone in the dressing room during a rehearsal for *The Nutcracker*. They were caballeros in Spanish and all the other boys their age were onstage for Candy Canes. Tchaikovsky's "Trepak Variation" crackled through the old speaker above the door, piping in sound from the stage. They were seated facing each other, black hats with gold embroidery on the plastic countertop beside them, their knees almost touching. He leaned over to brush up his friend's makeup—their elderly dance instructor would have killed them if it wasn't perfect. The bulbs on the mirror were fluorescent, and as he dusted powder over his friend's face, he noticed the peach fuzz that made his friend's cheeks glow. He noticed every ligament in his friend's neck. How was his friend's skin so perfect? His friend adjusted his dance belt, and he couldn't help but look. He brushed one of his friend's golden curls away from his eyes, smoothing his hair back into place.

Before he knew it, he was grabbing the back of his friend's head and kissing him. A firecracker went off in his chest. His friend kissed him back. And then as quickly as it

happened, his friend pulled away. They turned away from one another, sitting in silence for a moment. Then, his friend got up and left the room. The door clicked back into place softly behind him. Over the speaker, the “Trepak Variation” crackled to an end with a flourish.

After that year’s *Nutcracker*, his friend went to another studio across town. He took his usual spot at the barre, and his chest ached when no one turned up to take the spot beside him. His elderly instructor screamed in his face when he couldn’t remember the petite allegro. His chest was tight and his body was out of sync with his brain. He had to excuse himself to the bathroom twice to cry.

A year later, in his junior year Catholic ethics class, his young, spritely teacher told the class that it wasn’t a sin to be gay, it was just a sin to act on it. He dug his nails into his sweaty palms. His knuckles turned white atop the plastic desk. His foot started tapping like crazy on the chair in front of him. He dragged his sneakers across the carpet and under his own chair to keep himself still. He didn’t know how many of his classmates snuck a glance at him, but it felt like the eyes of all twenty-five boys in that class were boring into the back of his skull.

His cheeks burned—he knew they were bright red. He looked down at the light blue lines on his notebook paper, picked up his pen, and pretended to jot down notes. His stomach churned. He didn’t belong there. If he could just keep his head down and pretend to take notes until he got to college, maybe he could survive it.

In the car after his appointment, his mother asks him how it went.

“It was good,” he says. He takes a deep breath. “She suggested I start dancing again.”

“Oh, I would love that!” his mother says. “I think it would be really good for you.”

He thinks of the bare spot at the barre, his instructor yelling in his face, his chest tightening. “I don’t know if it would be.”

“Honey, you were so good.”

“But what if that was as good as I’m ever going to be?” As soon as the words are out of his mouth he wants to take them back. He looks over at his mother. She opens her mouth to speak a few times but no words come out. She grips the black steering wheel a little harder. He hates making her sad, but the words are out there. He continues. “I’m not good enough to make it away from home. And you never talk about my life now as fondly as you talk about when I did ballet. What if we were both just happier then?”

They’re pulling into their neighborhood now. Perfectly manicured shrubs line the lawns on his street. They park in the driveway. His mother finally breaks the silence.

“Honey, I only want what’s best for you. But you’re my youngest, I can’t help but miss when you all were little. I’m sorry that I haven’t done enough for you.”

He wants to let something horrible fly off his tongue. But he looks at her and her eyes are swimming with tears. They’re hazel, the only trait they don’t share. He doesn’t know if his mother truly believes what she said or if she’s just guilt-tripping him.

“That’s not what I meant,” is all he ends up saying, then he gets out of the car. They both go to their rooms.

After Mass one Sunday, about a year after his father left, he and his mother sat in a rose garden behind the church so she could pray. She had stayed behind in the garden every week since his father had left them, and he knew better than to question it. He was a senior in high school at this point.

On this day, they sat on a wooden bench in front of a fountain with a marble statue of the Virgin Mary. This statue was situated in a little alcove, and the soft trickle of the water pouring out into the main pool was calming to him. He watched the way that the clear water rippled in the wake of the fountain. This constant kept his mind busy. It was going to be hot in the afternoon, he could tell, but for the moment the morning sun felt perfectly warm against the back of his neck. Rows and rows of roses bloomed behind them. A gentle breeze carried their sweet scent to his nose. His mother shifted on the

bench.

“Honey,” she opened, “I want you to know that I’ll always love you, no matter what.”

“I love you too, Mom.” He leaned his head on her shoulder, though he was getting much too tall to do it anymore. He intertwined his long, slender pinky with her bony one. He assumed that she was just musing—they were approaching the anniversary of his father’s leaving and all. Then she continued.

“Are you gay?”

His stomach dropped, as if he were descending a staircase and missed a step. He saw in his mind’s eye his old friend, black and gold caballero hats, a dance belt, a pair of warm lips. He decided to be truthful.

“I don’t know.”

“Well if you are, I still love you. And God still loves you. It’s not a sin to be gay, just a sin to act on it.”

In the year since he had heard that from his spritely ethics teacher, he had decided that there wasn’t much of a difference between being gay and acting on it. His shoulders and chest heaved out a beleaguered sigh.

“Can I have the keys?” he asked his mother. “I’m going to go sit in the car.”

In his mother’s car, the leather seat burned his back, but he didn’t mind. He wanted to talk to someone who would get what he was feeling. He could only think of one person, and they hadn’t spoken in years. But maybe it was worth a try. He texted his old friend to see what he was up to.

A few hours have passed now since he shut himself in his room. It’s dark out. He sits with the lights off, curled up on his bed, stroking his suede comforter the same way he did last night. His phone lights up, blinding him a little bit. There’s a text from his old friend. He decides his old friend is just a friend again.

*My parents are out tonight. Wanna come over?*

*Yeah. Be there in 20.*

Thirty minutes later, he’s on his friend’s bed—wrapped in his arms, sitting on his lap, clothes on the floor, lips on his neck. His friend has lit the bedroom with soft bulbs and string

lights. In the six years since they first kissed, his friend's skin has gotten more perfect, the color of bronze. His friend's golden hair glows in the soft light; he runs his fingers through it. He pulls back for a moment to look at his friend. To admire his green eyes. To ask if the two of them can take this further. But before he can, he notices in his periphery—for only a fraction of a second—a pair of black canvas ballet shoes on the wooden nightstand.

He decides to disregard them. He presses his lips into his friend's lips harder, more desperately, trying to remove the image of the shoes from his brain. How long have the shoes been there? Does his friend still dance? He pulls back again, eyeing the shoes. They look beat-up, the black canvas at the toe fraying, but they're not dusty. The shoes are nestled in between a green scented candle and a dented HydroFlask with the straw pointed up.

"What's the matter?" his friend asks, hands still interlocked on the small of his back.

"Nothing...I—" he stammers. "Have you been dancing?"

"Huh?" His friend turns to the nightstand, eyes landing on the ballet shoes. "Oh, I never really stopped." His friend says this matter-of-factly, then turns back to him and leans in again, lips on his clavicle, his sternum, his stomach, working their way down to his crotch. While his friend does this he's just staring at the shoes.

So his friend never stopped dancing. He wonders why this had never come up before, but the two of them really never do much talking when they're together. He feels betrayed—as if somehow, by continuing to do ballet, his friend has breached some unspoken code between the two of them. He knows it's ridiculous to expect that his friend doesn't have a life outside of him, but that doesn't take away the hurt that comes with life moving on without him.

His friend asks to take off his boxers. This is all too much for him. And then he's crying. His chest heaves. He gasps a few times and desperately tries to wipe his eyes. His friend leans back on his hands for a moment, eyebrows knit together in bewilderment. He reaches across some pillows to grab a tissue. Then his friend hugs him. His friend's arms are tense—it's

clear to him his friend doesn't know what to do.

"What's wrong?" his friend asks.

"All of this! Not *you*, just *this*." He feels like he's six years old in ballet class again. "I want to go home."

"Okay, okay. You can go home, it's alright."

How does he tell his friend that when he's home, it doesn't feel like it? He can't go home, not really. He puts on his clothes and lets his friend walk him to his car.

As high school ended, he thought that going away might help him find home. The small, liberal arts college with its stony buildings and open-minded professors and overwhelmingly gay student body was supposed to be just the thing. But the dorm rooms were drafty, the professors were out-of-touch rich folks, and the student body was largely comprised of heirs to small fortunes, going through a starving artist phase before graduating to entry-level jobs at their fathers' hedge funds.

Soon enough, he found himself drowning in essays and readings. He lumped in with a group of kids in his major and they helped each other with the workload. They would sit on the freshly mowed lawns, or a vinyl futon in someone's dorm room, and share everything: answers to quizzes, a handle of Barton's from the corner store, edibles, the names of which trust fund kids would spot them for a weekend clubbing in the city.

In his third year he overdrafted while buying a replacement dab pen. He was mortified. His mother would see his account. He couldn't owe her anything else, especially on a purchase so stupid. His friends told him not to worry, it would all be okay. That night, he, his roommate, and the two girls who lived across the hall decided to unwind. They drank palomas from pink cans and sipped fruity, spiked seltzers until the lacquered coffee table and plastic recycling bin were full of the things. He was taking hits from his roommate's dab pen when he remembered that he overdrafted trying to buy one that morning. He excused himself to the shared bedroom.

He began to panic. He couldn't handle the stress, the schoolwork, the burden on his mother. He locked the door and took short, raspy breaths and sat in a ball atop his woven



rug. He let the rug's braids make an imprint in his cheek. This would prove his mother right—that they were both happier when he was a kid. When his father was still around. When neither of them knew he was gay. When he was so good at ballet that it made up for the fact that they had nothing else to discuss. What else *could* they have had to discuss?

How could he calm down? His pills he took each morning calmed him, right? He crawled to the bathroom, palms freezing on the cold tile floor. He flung open the medicine cabinet and pawed around on the metal shelves until he found the yellow bottle. He struggled with the cap. He pressed and pressed on the white plastic until the whole thing exploded open, little blue capsules flooding the floor. This was too much for him. He crawled back to his spot on the rug and curled back into a ball.

His roommate began to pound on the door, begging him to open up. But he was paralyzed. He just rocked on the rug and took his short, labored breaths. Finally, he heard the lock click and the door open. Someone must have found the bedroom key. His roommate took his shoulders in his thin hands and asked him how many pills he had taken. He had to croak out the word “none” several times before his roommate was satisfied. His roommate called his mother while one of the girls from across the hall began to sweep up the pills. The other girl stroked the top of his head. It was all she could think to do, he assumed. Her acrylic nails were soothing on his scalp. At some point, he saw her other hand drop onto the wooden floor. Her nails had these pink flowers all over them. He liked the sound they made against the floorboards.

After an indeterminate amount of time, he saw his roommate's lanky frame throwing clothes into a green duffle bag. It was his duffle bag. Those were his clothes. His roommate said something about a flight the next morning, and that he should get some sleep. He didn't want to go home and see his mother, but he understood how it must have looked to see those pills strewn on the ground. He hoped he would have done the same thing for his roommate.

Upon arriving home from his friend's house, he parks in the

driveway. He makes his way across the concrete and flips open a white keypad on the side of the garage. He punches four plastic digits and the garage door hums to life. The inside of the garage is a smoother concrete than the driveway—glossy and cool. He flicks on the light and pads across the empty space to see if his mother has kept an item from his childhood. There, on the side of the garage where he last left it, is a portable ballet barre. It's made of hard, shiny plastic that looks like metal; he can carry it easily with two hands.

He brings the barre to the center of the garage and kicks off his sneakers. There, in his white socks, he begins a barre routine—something that has been imprinted indelibly in his brain tissue. He begins with a demi plié from first position, gingerly bending his knees out and straightening them again. Then a grand plié. His knees and ankles protest; they crackle and pop all the way down as his heels lift off the floor. His spine does not allow him very far as he bends backwards in a port de bras. He completes a tendu en croix, though he can't point his foot as well as he once could.

It feels good to do ballet again. He wants to improve. He's rusty, but he wants to work to get his form back. While he moves his body through the barre routine, he decides he'll silently forgive his friend for continuing ballet. Maybe it's like his therapist said this morning. Maybe ballet is his friend's "something." And maybe that's why his mother likes to sit in the rose garden on Sundays. That's *her* something to hold onto.

By the time he gets to a rond de jambe, beads of sweat have broken out across his forehead, under his arms, down his back. He can barely force his foot to make the little half-moon motion, out in front of him and then circling around to the back. He finishes the exercise by balancing with his right leg lifted in front of him, bent in attitude. His supporting foot cramps up and he's forced to stop. He paces the garage to walk it out.

When he turns around, his mother is standing in the doorway to the house. The light pouring out from behind her looks golden in the dim garage. She has a big grin on her face, showing off her veneered teeth. He doesn't know how long she's been standing there, but he doesn't particularly mind.

## B E G I N   A G A I N   (   A N D   A G A I N ,   A N D   A G A I N )

He always loved when she watched him perform, though he never wanted to admit it to her. He wants her to stay here, to tuck him into bed tonight, to hold him like she used to. He wants to pinky swear to her that he's trying to be better, even if they don't understand each other anymore, even if some days he doesn't want her help. Because some days he doesn't even know what he wants himself.

But he doesn't say that. He just stares at her with his mouth open.

"I'm making tea," she finally says. "Would you like me to put on enough water for you?"

He nods, and with the front of his shirt he wipes a salty bead of sweat from the bridge of his nose.

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THE FOUNDATIONALIST

# Refuge at Giza

Yusef Bushara  
*Hong Kong University*

---

I am the shade beneath the camel's belly.  
I am down-to-earth unlike my creator  
I am ice in an oasis like this one

Drink me, though, and still thirst  
Don't mistake me for my more acrobatic cousin, the shadow  
He who thrives off imitation. No, I am Shade.

Old time is stored in my lazy, cool protection  
Bargain for me underneath this hydrated creature  
in this land of pyramids where sun is sand-cheap

THE FOUNDATIONALIST

# Cervidaemotion / Thomas Wyatt

Grace McFadden  
*University of Connecticut*

---

Prance across a thicket rimmed clearing, which is the same as  
the lap or chest where I lay my head

Desire comes without warning like a dizzy spell.  
In that one long lonely year that smelled like spit  
I wandered the dark green alone (and did I mention alone?)

I have a habit of holding onto the parts of a lover that get cold:

the back of the bicep,  
the edge of the ear,  
the tips of the fingers  
and the nose

Cold, I watch three whizz past on skateboards,  
a streak of heads trailing down a midnight avenue  
and shortly after  
three deer skitter over the crossed parts of the sidewalk  
Did they transform themselves?

Last year, I thought this couple didn't like me until the dude  
got me into a party, but on the way the driver  
hit a deer —

it flew into the air,  
true story, and we were perpendicular across the wrong side of the road

You are not immune to being h-

I mean, you are not immune to hurting others. She says: "Can I kiss you?"  
To this day I don't know the driver's name I'm not sure I should  
The kiss is dry and sweet.

and the couple broke up a month ago now.

Someone told me recently they don't gasp at seeing deer on the side of the road —  
"I think it's just because I've lived in Connecticut my whole life"

The staccato grace,  
the bowlegged flit,  
the gone-in-a-breath,

doesn't it ever catch you off guard?

A friend shows me their drawing:  
a boy with antlers stabbing a ram skulled man,  
and the ram skulled man is stabbing him back

## C E R V I D A E M O T I O N / T H O M A S W Y A T T

I still love the same people I loved when I was  
 five and ten and fifteen, and I probably will forever  
 We listen to songs that ask us to take our hands off each others' necks  
 My collar is embroidered with Noli me tangere  
 One finger to trace your jugular

One finger to point into the yard,  
 No, follow my finger, just past the old truck, see?  
 The early silence of a deer running from golden morning light

She drives over the big speed bump outside our house and points into the woods —  
 “This place is deer city!”

# Orpheus at the Opera

Jenan Cameranesi  
*Yale College*

---

Say, Orpheus, don't you love the opera? Melodies and ancient stories intertwine, a drama fit for that mythology you love. At the opera, we – three friends – dress in an elegant blue, dressed-up sour sophistication. Oh dear – let's take the pain

out of this memory. What do I remember of the opera? Other than you. The three of us, we laugh, always. I walk three miles in cobalt heels and the pain in my arch meant nothing, not with the blue of her dress and your shirt. Beautiful, the two of you.

(Dear Reader, I call him Orpheus, but please, unattach the romance of it all. This Orpheus misunderstands the story he is in. This Orpheus believes prettiness forgives all sins.) But in the car, as we change into indigo niceties, in our photographs, you're respectful, unlike when –

No. I want to make this beautiful. Orpheus, did you know that you stained all my memories of you? I want to remember the songs, the counter-tenor, the actors' staged sorrow, not my own. I want to make the ink of your shirt something else. Let me

make your photographed hand on my shoulder not your aching touch in a dark kitchen. Orpheus, I wanted to keep the opera happy. I want to stop seeing the world through blue-tinged lenses. I want to forget your calloused hands on my waist.



# Tuck Everlasting

Zoey Collea  
*Bard College*

---

1.

Wild toad crossing  
the threshold of pastoral forest  
and sward, tucked neatly  
against the ferric stakes

where a girl rests  
on both elbows, the croaks  
and thyme skin, she watches  
before asking the creature

if she can come with.

2.

Water, tender on his back  
of course you should live  
without penalty or end

in this great expanse.

You loved it more,  
with your chromatic  
belly and gullet cicada  
noise, that sounds  
like a swarm of honeybees  
when their hive has been knocked down.

Toad, you waddle in  
the boundless

murmuring through  
your artichoke cells

you don't have to live forever  
you just have to live.

# Teeth

Emily Huffcutt  
*University of Edinburgh*

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i.

I'm carrying one of your teeth  
                   in my mouth  
                   You've got one of mine on your  
 left arm.

                  I'm keeping it damp for you,  
 keeping it safe in the sweet pocket of my cheek,  
 tucked behind  
 molars and under my tongue,

                  I won't take it out  
 even if I'm tempted to see a silver filling  
 winking up at me,  
 And wonder if I tap it if you'll feel the  
 hole

in your mouth  
 And run the tip of your tongue  
 against that fleshy,  
                   empty           space,  
 (see my face flash through your mind)

ii.

The tooth on your arm is permanent,  
 From where I latched on and bit!  
 Stuck a needle in  
 over and

                  over and

                          over and

                                  over and

  over and

lapping away the blood and making eyes at you that were  
                   promising nothing  
                   vicious gagging  
 on words that got trapped behind a  
                   feral smiling  
                           that was more like a  
                   baring.

                  Every part of me warned you to stay away.  
 And now you've got that  
 black scar (in my shape)

## T E E T H

iii.

I would collect them from you like marbles  
 clattering within me until I have the full set  
 Taking whatever you would give  
 me           and keeping them so protected,  
                   so untouched,  
                   so loved in that  
                   hot dark cave.

I would press my arm to your arm  
 and beg you to understand  
 I'd walk with my back to you for months  
 And turn around  
 only once

you pass me by,

Lunge forward  
 and try to get purchase on anything, try to  
 sink myself into any flesh I can find until you  
 shake me off and

I am left with a mouthful of you.

You could prise open my jaw and fish out what you gave me  
 but you'd rather it stay in there

...

wouldn't you?

You like to know I can't let it go, can't spit it out,  
 so you watch me roll it

around

and

around like a

jawbreaker made of bone,

and twice as sweet.

# Mom's Apple Pie

Natasha Kinne  
*McGill University*

---

## Mom's Apple Pie

It's what patriotism tastes like  
Smells like the oven of the old house  
Before the  
Spiced baked apples were nuclearized  
By our saliva. It's what makes home  
Home.  
They say when you die on the banks in Normandy  
The sand tastes like thick grains of sugar  
Bloody brown caramelized crust  
Oozing apples.

True enough

I'm ripe enough to defend our slice of paradise  
Sam gives us dehydrated apple pie in a bag  
And says to stay away from the goddamn trees  
Before we get too fuckin smart.

When I'm high on methane  
And I'm all turned around I  
Think that Kunduz is Mount Horeb, WI  
And I see apple trees heavy with fruit.  
Does mom's apple pie have maggots in it?  
Did she cut the maggots up with the apples and  
Throw them in the pie?

I'm gonna be sick  
Worms crawling in my stomach

Sam said to shut the hell up  
It's too hot for apple maggots  
At home  
Mom, mommy, mama

# Phantom Pain

Rina Shamilov  
*Yeshiva University*

---

I, the would-be bride, rattle in the evening's afterglow, ripening like the mulberry trees my *Papa* had in his childhood home when he was seven or eight. He often compared me to that tree when I was younger because my skin sagged over my skeleton, hugging my bones loosely. Now I have blossomed, & my lips zip up, & my flesh tightly embraces the veins that dance under my bloodstream it reminds me of the night we collided for the first time:

when our feet trampled over the dirtied ground  
 & you whispered secrets into my hair  
 do you remember the moon's shape last October?  
 your eyes were sparkling, I can still remember smelling  
 your face as my fingers trailed along the seam of your lips.  
 the ring you gave me that night used to suckle the fat  
 out of my fingers, like I used to do with my *Mama's* breasts  
 but now it glides along the pole of my finger  
 as I slip off each layer of my skin, tantalizing you as  
 I crawl closer & closer to the rocks on your grave  
 do you remember the softness of my lips?  
 I'll kiss you till the cold of the cemetery turns my teeth purple.

# Here are the knuckles

Varsha Senthil  
*Temple University*

---

Here are the knuckles  
 Here are the knuckles  
 that will dig  
 into the sternum  
 of your lifeline,            your hanging  
 bloodline: the longer  
 you grow here,  
 the past            also grows  
 into a tunnel    sealed shut  
 with a blood pact.  
 The cut will not wake you.  
 Here are the knuckles that will

twist the skin  
 of your kin's  
 wrinkled faces:            lying does not change  
 the shape of your chest cavity  
 the warmth    of the hands you keep  
 under your sweater. Nothing will,  
 I have tried  
 existing            in a place  
 twice. I have tried splitting time  
 between day    and death;  
 sleeping with one eye  
 on our hands, intertwined.  
 I know blood tastes  
 sweeter            than one's spit.  
 I know the future  
 of your little girl            was a dream  
 that counted on the silence of sleep  
 but you are hardly breathing—here  
 are the knuckles            that will pump  
 your blood alive,            uncurl  
 your spine and press into them; yes,  
 every step leads down, closer  
 to a darkened door

## H E R E   A R E   T H E   K N U C K L E S

that locks on shutting —  
 stand up, all the same.  
 We have lied    long  
 enough.

If I stay in this bed it becomes a stretcher.

Yet my mother asks after my heart  
 as her hand    grazes my face. She has  
 kept me        hoping I will give out  
 in her arms, a sedentary monk.  
 My blood beats knowing  
 she feels the twitch of my toes.  
 In ten years it will beat the same: Mother,  
 I'm not kicking, only    shaking  
 out the pins and needles, only  
 trying to make way        to the glowing  
 Exit signs. My cheek  
 needed the palm  
 to bring blood back into it,  
 needed it more  
 than to be held with her  
 eyes closed.

No one is carried  
 out alive, I am learning that. It will  
 ache but the knuckles  
 must be your own.        When you're up wash the  
 metallic taste from your mouth,  
 watch your step  
 underneath you.  
 The light at the end of the tunnel is red.

# Aestivation

Julia Rudlaff

*Michigan State University*

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sensing drought,  
 African lungfish  
 dig burrows into the muck,  
 seal them with mucus,  
 then origami their bodies  
 into a state of suspended animation

the desiccation starts on my lips  
 words evaporate  
 chapped and barren,  
 energy turns to dust  
 in the wake of such  
 dry heat,  
 my body  
 shrivels—  
 I dig a nest  
 in my ashes,  
 tuck my head  
 between my knees  
 to wait out the absence

in the cocoon,  
 lungfish dissolve their own muscles  
 for sustenance

I lay awake  
 wondering  
 if I can feel  
 my cells digesting—  
 the last thing I consumed



## A E S T I V A T I O N

was a conversation  
about love and I think  
the longing is why my body  
coils at the thought of breakfast

when the water returns  
lungfish crawl out of their  
burrows and into the ponds  
submerging themselves in home  
once again

when you return  
I think I will have forgotten  
what it feels like  
to be nourished

I hope,  
between now and then,  
that I do not forget  
the rain always  
comes again

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# Cebar

Emma Brinks

*Michigan State University*

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I place a water kettle on the stove. I pour some yerba mate from the package, a cloud of polvo, dust, clouding the air, as it always has. The little green leaves of the yerba fill the mate, the Guaraní name of the gourd from which yerba mate inherits its name. This is the gourd, hollowed and dried, that holds the loose leaves and acts as a tea cup. To differentiate between the tea and the gourd from which it is sipped— which are both called mate, one becoming the other— the leaves are also called yerba. Yerba means, very generally, plant or herb. But in Argentina or Uruguay, the plant is always mate. The metal bombilla, *straw*, has a little bulb-shaped filter at the bottom, and I settle it into the mate, into the mass of crushed, dried, leaves, at the bottom. Out of the leaves, the stalk of the straw rises out above the gourd, a seedling from the earth.

My grandparents arrive, my papi stops trying to fix the hose and comes inside, and we sit down to drink our mate. The leaves swell and take on water, rising as I pour the hot water in the gourd. I bring the straw up to my lips, sipping. My papi and my grandpa talk about how flooded the Grand River is. I am the *cebadora*, so I refill the mate and pass it to my grandpa, who will finish it and return it to me to refill. Everyone will receive a mate. Then we will start again, the mate flowing hand to hand. Mate is shared in *jeres*, rounds.

The region where mate is grown in Argentina is called Misiones. The form of the land is drawn by the lines traced by the rivers that surround Misiones: el río Paraná, el río Iguazú, el río Uruguay. The region marks where Argentina meets with Uruguay, Paraguay, and Brazil, separated only by the fold of the river banks. The greater region, transcending borders, is called the Platense region. Mate only grows here. It is one of the largest river basins in the world. It feels so far away.

To be Argentine is to drink mate. In Buenos Aires, col-

lege students carry plastic thermoses and stainless steel mates to have *unos matecitos* between classes. The first question formed by Argentine lips as you stand in the doorway is *Tomás unos mates?* Have some mates with me. The soldiers in the Guerra de Independencia de Argentina could bear anything as long as they received their allotment of mate. There is yerba stuck in between the cracks of every keyboard. It is the only thing that is present in every home. The río Paraná is the first cebador. Can rivers flow in reverse?

When we were young, my sisters and I would drink Tereré. It's a sweeter, Paraguayan, recipe for mate, and made for the heat of summer time. The name for tereré is believed to have originated in one of two ways: (1) *Te-re-re* is an onomatopoeia that mimics the sound of air and water running through the bombilla when a mate's water runs dry; (2) It comes from a deformation of the words *té jere*, *te* meaning *tea*, and *jere* being the Guaraní word for *round* or *turn*. I find a picture of my oldest sister crouched on the porch of our old house, under the sun of a Michigan summer. She's probably six. Her hair is up in clips and she's drinking mate from the hollowed out half of a grapefruit. There are mosquito bites running up and down her arms and a packet of seeds in her lap. The bombilla she's using is one of the two I use now. How many pairs of lips have blessed it in its lifetime? How many rivers flowed from its reservoir, up and up and up.

Like most American high schoolers, I took the SAT Junior year. The hardest part of the test always came first: the demographic information. The question was one of ethnicity, "Are you Hispanic or Latino/a?" I always paused. It was separate from the question of race, which included black, white, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Other. Of course I was white, but was I Hispanic or Latina? The answer should be *no*, I thought. I didn't feel disadvantaged or discriminated against, so should I really benefit from affirmative action? But sometimes, I marked *yes*. I felt latina, and it gave me a quiet little thrill to identify with it. It felt like a dirty little secret. But who would ever know, anyway? The tests were private: both scores and personal information. Something to keep between me and the computer system that scanned and logged

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my information.

When you have a new mate, you must cure it before using it. I buy myself a new one this year, because I've been using a mate that my papi has been using since college. The new one is made of wood, like many of the more modern mates, and plated with aluminum. It came in the mail, flown thousands of mile North, a marvel of globalism. I fill it three quarters of the way with yerba. During the first pour, the yerba rises before receding again, like a breath. The water steams and bubbles as I pour it in, the yerba soaking up and subsuming it, swelling and rising and dropping. I top it off, and the characteristic bubble and froth rises to the top, a mixture of oxygen and the natural compound of saponins. Saponins are in the same family as the compound for soap. I let it rest: soaking, immersing, imbuing the wood with the sense and flavor of the yerba. The green gold laps against the lip of the mate, rich and dark, a drop of water from where I did not pour carefully enough glistens against the metal, and runs.

The yerba mate plant, *Ilex paraguariensis*, is part of the holly family, and has inherited its waxy, leaves. It likes wet air, with hot weather. The trunk rises up from the earth: up to where the branches converge with long, ovular, leaves, whose deep vein runs down the middle. Thinner veins branch out like tributaries from the center— smaller, but just as deep. That is the path the water will travel. The leaves are evergreen.

I leave my window open during the winter. The cold brushes in and snow dusts the metal sill. I find a spider taken residence inside my unclosed kilo bag of Cruz de Malta brand yerba mate. If I had to take shelter somewhere, I think it would be with the yerba too. Sitting in my room, working, I fill an electric kettle with water and wait for it to heat.

When the flow of the mate slows to a trickle, someone sipping their mate too slowly for the patience of the rest of the *materos*, the drinkers, we say, "Are you teaching it to talk?" What we don't realize is that, with the number of lips that have graced the *bombilla*, with the number of tongues that have felt the stream of water passing over them, the mate is already bilingüe, more.

Many words have passed through the *pico* of the bombilla, the aperture, the beak.

The word *cebar* means to fill, to fatten, to nourish, to charge, to load, to vent. It can be used like this: *cebar el motor*, to fuel the car— fill the gas tank; *cebar las vacas*, to fatten the cows; *comida para cebar los niños*, food to nourish the children; *cebaron los cañones y esperaron a recibir la orden de disparar*, they loaded the canons and waited to receive the order to fire. But in Argentina, *el arte de cebar*— the art of filling, loading, charging— refers to the art of mate. *Vamos a cebar mate*, they say, we're going to have mate. The cebadora, then, is the host and server, pouring the water. The cebadora is charged with the art of filling, nourishing, and loading the mate, as they pass it from hand to hand.

If I'm not paying attention and the water boils, I pull it off, dump it, and start again. *No quemá el agua, vos*, grandma-abuela says. *Don't burn the water*. Don't let it boil. If it does, you can't fix it by adding cold water. Too much oxygen has been boiled out.

My guidance counselor received a letter from College Board, the SAT test administrators, later that year. The letter was to inform her of my qualification for the National Hispanic Recognition Program, an award to recognize test scores of underrepresented groups. When I was called down to the office to pick up the letter telling me to apply for the award, I was awash with a wave of dread. My secret had surfaced. I ignored the letter. It would go away. Soon the deadline would pass, and one else would be any the wiser. It would go away. I'd forgotten about it all a couple months later, when I was called to Mrs. Johnson's office. She held up a second letter from College Board and said, "Did you get this? I wanted to make sure you applied. It's important." Shit. Now I had to talk to my parents about this. That evening, I sat down with them at the dining room table.

Argentina learned to cebar mate from the Guaraní, the people indigenous to the *Platense* watershed. When described, the Guaraní are divided into groups based on the rivers they live along, Rio de la Plata, Arroyo Malo, Rio Luján, Paraná de las Palmas, and on and on. Another name: *Guaranís de las Islas*, of the

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Islands among the rivers. I am trying to understand being inside of something, a body of water. All the rivers of the region drain into the río Paraná, whose mouth opens in Buenos Aires, the capital city of Argentina.

The gauchos, the Argentine cowboys who followed the herds of wild cattle across Las Pampas, the plains south of Misiones, drank mate before breakfast, at lunch, and as an after-dinner digestif. They sit around the *folgón*, firepit, as the hot sun drops through the sky, dusty and tired from riding. Quietly, the cebador begins to pass the mate round. A tide of surging conversation arises from the calm weariness as the energy from the mate seeps into the blood.

I told my parents what I'd done. They told me this: My papi moved to from Argentina to the US for college. After graduating, he went on to a Masters program at the University of Notre Dame. Because of his performance and his status as a latino student, he was offered a scholarship. A couple months into his degree, he was called to the Dean's Office. The Dean told him that he wasn't latino, he was actually white. Those two things were mutually exclusive: labels as solid blocks, they cannot converge or overlap. Because he wasn't latino, the Dean said, they had to rescind the scholarship he'd received. Instead, he could make up the money through an Assistantship. I apply for the program later that night.

There is a poem that I learned when I was ten, which is recited in a moment of victory, *Por el río Paraná / venía navegando un piojo, / con un hachazo en el ojo, / y una flor en el ojal. Along the river Paraná, / there came sailing a louse, / with an ax in his eye, / and a flower in his lapel.* Sometimes I am the flea, bloody and decorated, following the current of the Paraná, downstream.

My grandparents tell me that, during the Guerra de las Malvinas, when yerba mate was scarce, people were reusing it. They dumped the old yerba from the mate, spreading it across towels and drying it on their roofs. It baked in the hot sun, just like it had the first time, after the leaves are pulled off the plant in a process called *sapeco*, toasted over an open flame. *Sapeco* evapo-

rates about 25% of the moisture, solidifying and vaporizing gums and resins and leaving leaves green, even after being completely dried. Maybe this is the magic of mate, the capacity for life and vigor without water. It is like rebirth, to be dried, and flooded, dried again, rewet.

I have been asked about mate many times. Sitting on the porch during the summer some said, “What’s that? A grenade?” At school while studying in the Plant and Soil Science building, “What’s that thing?”

I say, “An Argentine tea.” I get little smiles, and amused, dubious, looks, like we’re in on some joke together. Its a joke that edges right on river bank of uncomfortable. I suppose rivers have always been used to mark borders. I don’t know who is supposed more uncomfortable though. Is it them, with their mysterious, unspoken, assumptions?

I’ve been asked if it was pot, weed. On iPhones, there is a mate emoji. Someone I follow on instagram mistakenly uses it beneath a post like they would the margarita. There used to be a “natural” energy drink that incorporated mate to lure in ill-informed free-thinkers and granola children. To make it look more exotic, the company that produced the drink added an accent to the “e” so that the bright yellow can read, “maté.”

My grandma-abuela drinks mate with her cheeks pulled in around the bombilla, and tongue tucked down, making her face look hollow. It keeps the steaming heat of the water off her tongue. She can drink mate hotter than anyone I know. In high school, when I drink mate with my dad and my grandparents, I burn my tongue every week. She says when she was young, in Argentina, she was plagued by mosquitos like you’ve never seen, and sometimes she just couldn’t stand it. Now, she has grown out of both afflictions: She doesn’t burn her mouth anymore and mosquito bites don’t itch. One day I will inherit that ability, just as many other things flow to me, downstream.

Sometimes, late in the rounds, the mate drools and spits, trapped air bubbling up and out of the bombilla and dripping down the lip. I spit too, when I get water caught in my lungs. We



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are opposite beings, the mate and I, one of us breathes water and the other air. But we are both meant to be scorched and submerged, and again.

I lay back in the Manistee river, camping with my family in Northern Michigan. Shafts of sunlight send ripples through the water, across the silt of the river bed. That two things could flow through one another, undisrupted but for the sparks of light and circular curls of shadows, seems like transcendence. The cool current brushes past me, and I can imagine I am being cleared and unloaded of everything in my head. Like that meditation exercise I sometimes practice before bed: Water running down, down through the top of my head and shoulders, past my throat, through my chest, down my legs and out the dusty soles of my feet, downstream.

I read that the 5th or sixth mate has been claimed to be the best— the perfect balance between overpoweringly bitter and diluted and weak. I think my favorite, though, is the first or the second. It is the strongest, harsh and bitter, even if it is coated with *polvo*, *powder*, that runs up the bombilla with the water, into your mouth. *Polvo* that dusts your arm hair and settles in your pores like a new skin of light green. That's why the cebadora always drinks first; it is polite to clear out the *polvo*. But I have developed the palette of a cebadora, I suppose. Other things feel *lavado*, *washed out*, in comparison.

I sit at the beach drinking mate. The heat of the mate warms my hand, stiff with the March cold. It is still winter here. My skin seems to harden against the wind, drawing my breath away. The waves of Lake Michigan lap against the dun sand, in surges. My body recedes against the cold. But I bring the warm metal bombilla up to my lips and my gladness swells up and overflowing. A heat in the throat. A burning in my sternum. It has been winter here for months, but the Lake never quite freezes, and I am used to the way I move through it.

“Gracias, che,” my papi says after a while, handing me back the mate. When you don't want another round you tell the cebadora, “Gracias.” I will pour another for myself.

# The Fall and Rise

Maggie Wolfe  
*Duke University*

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*And it was cold and it rained so I felt like an actor  
 And I thought of Ma and I wanted to get back there  
 Your face, your race, the way that you talk  
 I kiss you, you're beautiful, I want you to walk  
 We've got five years, stuck on my eyes  
 We've got five years, what a surprise  
 We've got five years, my brain hurts a lot  
 We've got five years, that's all we've got  
 -Bowie 1972*

Bowie, Chloe, Dina. I remember them all, flocked together. My idol, my dog, and my mother all in one fell swoop. Poof. Gone. What are you supposed to do? It was cold and it rained. Surrounded by horses, horses, horses. Save yourself, serve yourself. Et cetera.

*So I felt like an actor*

I moved my horse, Paul, to North Carolina in my second year of college. I found a barn at the recommendation of a friend. I think she was worried about me; I had not handled separation from the horses well my first year. I maintain that I simply did not enjoy seeing the blues and grays of Duke every day; I am more of a warm tones person, and the universally cool palette was getting to me to the point that my friends and family were concerned.

My music echoes in Paul's stall when I go to visit him everyday after class. I always play Bowie, usually the later stuff, (usually *Blackstar*), and I don't know why but the electronica and the strangled crooning create the oddest echo against the open-grained wood. It's a very yellow sound; it blends perfectly with the golden hour light that slits through the impeccably maintained red barn doors (except for the chips by the handles). It's a Gryffindor hour, brave and reckless and targeted. It grates on the ears in a lovely, masochistic way. I think I'm

## THE FALL AND RISE

unique in my love for the moment the music creates, or at least I am left with that impression. My friends all call it chaotic, the opposite of what they want in a place where they come to relax. I think it fits.

Paul's stall has a brass nameplate, the newest in the barn, ordered in August after Paul managed to get a bite of his previous one, leaving giant tooth-shaped indentations in the coppery metal. It's hard to tell what it actually says; unobscured, it reads:

Tall Paul  
Maggie Wolfe

You can barely read either name as it is. Little green dots speckle the pristine surface, like tadpoles in a pond, newly born in spring. This barn is full of little contradictions: smudged golden nameplates, revealed to be pyrite; cobwebs in the small window into the tack room which form a free-range Jackson Pollock: 50 shades of gray and 100 layers of grime; steel bars on the window which remind me of the plated windows in Duke's older buildings: old and a little rusted, oddly hot and soaking in all the natural light. It's like Bowie's Berlin years: yellow in the filtered setting sun, like the cover of *Low*; comforting and then jarring in its contradictions and its oddities like *Heroes* (why is there a banana peel left in the corner of Paul's stall, why are Bowie's hands like that?); electronic, in a comforting, unruined, non-fire-hazard-fans-from-Ollie's-Bargain-Hunt kind of way, like *Lodger*.

*And I thought of Ma*

I started riding when I was eleven years old. Dina ("Mom" always felt oddly formal and removed; she and I always ended up opposing whatever was expected of us) had been searching for my sport for years. When she was a child, her father (my grandfather) built her a basketball court, borrowing his brothers' tools from their construction business and clearing out 100 square feet of grass off of his farm. It was a playing field of red Georgia clay, unpaved, and twenty years into its lifespan, when I was its master, the particles (not dust, that's too strong a word, too large a molecule) would fly up and stain your hands red no matter how careful you were not to fall and ruin your white jeans from Ross. When Dina still played there,

it was much more: a place of artistry. My grandpa didn't let her into the house each night for dinner until she'd hit a hundred free throws on the hoop-sans-net. She always did it. Of course she did. I wasn't there, but I can imagine it, construct the romance in my head:

*There is Dina, my grandpa watching imperiously, but lovingly, from afar, the silent generation embodied. As she dribbles, the red clay forms a halo around her head, and whatever deity exists reaches their life-creating hand down and guides the ball into the hoop (its rubber grooves almost blend in with the earthy color of the shaken clay; it almost makes it look like a shooting star). Perhaps there was music playing in the background. Perhaps there was Bowie at her shoulder, marking her, choosing her. Perhaps the sky parted and the bluebirds called out in celebration.*

*And I wanted to get back there*

The barn Dina found for us was called Step-n-Free, a play on the owner's name, Stephanie. (Her name was actually Lydia, but what catchy name ever came out of one of *Pride and Prejudice's* lesser sisters?) It was a little bit like that red clay court on which my mother and I both spent our childhoods: functional but dirty; down a dirt road; a place where Flannery O'Connor would set a murder, or a monkey, or both.

Dina would never drive her black Volvo (Gertrude was its-her-name) to Step-n-Free. Somewhere in the years since she was a country girl with calluses so thick they made the soles of her feet gray and her hands stained permanently red, she'd become a *clean person*. And so her black car could not follow in her footsteps: it could not become a raggedy ann with grit in its fenders. This meant that every day-hour and a half there, hour and a half back—we drove the Mazda which she bought used “for me” when I was fourteen (its-his-name was William the Bastard). It was lovely in its way, but it was desolate. There was no corn on the property (it was exclusively a livestock operation), but it nevertheless had the air of a corn field. If you stayed there all day, you wound up shocked that you had not witnessed any alien abductions or ax murders. They filmed *The Walking Dead* there.

There were animals everywhere you turned. Stephanie

## THE FALL AND RISE

had four dogs, so that each one could catch a different type of pest; Chloe caught rats, Prissy got frogs, Paisley got possums, and Duke got the neighbor's chickens when they looked at him the wrong way. There were forty horses on the property, and one three-legged, one-horned monstrosity of a goat named Tyrion Lannister. They gave the place the air of a trail after a storm: pine cones and leaves scattered, branches still falling, air energized from a lightning strike that could have killed you (could have killed us all), but didn't. It energized you, created a high, and it made even the germaphobe in me (and in Dina) accept the tack room where the feathers of dead birds served as carpeting and mouse droppings rested alongside popsicles for the kids in the overheated freezer.

Dina had a way with animals, especially Step-n-Free's animals. She always fed the horses as soon as we arrived. She did a little jog, smiling her radiant, white-toothed, square-jawed smile that I didn't inherit, and she made her way to the feed room, where you turned on the lights and heard the scurry of mice and did not care. It smelled like molasses and straw, a bakery you never got to visit because it closed during the Civil War. She gave the dogs grain and the horses forage. She always had obvious favorites. Chloe was a Jack Russell terrier with red and white markings, the runt of her litter. Stephanie had gotten her as a last attempt to avoid calling an exterminator about the pest issue. Dina adopted her as a pet and spoiled her rotten and made her too fat to do her job. No one cared, though, because it was Dina. Chloe would run up to her and jump into her arms when we pulled in and stepped out of the Mazda. Their smiles lit up the corn fields.

*Your face, your race, the way that you talk*

I've never been able to describe what it feels like to ride a horse very well to others; they always end up confused. If I try to be clear, it ends up a cliché out of *Black Beauty*: the wind blowing through one's hair as he or she or they gallop through the countryside, chasing the sunset (or is it supposed to be sunrise?). The best I can generally do is to say that it makes even me—the depressive, gothic terror—happy. That tends to amaze my listening audience enough that they pause their questioning for the moment to contemplate. It's not the most

accurate explanation, but at least it satisfies my audience.

When I ride Paul, it makes me feel intoxicated: dizzy and on top of the world and a little paranoid at the back of my mind. He is physically taller than every other horse I have ever met. He seems to scrape the top of the skyline as he gallops up hills in the field like no other horse, even though the height difference is only a few inches. He also just has a look in his eye—the look of superiority, what my therapist desperately calls confidence—like you see in the realist portraits of 19th-century aristocracy. He is Jacques-Louis David's Napoleon snatching Josephine's crown from the pope himself, except he doesn't have a complex about his height to bother him. I've always felt that confident horses (confident people? confident dogs? I get them all mixed up) rub off on you if you let them, and I let Paul use me as a scratching post.

Paul always meets my expectations, and sometimes I worry that it's almost worse that way, for both of us. If Paul is a David painting, then I am a Goya: an awesome subject brought to the light and found wanting, a withered old man in want of a napkin. I never seem to surpass the expectation. When I played on that old basketball court, I didn't look like a warrior returning from battle with clay-streaked cheeks and battle scars, but a drowned rat coming out of the Chattahoochee, gasping and gaping. When I'm bathed in the light of the splitting sun along with Paul and Bowie each afternoon, I look less mysterious or majestic or god-like than sunburnt. No one and nothing runs to me in joy when I pull into sight.

I found out that Bowie died from the news, obviously. There were a million different obituaries and clips on the T.V. His last album, *Blackstar*, had come out just a couple of days before. I had never listened to it then; I had no need for a prop.

With Chloe, it was actually tragic, for everyone. She wasn't an old celebrity who'd led a hard life. She was tiny, a year old, innocent, with a little mole that grew wiry hair above her eyeball. She twitched her back right leg when she walked so it looked like she had a peg leg. A Chevy truck crushed her skull going 60 in a 35. Ironic: Stephanie was always telling Dina

## THE FALL AND RISE

she should make my dad get a Chevy. Dina cried—an hour and a half there, an hour and a half back—when she found out. I thought it might have been the first time.

I found Dina at home. I was angry we weren't on our way to the barn yet after I'd gotten home from school and changed. She normally met me downstairs, ready to go with a water bottle and my tall boots. I thought she looked forward to our treks to Step-n-Free even more than I did. Apparently not. I checked on her: asleep. She wasn't. The flashing red lights on the ambulances were much brighter than the Georgia clay. Their glow was not capable of leaving grit in any fenders. She'd have hated that.

*Stuck in my eyes*

Death is not what one imagines. That is not just in the cliché way, the way of tragedies. It is in a selfish way, a survivor's way. I walk around everyday and I don't know where to put my love. There is no place for it now.

My new barn in North Carolina is many things: it has a gravel driveway that gets my car just as dusty as it ever was at Step-n-Free; it has a menagerie of three dogs and sixteen horses; it has walls of corrugated metal which echo my obsession-driven music. It doesn't have my mom. It can't fill that hole.

Dina once told me that she signed me up for my first horse riding lesson after I had gotten rejected from my first travel basketball team. I had wanted to follow in her footsteps. I didn't have the talent on the clay that she did, but I knew what it was; I thought that was enough. Perhaps, desperately, she thought, "What little girl wouldn't be cheered up by a pony ride?"

She was right. The barn is still my favorite place. (Does it matter whether that's in memory or in truth?)

## VOVÓ

Luiza Louback  
*University of Pennsylvania*

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Her mother named her Merci — gratitude in flesh. As the oldest of nine daughters and two brothers, French names mixed into Portuguese, she belonged like flowers under a desert's palm. The name Merci came for her mother in a dream, a variation of Mercês, to please.

Her mother tasted the name like golden coins on her tongue, rare and shiny. As Merci came out of the womb, her mother tightened her grip as if she was going to lose her precious coin. Between ruby sheets, she held the pain like uneaten plums. A daughter, soft and lustrous, made for her to polish.

She learned how to write her own name when she was twelve, copying foreign handwriting from railroad plates, watching mottled letters invade the page. Her father didn't like the ink burrowing into the lines of her palms. He used her hands for work. For the heated underside of cooking pots and the unbri-dled mouths of her eleven children.

After eleven labors she realized children were bodies tightened into bruises. At nineteen, her spine was crooked. At twenty-five, her breasts were stretched, her orange skin ripped apart for its juices. At thirty, her opium-heavy hair was as white as the milk her children cried for every night. She died at thirty-five, whispering to sleep.

At the funeral, the entire village came, circling the body as a piece of gold that these mountains were famous for giving. Merci kneeled beside her mother, braiding her hair for the last time, feeling the arid strands between her fingers. She kissed her mouth, enlaced their hands, just skin over skin.

Her mother taught Merci how to worship water before she



## V O V Ó

taught her to speak. How to swim in the dark river that crossed the village, how to carry a water bucket with precision, balancing the hard and round head with the heavy metal bucket.

Now, her tears turn her mother's braid into a canoe that travels across an unknown river, one there is no return. The time it takes her mother to drown and bury her is the same.

At that night, Merci languages herself, echoing through the unpainted walls:

“Por favor, deixe-me salvar seu corpo de suas águas profundas.”

The trees crinkle with the wind, unable to answer her prayers.



For Merci, the earth was a piece of fabric, velvety and silky, made to graze her knuckles, to feel on the skin.

As the grief culminated in housekeeping, she bore the loss as it screamed, carefully arranging the geography of what she had inherited. At eighteen, she settled for what she had been given: a crackled house, a plain cornfield, ten siblings, a husband.

One day her mother taught her to spit into those who entered her house uninvited, a *facão* in her hands. Let the blade shine on their eyes, the saliva mark their boots, she used to say.

She spat at him the day they met. He was a white boy, blue eyes starving, leather shoes undone. It didn't scare him and he smiled at her.

“Everything is unconquerable here”. She said, hot wind unfurling her voice.

He came from the south of the country in search of what was lost, honesty, and the man-made hunt for labor.

## V O V Ó

She let him harvest the land and play futebol with her siblings, their figures burning into an orange sky, swallowed by the smoke of dirt. They ate boiled corn after work, and she watched the butter melt on his lips, the yellow seeds in his teeth. When they kissed, her tongue felt greasy and salty.

He stared at her as if he were astonished at this broken truth, that he could have her like a root has a tree. She watched his tongue roll as he pronounced her sisters' names Mercês, Marcia, Maria... letting the letters find climax in his mouth, chewing slowly because he knew the choice was his to make.

He put her on the sides of his horse on a honey-melting day, leaving behind a small village framed like a canvas around everything she knew. Merci left her siblings in the care of men she never met. Like ivies coiling together goodbyes, her sisters and brothers married for necessity, for naivety, for a future.

He was good most times, the bareback of his hands shared the same vacuums that were filled with earth, his swollen fingers perfect for weeding, for the round shape of a beer bottle.

For him, rural life was very similar to alcohol — both burn softly your scattered limbs. They crawl to the edges of desire, just like a person breathing a thing into existence. Both sweetly rot beneath you, inside you. Both consume you to death.

Merci was lost in a swirl of sand, a wedding band veining her finger. She thought of how they were both starving. He wanted her life. She wanted her mother.

Who is to say he will be damned like blue in nature or yellow like honeysuckle?

Either way, sick.



## V O V Ó

The crying was raw and turned high and low like an old radio. Her younger baby screamed without peace, maybe because nothing was floating on the top of her head, no protection.

Merci laid on the shallow bed, her gaze weighting, her womb crumbling. Now she is the same age as when her mother passed away. It was her fourth daughter, French names mixed into Portuguese: Simone, Sheila, Solange, Silvana.

They lived far away from electric beams and fervent cities, and the hospital was Merci's self-made dream. At the sight of birth-giving, her husband rushed to the old Kombi, the seats removed to fit Merci in the ground, huddled in a corner.

Silvana was born in the middle of nowhere, a red body in the BR-31 driveway, a gray road that leads all the way to the sea. The scarf tied around Merci's head to protect her from the sun, now enveloped her new daughter as her husband laughed. His hands shook anxiously for the upcoming celebration at the nearby bar.

Giving birth has become a ritual, how they peel her body like a tangerine and bury unreachable parts of herself, enlarging her hips to bear more children. It took her a while to understand that a mother was more than a seed maturing, the ovary enlarging to become a fruit.

At home, Merci cupped her ears, as if every sound hurt as if her body had forgotten how to listen. Silence erupted. Simone, the oldest, swaddled her sister in a dishcloth, lifted her tiny head, letting the baby hug tightly her finger.

"Mãe?" She asked.

"Sim, eu sou sua mãe." Merci answered, allocating the baby into her arms, imagining a flower birthed out of the earth. She let the summer stretch its languid heat across the window, blind her eyes.

After hours, her husband arrives, embracing her, their bodies

cracking against the wooden bed. His drunken mouth leaves a trace of vapor on her neck.  
Every word a breath.

“Eu  
te  
amo”

They slither into her ears as her tears combine with his spilled drink.



When they moved to Belo Horizonte, a hole-shaped city trapped in the middle of hills, Merci found in gardens a place to be pure and true. She enjoyed the routine, worshiping the land with water and gently blessing it with seeds. The grass kissed her bare feet, as she regained lost moments.

Her husband returned home screaming:

“Ô Lugar assombrado!”

His voice trembled, the metal door accompanying him as he shut it. Every day he did the same things, announcing his presence with screams and cracks. This time, he stumbled over to the garden.

Merci's body wilted hate like a dandelion tired of being swept by a controlling wind. She is more than something he could lose himself in, aching for every piece of her hair and teeth. She is more than hands feeding, hands cleaning, hands collecting pieces of broken glass bottles.

Her heart beats wild and erratic as they stick together, fists and wrists merging. He cries falling into Merci's precious roses. Thorns, and blood and petals blending into a red painting.

He stayed on the ground, drunk and surrounded by dead

## V O V Ó

flowers. Hours later, she helped him, treating the scratches and putting him to bed like a child who hurt himself while playing.



In every picture, Merci stays put in a parallel world I can not evade. Hands on her lap, curly hair yanked tight against her scalp, golden crucifix on the curve of her breast. Pursed lips and suspended eyelids.

Her husband sits on her sides, stained paper skin, blue eyes shadowed by milky curtains, thin hair running smoothly on his scalp. He smiles broadly, clasped hands on her back.

She feels the teeth moving in her mouth, uncomfortable. An intimate rebellion, bones trying to move back to a past of harsh bites. Merci hurts with them, the pain of being encapsulated into places too small for you, never creating roots. Not knowing a soil to sink into, alone.

In this country, men praise the silence. I knit our fingers together and I ask:

“Vovó, how did you meet grandpa?”

She looks at me with the kind of eyes that carry hidden things. The kind of eyes that make me understand how we are a family holding the same grief.

Merci opens her mouth, and I swear she smiles directly at me.



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# Notional Ekphrasis in Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*: Pushing the Bounds of the Real

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There is a boy drowning in green water. He is drowning right now, today, and he was drowning yesterday, and he was drowning in December 1938 when a poet looked closely at a painting and saw a young leg frozen in the act of sinking. The boy is Icarus, in Pieter Brueghel's painting *The Fall of Icarus*, and the poet is W.H. Auden, who saw Icarus' painted leg during a visit to the Musées Royaux des Beaux Arts in Brussels and responded with his poem, "Musée des Beaux Arts." "Musée des Beaux Arts" is an ekphrastic poem, a poem that describes in words a visual or physical object, usually a work of art. As ekphrastic poetry goes, it is readily identifiable: the poem's title names the museum in which the poet saw the work displayed, and the work itself is named in the fourteenth line when the poem refers to what Auden saw "in Brueghel's *Icarus*".<sup>1</sup> He closely observes Icarus' descent and drowning, "the white legs disappearing into the green / Water."<sup>2</sup> Much of the poem is spent on the other figures' lack of attention, how the ploughman hears and does nothing, how the ship "sail[s] calmly on."<sup>3</sup> In the face of that inattention, this poem is a communicative work, an act of translation. Auden sees Brueghel's *Icarus* and describes it, in detail, to a reader: the splash, the white legs, the "expensive delicate ship."<sup>4</sup> Not only is the visual

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1 W.H. Auden, "Musée des Beaux Arts," In *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, 3rd ed. vol. 1, ed. Jahan Ramazani, Richard Ellman, and Robert O'Clair, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003): l. 14.

2 Ibid., ll. 18-19

3 Ibid., l. 21.

4 Ibid., l. 19.

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detail of the central painting, *The Fall of Icarus*, communicated, but so too is the overall experience of viewership: Auden in fact conveys the sensation of standing in a gallery amidst Brueghel's other works, *The Numbering at Bethlehem*, *Winter Landscape with Skaters and a Bird Trap*, and *The Massacre of the Innocents*. In doing so, Auden writes into being both the experience of looking and the experience of seeing. By making that experience possible, he encourages the reader to look as closely as he does, and in the process effectively translates the painting from a visual work into a literary one. For all the ways in which "Musée de Beaux Arts" is interpretively challenging, the identifiability of the referent and the fundamental literariness of Auden's approach make it a relatively straightforward example of an ekphrastic work.

Ekphrasis, however cannot always be so concisely understood. Ekphrasis grapples with some of the thorniest questions of literature; it is tangled in the struggle to determine what in literature is real, what is true. Valentine Cunningham argues that ekphrasis addresses this doubt by pointing to the tangible, the "touchable, fingerable, *thisness*...the absolute *thereness* of an aesthetic object."<sup>5</sup> Not only does ekphrasis point to the real, it points to the made, to other works wrought by human hands, fathomable in human space, and ostensibly comprehensible to the human mind. In doing so, it begins to bring poetry into that same comprehensible realm. Murray Krieger's "The Ekphrastic Principle and the Still Movement of Poetry; or *Laocoön* Revisited" expands this concept to address ekphrasis as the striving of words themselves to achieve corporeal presence: not to Cunningham's external thereness, but to a more inherent solidity. Krieger describes a necessary self-consciousness within poetry, a "formal and linguistic self-sufficiency" that requires the poem's "coming to terms with itself."<sup>6</sup> He argues that the use of a tangible referent, rhetorically "com-

<sup>5</sup> Valentine Cunningham, "Why Ekphrasis?" *Classical Philology* 102 (2007): 61.

<sup>6</sup> Murray Krieger, "The Ekphrastic Principle and the Still Movement of Poetry; or *Laocoön* Revisited," *The Poet as Critic*, ed. Frederick P.W. McDowell (Northwestern University Press, 1967): 88



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plete" artwork in particular, spacializes poetry, superimposes the stillness of the finished object onto the "turning world" of literature.<sup>7</sup> Literature, in lashing itself to the tangible human creation, claims its own tangibility, and drags itself to its own two feet, free-standing.

Ekphrasis has been complicating literature for millennia. Homer's description of the Shield of Achilles in the *Iliad* is commonly recognized as the earliest known example of this phenomenon.<sup>8</sup> Ancient Greek ekphrasis had a very broad definition; though it required great vividness of the written evocation, it could describe a thing, person, place, or event, not just a work of art.<sup>9</sup> Ekphrasis was popular in poetry and prose throughout antiquity, and in late antiquity began to be defined as a genre, becoming more specific to art objects. During the Roman imperial period, Philostratos the Younger applied the term to Kallistratos' descriptions of statues.<sup>10</sup> Ekphrasis would become most firmly attached to poetry with the work of Leo Spitzer and Jean Hagstrum in the mid-20th century, particularly with Spitzer's famously narrow definition of ekphrasis as the "poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art."<sup>11</sup> However, between the Roman definition of ekphrasis, and the modern concretization of that genre, ekphrasis grappled with particularly expansive questions and forms in the Early Modern period.

The question of representation is central to ekphrastic work, and the form that strikes closest to the heart of that question is what John Hollander calls "notional ekphrasis," ekphrasis describing "what doesn't exist, save in the poetry's

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7 Krieger, "The Ekphrastic Principle and the Still Movement of Poetry," 90.

8 Ruth Webb, "Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern: The Invention of a Genre," *Word and Image* 15, no. 1 (1999): 8. and Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992): xv.

9 Krieger, *Ekphrasis*, 7. and Webb, "Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern," 8.

10 Webb, "Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern," 15.

11 Leo Spitzer, "The 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,' or Content vs. Metagrammar," *Comparative Literature* 7, no. 3 (1995): 207.

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[or prose's] own fiction."<sup>12</sup> This is the form that defined the exploratory ekphrastic works of the Early Modern period. Notional ekphrasis refers to works that never existed, that are but figments of the writer's imagination, and also extends to actual works that have been totally lost; in all cases, it is the language itself which brings the object into being.<sup>13</sup> Far from a hazy cousin of the concrete ekphrasis I've discussed up to this point, Hollander casts notional ekphrasis as the grand, unacknowledged ancestor of all ekphrastic work, that which "provides the paradigms and the precursor texts, the rhetorical models and the interpretive strategies" for modern ekphrasis of the actual.<sup>14</sup> No ekphrasis, however definite its referent, is free from the notional tradition. Notional ekphrasis grapples most closely with the questions of reality that all ekphrasis must address. Ekphrasis is poetry's answer to its own self-doubt, proving tangible truth amidst uncertainty, the claim that seeing is believing; notional ekphrasis is the question, the source of the doubt, that which asks whether belief can prove like sight. To grapple with notional ekphrasis is to engage directly with questions of reality older and deeper than their solid manifestations, to dive into murkier, but perhaps more rewarding, waters.

Early Modern literature is a productive pool for this murky swim. James Heffernan, building on Hollander's work in his book *Museum of Words*, argues somewhat generically that outside of Italy nearly all ekphrasis in the Early Modern period was notional. He grounds his argument in such works as Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* and Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*. Heffernan argues that this pervasive notionalism, so often treating works either truthfully or fictionally lost to time, functions in a paradigm under which visual art is "perishable."<sup>15</sup> This is not, however, a paradigm of *ephemerality*. These

<sup>12</sup> John Hollander, "The Poetics of Ekphrasis," *Word & Image* 4, no. 1 (Winter 1988): 209.

<sup>13</sup> John Hollander, *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995): 5.

<sup>14</sup> Hollander, "Poetics of Ekphrasis," 209.

<sup>15</sup> James A.W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics*

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lost works, such as the image of the fall of Troy in *The Rape of Lucrece* (which has been speculated to be both totally fictitious and one of a set of paintings or tapestries since lost), were just as physical as Brueghel's "Icarus"; they are not vapors, destined to fade, but objects real as flesh, imprinting themselves on the world as physically as any other 'real' thing, just as subject to the "ravages of time and historical contingency" as anything, even you or I.<sup>16</sup> They are not fleeting, but they are finite. Heffernan contrasts this perishable view of art with ekphrasis in the Romantic period, which often concerns itself with the visual and physical arts as timeless.

Mired in this temporal anxiety, the Early Modern idea that literature is eternal in a way the visual arts are not was accompanied by a preoccupation with lifelikeness. Suparna Roychoudhury's recent article "Artlikeness: *Enargeia*, Imagination, and the Enlivening of Shakespeare's Hero" explores this concern with aesthetic vividity as a form of enlivenment, not a described near-life, but an inscribed actual vitality, what Roychoudhury calls the "fictive understructure of life itself."<sup>17</sup> Wendy Beth Hyman and Jennifer Waldron's "Introduction: Interstitial Fiction" places this question of the lifelike within a larger conundrum about reality in which Early Modern fictions "display an ontological capaciousness that reconfigures...the limits of plausibility."<sup>18</sup> Steeped in the contemporary fascination with ingenious handicraft and grappling with that timely question of whether a bright enough description can give life beyond text itself, Christopher Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* exemplifies this capacious questioning. Teetering between the sturdy and the fleeting, the real and the unreal, the truthful and the deceptive, the notional ekphrasis of *Hero and Leander* of *Ekphrasis from Home to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993): 91.

16 Heffernan, *Museum of Words*, 91.

17 Suparna Raychoudhury, "Artlikeness: *Enargeia*, Imagination, and the Enlivening of Shakespeare's Hero," *English Literary Renaissance* 52, no. 3 (Autumn 2022): 427.

18 Wendy Beth Hyman and Jennifer Waldron, "Introduction: Interstitial Fiction," *English Literary Renaissance* 52, no. 3 (Autumn 2022): 318.

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offers both an obsessive materiality and a predisposition to illusion that, together with the poem's deeply felt literary genealogy, probe the boundaries of the real both in and outside of the written world.

*Hero and Leander* begins by quite literally clothing itself in story. The poem opens with Hero, describing not her body or personal attributes, but her extravagant clothing, a gown embroidered like a tapestry on green fabric with purple silk lining, depicting the grove

“Where Venus in her naked glory strove  
To please the careless and disdainful eyes  
Of proud Adonis, that before her lies.”<sup>19</sup>

Hero's tapestried gown is Marlowe's first introduction of the layers of textual reality that permeate this poem. The scene on Hero's sleeve establishes that the story of Venus and Adonis, known to contemporary readers through Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, is existent within the world of the epyllion; it is therefore real at once in their ontology and in ours. The Venus and Adonis myth suffuses these early lines in other ways as well. Hero is an acolyte of Venus, so beautiful that even Cupid, Venus' son, “imagined Hero was his mother.”<sup>20</sup> Hero's ekphrastic garb bears further connections to the Venus and Adonis story: in addition to the tapestry on her sleeve, her blue kirtle is stained “with the blood of wretched lovers slain,” recalling Adonis' bloody death during a boar hunt.<sup>21</sup> Leander, like Adonis, is young, preternaturally beautiful, and doomed. Adonis' death now stains Hero's gown on four levels. Within the world of the poem it is visually depicted on the tapestry that tells the story of his death, and is present in the actual blood on the kirtle; to the reader who knows the Venus and Adonis story, it is further present in the written presence of the bloodstain and in Marlowe's ekphrasis of the tapestry as a representation of the

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<sup>19</sup> Christopher Marlowe, *Hero and Leander*, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature Volume B: The Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Century*, 10th ed., ed. Stephen Greenblatt, et al. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2018): ll. 12-14.

<sup>20</sup> Marlowe, *Hero and Leander*, l. 40.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 16.

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literary history of the Venus and Adonis myth.

Marlowe's choice to concentrate these representational complexities through the medium of the tapestry is not incidental. Tapestries were a ubiquitous narrative form in Early Modern England, found in courts, noble estates, schools, churches, and humbler homesteads. They were temporal objects, known to fade and decay over time. They were manipulable, capable of being rolled, carried, "hid behind, pulled back, or slashed...cut into pieces, embroidered over, and even rewoven."<sup>22</sup> As Rebecca Olson argues in her book *Arras Hanging: The Textile That Determined Early Modern Literature and Drama*, tapestries as they appeared in literature and onstage also bore this manipulability, and would have been understood by Renaissance readers as palpable, interpretive texts. By including a tapestry of Venus and Adonis, a story to which Hero and Leander are intimately connected, Marlowe makes his own text more tangible by association. Furthermore, tapestry ekphrasis within a fiction was known as a representation of literary text itself, as Arachne and Philomela's tapestries stand in for the text of the *Metamorphoses*. By turning the ekphrastic tapestry of Venus and Adonis into a gown, Hero, a literary character here appearing in a poem, is literally clothed in a metaphor for poetry. The tapestry of Venus and Adonis could not only be read as a stand-in for literature as a whole, but specifically for extant poetic treatments of the myth, in particular book 10 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. By dressing Hero in this poetic tapestry, Marlowe nods to Hero's existence as a literary figure, further complicating the layers of 'reality' at which *Hero and Leander* is operating.

Hero's gown is not the only early blurring of the lines of the real and the fictional. Immediately following the ekphrasis of Hero's narrative garment is a brief description of her veil, which reaches from the myrtle wreath atop her head to the ground beneath her chirping boots. The veil is made of "arti-

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<sup>22</sup> Rebecca Olson, *Arras Hanging: The Textile That Determined Early Modern Literature and Drama*. (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2013), 151.

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ficial flowers and leaves, / Whose workmanship both man and beast deceives;"<sup>23</sup> in other words, the veil is an optical illusion, a *trompe-l'oeil*.<sup>24</sup> This deceptive attire is extended in her necklace, the "chains of pebble-stone, / Which, lightened by her neck, like diamonds shone."<sup>25</sup> Through her treatment of another Ovidian epyllion, Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, Catherine Belsey provides an interesting conceptual framework for reading a poem as a literary *trompe-l'oeil*. Belsey argues that *Venus and Adonis* is not only a text about ungratified desire but also a text that elicits ungratified desire in its reader, that "promises a definitive account of love" but simultaneously "withholds the finality" expected.<sup>26</sup> Belsey grounds this interpretation in the epyllion's subversion of both Renaissance and mythological gender and social norms. Venus, a female goddess, pursues a beautiful young man, a counterpoint to multifarious masculine pursuits of young Greco-Roman women. The goddess of love herself, usually the object of all attention, is here the suitor, the "desiring subject."<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, she is an unsuccessful suitor, her failure a creation myth for lovers' failures the world over. *Venus and Adonis* is another example of complex representationality, in which the story explicitly told in the text is rendered again in the experience of reading.

Belsey's model does not exactly fit to *Hero and Leander*. Hero, devotee of Venus, is very much the object, not the instigator of pursuit. Her bloodstained kirtle attests to this immediately, as does her introduction as the one "whom young Apollo courted for her hair," and Leander's wheedling away of her virgin principles in several hundred lines. The gender-swapping to which Belsey devotes so much attention is most present in Leander's encounter with Neptune, but Leander rejects the subversion, crying out "You are deceived; I am no woman

23 Marlowe, *Hero and Leander*, ll. 19-20.

24 A particularly painterly illusion of reality, in which depth is created in a two-dimensional work.

25 Marlowe, *Hero and Leander*, ll. 25-26.

26 Catherine Belsey, "Love as *Trompe-l'oeil*: Taxonomies of Desire in *Venus and Adonis*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (Autumn 1995): 258.

27 *Ibid.*, 259.

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I."<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, though Venus and Adonis never consummate their relationship, Hero and Leander do. Marlowe's poem ends as the sun rises over their shared bed. However, though Hero and Leander's relationship with each other is consummated, the informed reader's relationship to the story is not. Marlowe's poem ends partway through the traditional myth, in which Leander is drowned and Hero joins him in death; a reader anticipating the expected continuance of the story must be left unsatisfied.<sup>29</sup> And because the story does not proceed to its expected close, the audience is left to wonder if it will; the abrupt ending injects a sense of unfamiliarity into an otherwise well-trod tale. The balance of a familiar story with an unfamiliarly abrupt ending turns *Hero and Leander*, under Belsey's model, into a kind of literary *trompe-l'oeil*. This open-endedness, like Hero's veil, invites uncovering, encourages the reader to peel back the poem's outermost layers and puzzle through its blurry obfuscations of the literary and the real.

Though necessary to the poem's effect as a *trompe-l'oeil*, the reader's understanding of Marlowe's literary genealogy, of the precursory and contemporary tellings of similar myths, is most critical in the scene at the temple of Venus, when Hero and Leander meet. In his ekphrasis of the temple, Marlowe builds his densest questioning, grounding himself in *Hero and Leander's* literary family tree, and tangibly blurring the bounds between literature, life, and art. The crystal floor of Venus' temple at Sestos, like Hero's gown, is an ekphrasis of Ovidian myth, in which one may "see the gods in sundry shapes, / Committing heady riots, incest, rapes."<sup>30</sup> The ekphrasis continues into the floor's depiction of Jove with Danaë, Ganymede, Europa, and Iris; Mars catching Venus *in flagrante delicto* with Vulcan; and Sylvanus weeping for Cyparissus. These stories are drawn from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a work that greatly informed

28 Marlowe, *Hero and Leander*, l. 676.

29 There is some debate as to whether this sudden conclusion was intentional or due to Marlowe's death in 1593. The contemporary playwright George Chapman went so far as to "finish" Marlowe's work with an addition in 1598 that has been often condemned as tedious and moralizing.

30 Marlowe, *Hero and Leander*, ll. 143-144.

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the English epyllion, of which *Hero and Leander* is an example. Efterpi Mitsi argues that Ovid's influence on the epyllion form "freed poetry from the didacticism of the epic," giving license for the ample use of ekphrasis and digression, two tactics of which Marlowe makes frequent use.<sup>31</sup> That said, Marlowe's likely source material for the Hero and Leander myth was not just Ovid directly, but Musaeus' interpretation of the *Metamorphoses*.

Musaeus was a late 5th-early 6th century intermediary between Marlowe and Ovid; he was considered divine, a direct inheritor of Orpheus' talent either through blood or tutelage. His interpretation of Hero and Leander aligns closely with the events of Marlowe's poem, though he continues the story farther than Marlowe, writing all the way to the lovers' deaths, while Marlowe's version ends at the consummation of their relationship. However, Musaeus' poem is less than half the length of Marlowe's, with little emphasis on detail or vivid imagery and no ekphrastic content; those attributes are more clearly inherited from Ovid's work. Through the invention of the Venus' glass, Marlowe nods to the interpretive history of the Hero and Leander story; he acknowledges the "divine Musaeus" earlier in the poem, and the glass's attention to violence and rape recalls the Ovidian ekphrastic tapestries of Arachne and Philomela.<sup>32</sup> The Venus's glass, like the Venus and Adonis tapestry some hundred lines earlier, connects Marlowe's text to Ovid's, a text very well-known by Renaissance audiences. The Ovidian ekphrases of *Hero and Leander*, begun with Hero's tapestry and made obvious in the temple of Venus, reveal Marlowe's epyllion to be self-conscious, articulately aware of its place in the tradition of interpretations of both Hero and Leander specifically, and the broader sphere of Greco-Roman myth. Ovid's interpretive approach relied heavily on ekphrasis to explore "the relation between text and image."<sup>33</sup> Marlowe draws on this

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31 Efterpi Mitsi, "Violent Acts and Ovidian Artifacts in Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*," *Classical and Modern Literature* 27, no. 2 (2007): 5.

32 Marlowe, *Hero and Leander*, l. 52.

33 Mitsi, "Violent Acts and Ovidian Artifacts," 9.



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history, grounding his work in acknowledged tradition, and using Ovid's explorations of text and image to push further, probing the boundaries of literature, art, and life itself.

I have established that ekphrasis can serve as a means of claiming palpability amid the nebulousness of words. As Auden claims the actuality of Brueghel's painting, or Keats the stillness of the Grecian Urn, Marlowe's Ovidian ekphrases lay claim not to the conjured thereness of the notional tapestry and floor, but to the historical and literary thereness of the Ovidian stories. By clothing and surrounding Hero and Leander with these objects, by so saturating the world of the epyllion with these impactful stories, he legitimates the impact of his own art, and the story he is telling. Marlowe has established a paradigm by which other texts are palpably real both in and outside the bounds of the epyllion. Why should *Hero and Leander* not follow that same law, be equally palpable both in and outside the text of the poem? This questioning is the product of Marlowe's notional ekphrases: they push the bounds of tangibility, inviting the reader to question where the real begins and ends.

The Venus' glass pushes this question farther than any other single moment in the poem. The glass has been read by some as a distinctly static object, evoking "statis, shape, and silent presence," as Mitsi claims it does.<sup>34</sup> However, the present-tense description of the Ovidian stories contained, as well as the floor's material and the scene that takes place upon it, suggest otherwise. The "riots, incest, rapes" of the gods are all described as present occurrences: looking at the floor, a viewer can see Jove "slyly stealing...bellowing loud...tumbling," watch Mars "heaving" and Sylvanus "weeping;" these active verbs set the crystal floor in motion.<sup>35</sup> Looking at the temple floor, the reader sees those actions occurring immediately before them. That immediacy is heightened by the lack of buildup or denouement; the full stories are not played out. The positioning of these action-only scenes "underneath" the floor, rather than

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 13.  
<sup>35</sup> Marlowe, *Hero and Leander*, ll. 144-154.

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upon or within it, suggests that the crystal acts almost as a traversable portal to these events, rather than a static depiction of them.<sup>36</sup> Drawing on another meaning of “glass,” the temple floor could even be a kind of mirror, reflecting Hero and Leander, themselves vital, living myth. The shining-floored temple then becomes a space where life, art, and myth blend and blur to the point that the living and the literary become indistinguishable. It is in this protean space that Hero and Leander first encounter each other, where Leander is pierced by “love’s arrow with the golden head,” giving the pair a crucial action moment of their own to accompany those depicted around them.<sup>37</sup> In fact, Hero is shown “in the midst” of the Ovidian scenes, not above or apart from them.<sup>38</sup> She crouches at a bloodied silver altar, a perfect counterpart to the golden arrow striking her soon-to-be lover in a moment of distinctly visual and distinctly literary symbolism; her bloodied silver altar to Venus pairs with Cupid’s bloodied golden arrow, connected in their precious metals, both foreshadowing the deaths brought about by their love. Buoyed by the stained-glass quality of this symbolism, the shooting scene occurs atop the floor, in ‘real life,’ but with the same imagistic feel as the scenes occurring under it with their brass towers, iron nets, rainbows, and cypress trees.<sup>39</sup> The arrow-shot is also described in past tense: the arrow “flew” and Leander “was” transformed, a calcification to contrast the present-tense vitality of the glass scenes.<sup>40</sup> In the temple of Venus, as the myths laid beneath their feet are made alive, Hero and Leander become mythologized, a transposition between life and art as the crafted inlay lives and the living Leander freezes statuesque, “stone still.”<sup>41 42</sup> The stories pass into

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36 Ibid., l. 145.

37 Ibid., 161.

38 Ibid., l. 157.

39 Marlowe, *Hero and Leander*, ll. 146, 150-51, 154.

40 Ibid., ll. 161-62.

41 Ibid., l. 163.

42 This mutability is further supported by the temple’s wall decoration, a carving of Proteus (l. 137), a shapechanger, from whom the word “protean,” meaning variable, changing, or mutable, is derived.

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being, and the beings into story.

The dynamism of Marlowe's ekphrastic style is part of why *Hero and Leander* can be so richly mined for its realities and unrealities. As we have seen in the temple, Marlowe grapples not only with distinctions of reality between text and art, but between text, art, and life. Rachel Eisendrath's *Poetry in a World of Things: Aesthetics and Empiricism in Renaissance Ekphrasis* contrasts the vitality of the ekphrasis in *Hero and Leander* to the "congealing" ekphrastic traditions of late antiquity.<sup>43</sup> After a lengthy walk-through of the history of post-Augustan ekphrasis, Eisendrath grounds her argument in Marlowe's first ekphrasis of Hero. Hero's initial description is notably cluttered; she is only briefly mentioned to be "fair" and the nearly fifty lines of her introduction barely alight on her body at all. Her rich clothing, illusory veil, and intricate boots receive dozens of lines of attention, whereas her face and eyes, usually hallmarks of the Renaissance female form, aren't mentioned at all. In fact, Eisendrath notes that her tangibility seems to be reliant on her ekphrastic accoutrement. Others encountering Hero praise her "sweet smell," the sun and wind delight in dappling her hands, and the honey bees "have sought [her breath] in vain, / And, beat from thence, have lighted there again,"<sup>44</sup> but no one seems to actually move toward her or touch her. Marlowe's poetry "[occupies] an airy distance around Hero's surface," where everything is "hovering, playing, flickering, breathing," but never touching down.<sup>45</sup> Her ekphrastic clothing is what touches ground, shines, moves and stills, defines her solid shape. In contrast, Leander bears none of Hero's extravagant attire, but his body is almost obsessively objectified: his hair is compared to the Golden Fleece, his body to Circe's wand, and his neck to ivory.<sup>46</sup> Marlowe's objects take on more life than their human bearers, with their bodies almost exclusively conglomerated

<sup>43</sup> Rachel Eisendrath, "Playing with Things: Reification in Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*," in *Poetry in a World of Things: Aesthetics and Empiricism in Renaissance Ekphrasis*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 84.

<sup>44</sup> Marlowe, *Hero and Leander*, ll. 21, 23-24.

<sup>45</sup> Eisendrath, "Playing with Things," 98.

<sup>46</sup> Marlowe, *Hero and Leander*, ll. 56, 60, 65.

artifacts. Hero is ethereal but her tapestry moves as she moves, her veil sways, reaches, and deceives. Her boots are perhaps the most obvious in their animation, with their “sparrows perched” that “chirrup through the bills” when watered;<sup>47</sup> the boots incorporate also the enargeiaic question of lifelikeness, the philosophical implications of an avian handicraft so well-turned that it sings as sparrows do. And, just a hundred lines after readers “wonder to behold” Hero’s exceptional footwear, the Venus’ glass shines with vitality.<sup>48</sup> Eisendrath calls this phenomenon the “new poetic life” of “ekphrastic thingliness,” and goes on in her analysis to examine Marlowe’s style through the histories of aestheticism and the commodity-based economy.<sup>49</sup> But this “frothy hyperbolic life” uncovered in Marlowe’s things bears an equally fascinating connection and contrast to the physical text itself, which is necessarily static.<sup>50</sup> Despite the poem’s propensity for motion, the words themselves cannot flicker or shift across the page like Hero’s bees. Marlowe’s ekphrasis, as seen before in the temple, objectifies the living and vitalizes, or as Eisendrath says, reifies, the object. This categorical blurring of what is and is not really alive, is augmented by Marlowe’s exploration of the dynamism of the supposedly-still (tapestry, boots, a glass) through the fixed physical medium of text. If the work of actual ekphrasis is to concretize poetry’s insubstantial motion, the work of notional ekphrasis (at least for Marlowe) is to catalyze still text into movement, not to still the turning world but to turn the still world of poetry.

Icarus is always drowning because he has been painted so. The brush has left the canvas, the painting has been framed, the work is done and he will always be dying. W.H. Auden saw this, mourned this, and then drew from that immutability a certitude of his own: that his poetic translation of the painting’s suffering was, like Brueghel himself, “never wrong.”<sup>51</sup> This is ekphrasis of the actual at work, the grounding of a poem’s

47 Ibid., ll. 33, 36.

48 Marlowe, *Hero and Leander*, l. 34.

49 Eisendrath, “Playing with Things,” 99.

50 Ibid., 98.

51 Auden, “Musée des Beaux Arts,” l. 1.

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truth in the irrevocability of identifiable art. It is precisely that changelessness that notional ekphrasis works against. Three and a half centuries before Auden's stay in Brussels, Christopher Marlowe rewrote a myth that had been told and retold before and filled his tale absolutely to the brim with imagined things, with small, beautiful notions assembled into myth. In the ekphrasis of *Hero and Leander*, those notional creations breathe, move, and bleed on the page, made vital by every reader's eye, yet textual still. *Hero and Leander* balances on that contradiction, on the superposition of text and reality; the poem draws on the thread of uncertainty running deepest in the poetic craft, probing ceaselessly at the boundaries of literature, art, and life.

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# Non-Human Agency in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

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## 1 Introduction

What does one live for? Why, one asked oneself, does one take all these pains for the human race to go on? Is it so very desirable? Are we attractive as a species? Not so very, he thought, looking at those rather untidy boys. (Woolf 84)

If an alien species came to check on our current global state of affairs only to find us busy with large-scale livestock farming, warfare, deforestation, coral bleaching, air, water, plastic and light pollution, or with melting the polar ice caps, to name but a few human day-to-day activities, they might not find us so very attractive as a species either. Instead of this rather subjective evaluation of such human behaviour, one might also use the adjective *anthropocentric*. Essentially, this term translates to 'human-centred' (cf. Padwe) and denotes the view that humans are not only the pivotal species on this earth, but also that everything else has value only insofar as it



is beneficial to us (cf. Thompson and Barton 150). Its diametrical opposite is the *ecocentric* view, i.e. the “ethical consideration for the intrinsic value of nonhuman forms” (Kopnina et al. 115). Anthropocentrism might be the single most self-destructive driving force behind the myriad of damaging, hubristic and short-sighted human projects that characterise the current era that has unofficially<sup>1</sup> come to be known as the Anthropocene. The National Geographic Society describes the latter as “the most recent period in Earth’s history when human activity started to have a significant impact on the planet’s climate and ecosystems”<sup>2</sup>, whereas Clark offers an equally accurate, albeit slightly more cynical, definition of the Anthropocene as “a dark moment of humanity’s realisation of its own nature” (8).

Virginia Woolf (1882-1942) died before there even existed a term to describe and discuss this “dark moment”: although the onset of the Anthropocene is retrospectively dated back to some time between 1610, when European colonisation started to irreversibly impact the environment, and 1950, which marks the beginning of “the plutonium fallout from atomic bomb explosions” (cf. Heggglund et al. xi), the concept was not coined and made popular until the year 2000 (cf. Tung 135). Yet Woolf’s texts boast of an astonishing awareness of humanity’s rather problematic attitude towards its host planet. Among them, her novel *To the Lighthouse*, published in 1927, stands out as especially indicative of this. Whilst the vast majority of scholarly criticism typically casts *To the Lighthouse* as an exploration of marriage, loss, art, identity, memory or perception, I posit that the novel accommodates an equally deep-seated examination of anthropocentrism that raises profound questions about human and non-human values and relations.

Recently<sup>3</sup>, ecocritical interest in modernist literature in general, and in Woolf’s works in particular, has increased (cf. Heggglund et al. xiv), with scholars noting the “abundant

1 As the National Geographic Society states, the official geological era is still the Holocene (cf. “Anthropocene”).

2 Reference in bibliography: “Anthropocene”.

3 Heggglund et al. suggest that “a more ecologically-minded modernist studies [...] found its way into critical conversations in the late 1990s and early 2000s” (xiv).

evidence in Woolf's writing of her alertness to the more-than-human world" (Alt 8). In this paper, I strive to participate in and extend this discussion. Subsequent to the theoretical framework provided in chapter 2, chapter 3 will analyse *To the Lighthouse* with regard to the various typically modernist tools it employs to represent non-human life. To this end, I will particularly elaborate on the structure and narration of the novel. I will also, however, critically depart from this scholarly discourse that merely praises Woolf's depictions of nature to discuss (in chapter 4) how this novel also calls into question such representations of the "more-than-human world" – an aspect which is in line with the modernist doubt as to the possibility of truthful representations of life and consciousness, and of which Woolf certainly was no exception (cf. Dalgarno 70).

Thus, my argument is that *To the Lighthouse* explores ways of imagining and foregrounding non-human agency in narrative prose, whilst also expounding the problems of this very practice. Ultimately, I assert that the novel pits anthropocentric against ecocentric values and thereby questions their viability. This casts Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* as a very early example of ecologically critical writing, asserting non-human agency and anticipating the Anthropocene with its calamitous consequences.

## 2 Theory: Modernism and the Anthropocene

As established in the Introduction, *To the Lighthouse* was put into print more than half a century before the Anthropocene was called into existence. However, as I will show in the following chapters, this novel testifies to a literary alertness to the rapidly "shifting relationship between human actors and the diverse agencies of the nonhuman world" (Hegglund et al. x) that was already present in the first half of the twentieth century. Woolf ranges among the most well-known writers of modernism, a literary genre that was at once externally affected by the overall acceleration of the industrial revolution and the devastation of World War I, and voiced an internally arising epistemological scepticism about the reliability of perception and the limitations of language (cf. Wolfreys 151-156).

## NON - HUMAN AGENCY

It was perhaps the fragmentation and destabilisation of this period that prompted modernist writers to develop an “intolerance with linear narrative structures” (Booth, qtd. in Wolfreys 154) and instead experiment with “more flexible” ones better suited to “[convey] the complexity of relationships in the real world” (Kostkowska 4-5). Within these unconventional narratives, the characters’ environment “gains a new presence as modernism explores the boundaries of language and the possibilities of nonhuman lives that operate outside of human control” (Sultzbach 2). *To the Lighthouse* is not only a typically modernist novel in that it ticks all of these boxes, it is also, as I shall demonstrate, pervaded by imaginations of that which is “outside of human control”, be it natural laws, non-human consciousness or the passing of time. Hegglund and McIntyre explain, based on Robert Markley’s “tri-partite model of temporality” (Hegglund et al. xii),<sup>4</sup> the perception of time in terms of three registers: first is the “experiential or embodied time”, the “subjective, phenomenological flow of moment-to-moment experience” (ibid.) which modernist texts often convey with free indirect discourse (cf. Winston 20-21). The second register is that of “historical time”, “the successive generational sweep of human culture that outlasts individual lives but still remains within a longer narrative of human existence” (ibid.). While these first two are inherently human-centred, the third temporal register describes “a non-anthropogenic<sup>5</sup> time that transcends both individual and historical experience” – also called the “planetary” or “climatological” register (ibid.). To think about time in such dimensions is meant to raise awareness for the existence and importance of non-human life and scales on this planet. I will, in chapter 3.1, apply this model to *To the Lighthouse* in order to substantiate Hegglund and McIntyre’s claim that “[o]ne of the features of a modernist Anthropocene, then, is the oblique expression of climatological, planetary time through tropes that find their way into conventional literary

<sup>4</sup> For an in-depth analysis see Robert Markley’s “Time, History, and Sustainability” (2012).

<sup>5</sup> Anthropogenic, according to the Online Cambridge Dictionary: “caused by humans or their activities”. For further information visit: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/anthropogenic>.

forms” (xii). Although ecocriticism, as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment”, did not officially come into existence until the 1980s (Glotfelty et al. xvii), *To the Lighthouse* proves that ecocritical ideas have in fact already been around quite a few decades earlier.

Consequently, by contextualising Woolf’s novel within the emerging Anthropocene, I intend to contribute to a “reconsideration of a literary and artistic period that, in its ecological, planetary preoccupations, becomes more and more contemporary with each passing year” (ibid., xviii).

### 3 Analysis: Non-Human Agency in *To the Lighthouse*

#### 3.1 Structure: Imagining More-than-Human Scales

The peculiar structure of *To the Lighthouse* may be one of its most fascinating features: the novel is sectioned in three parts, respectively entitled “The Window”, “Time Passes” and “The Lighthouse”, whose narrating time notoriously does not in the slightest correspond to the time narrated in them. “Time Passes”, the middle section, occupies no more than 20 pages to lay out the time between 1910 and 1920 – ten whole years which witness the entirety of World War I. “The Window” and “The Lighthouse”, by contrast, each span a single day in the life of the Ramsay family and their guests, yet they lay claim to the remaining 171 pages of the book.<sup>6</sup> In other words, while parts 1 and 3 prolong a few hours – in which nothing of any historical consequence happens – almost to the point of time standing still, the middle section unabashedly recounts nature’s invasion of the house in the ten years’ absence of the Ramsays and largely ignores the simultaneously happening world-wide war, thus questionably accelerating a period of time which produced events of paramount importance to history – or so the reader thinks.

Such would be an anthropocentric subscription to worldly events. In its fragmented style, the novel’s structure appears to mirror and process the turmoil of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but it also, according to my thesis, criticises humanity’s self-centeredness by contrasting human with non-human

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6 I base these numbers on my version of *To the Lighthouse*, see bibliography.

timescales; pointing its readers to far greater dimensions and natural processes such as the cycle of death and birth, decay and re-growth. This expresses what Tung calls the “quintessentially modernist interest in differently-scaled clocks”, which “underscore the need for a multiplicity of scales” (134). To emphasise my point, I would like to return to Markley’s temporal model sketched out in chapter 2.

The first and third part of the book, narrated in free indirect discourse, showcase our habitual perception of time: that deeply subjective, “moment-to-moment” (Hegglund et al. xii) stream of consciousness which grounds us in our human flesh and storylines, prompting, for instance, Charles Tansley to be bothered by the others’ lack of interest in his opinion at the dinner table: “They were talking about the fishing industry. Why did no one ask him his opinion? What did they know about the fishing industry?” (Woolf 85). His horizon is in this experience limited to the *experiential* or *embodied time*. Within this register, one human life seems to be made up of an infinite string of singular moments in time glued together. Then, adding up individual human lives and apportioning them into generations, periods, epochs, we arrive at the second register, *historical time*, in which Mrs Ramsay, for example, locates “the eternal problems: suffering; death; the poor” (ibid., 58). This conceptualisation of time is present in Mr Ramsay’s reflections on the long-term relevance of his books (“His fame lasts perhaps two thousand years?”) or in Lily Briscoe’s thoughts about whether her art will matter to posterity (“It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed”) (ibid., 37, 191), respectively to be found in the first and the third part of the book. Significantly, this indulgence in anthropocentric time perception prevalent in the two framing sections is set against an ecocentric outlook in the middle section. As previously alluded to, the latter delineates the steady advancement of non-human agents – animals, plants, the wind, etc. – into the house over the course of ten years. Events of monumental cultural or personal importance to humans, such as the war and its deadly consequences, the success of Mr Carmichael’s poetry, or the death of Mrs Ramsay, occasionally punctuate the narration, but are strictly locked away in brackets of no

more than two or three sentences so as not to interrupt the ‘main story’, the organic flow of nature’s processes. The middle section thus isolates and belittles the anthropocentric *embodied* and *historical* timescales and makes “human structures of temporality fall away as Woolf removes her human characters from the forefront of the narrative” (Lostoski 68).

What this removal of “human structures of temporality” uncovers is the third register, *planetary time*, which is infinitely greater and exists independently of humanity. It also provokes the realisation that the entire duration of our stay on this earth is no more than a speck of dust on this timescale – and yet here we are in the midst of the Anthropocene, “enacting”, as Clark proposes, “an anthropocentric fantasy of denial of human finitude” (8). The structure of *To the Lighthouse* challenges this “fantasy” by way of revealing and contrasting the *embodied*, *historical* and *planetary* registers. It points us towards what Tung calls “the inhuman timescales on which planetary and cosmic consequences play out” (139), and not without ridiculing human scales. As Mrs Ramsay recognises: “But what after all is one night? A short space, especially when the darkness dims so soon” (Woolf 119). Here she almost seems to anticipate a post-human world; reflections in which Mr Ramsay shares as well: “What, indeed, if you look from a mountain-top down the long wastes of the ages? The very stone one kicks with one’s boot will outlast Shakespeare”, he reasonably conjectures (*ibid.*, 37).

In this context, “Time Passes” appears as a miniature representation of these “long wastes of the ages”. As a matter of fact, Woolf herself conceived of the structure in terms of “two blocks joined by a corridor” (*qtd. in* Winston 22). This spatial structuring of time comes to be expressed by Lily Briscoe as she remembers Mrs Ramsay after her death: “Mockingly she seemed to see her there at the end of the corridor of years saying, of all incongruous things, ‘Marry, marry’” (Woolf 162). Morbid as this might sound, Mrs Ramsay, in many ways the protagonist of the story, epitomises all of humanity as her death leaves the book’s storytelling just as unimpressed as the ‘death’ of our species will leave the turning of the earth.

Illustrative of the modernist “attention to aesthetic

and formal concerns” (Wolfreys 153), the characters’ musings on time and life, as they pour out from the pages of the book, thus mirror its form, altogether proclaiming the transience of human life on this planet. *To the Lighthouse* self-consciously imposes a structure on how time is subjectively perceived – and how it might be objectively constructed. As readers we are invited to take up an ecocentric view as we witness the breaking out of our habitual *embodied* experience of time, transcending even *historical time* and eventually pondering the beyond-human *planetary* register that “suggests the Earth as a place of matter and climate, life and the passage of time, and an array of species of which the human is only one” (Friedman 8, qtd. in Schuster 98). Mrs Ramsay exemplifies such a confrontation with the *planetary* as she gazes upon “the wavering line of sea and sky” and is suddenly “unable to move by the intensity of feelings which reduced her own body, her own life, and the lives of all the people in the world, for ever, to nothingness” (Woolf 72).

### 3.2 Narration: Intersubjectivity and Non-Human Focalisation

As noted in the preceding subchapter, “The Window” and “The Lighthouse” each host a continuous stream of consciousness in which anthropocentric thoughts and values are embedded. Characteristically for Woolf’s writing, the narration flows seamlessly in and out of the characters’ minds (cf. Winston 19-21). Throughout the book, numerous moments occur in which their individual, subjective experiences overlap and shape each other to such an extent that it creates a sense of intersubjectivity. In the dinner scene of the first part, this shared experience is compared to “a fume rising upwards, holding them safe together. Nothing need be said; nothing could be said. There it was, all round them. It partook, she felt, carefully helping Mr Bankes to a specially tender piece, of eternity” (Woolf 97). Intersubjectivity is portrayed as a means of connecting with one another, of feeling part of a community that is not held together by a shared language but by collective experience. Crucially, it appears that this community is not limited to human agents. The stream of consciousness also paints

the characters' sensations, thoughts and emotions as entwined with external, non-human phenomena, such as

the monotonous fall of the waves on the beach, which for the most part beat a measured and soothing tattoo to her thoughts and seemed consolingly to repeat over and over again as she sat with the children the words of some old cradle song, murmured by nature, "I am guarding you – I am your support". (ibid., 20)

Indeed, the text seems to suggest a sort of dialogue; a sensational, non-linguistic exchange between Mrs Ramsay and the waves that manifests itself as a "soothing tattoo" imprinted on her mind.

Correspondingly, intersubjectivity is portrayed as a phenomenon that is not exclusive to humans but may also be shared with non-human agencies, as well as possibly being a means of communication among them: "the cliffs looked as if they were conscious of the ships, and the ships looked as if they were conscious of the cliffs, as if they signalled to each other some secret message of their own" (ibid., 169). What is remarkable in *To the Lighthouse* is that consciousness and agency, next to being valued in animals and plants, are also assigned to inanimate objects that, because we humans are linguistically unable to communicate with, we usually – anthropocentrically – declare to be unconscious, insentient, dead matter. Woolf, however, imagines them as possessing consciousness, and through her portrayal of human-non-human intersubjectivity dissolves the normatively conceived boundaries of the internal and the external world. Consider for example Mrs Ramsay's experience as she is looking out the window at night and watches the "stroke of the Lighthouse":

Often she found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking, with her work in her hands until she became the thing she looked at – that light for example. [...] It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to things, inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus (she looked at that long steady light) as for oneself.



(ibid., 61)

This feeling that arises in her is elsewhere summarised as being “extraordinarily exposed to everything” (ibid., 186), and could also be described as *interconnectedness*: a sense of one’s own permeability, of reciprocal responsiveness and oneness with everything. This calls forth a “tenderness” in her which she downplays as “irrational”, yet which is rather a form of non-anthropocentric compassion for those non-human entities – the “Lighthouse”, the “trees, streams, flowers” – that translates to an ecocentric valuing of the environment: to recognise and appreciate them as agents in their own right, regardless of them being of any use to us.

Therefore, *To the Lighthouse* describes life not as a self-contained, solipsistic experience of oneself, but “in terms of how we relate to one another” (Mostafaei and Elahipanah 808) and mutually impact each other. Incidentally, this encapsulates a philosophical outlook that multiple modernist writers seem to have shared:

Rather than being interpreted as signs of an inward turn or a probing of psychological depths segregated from the material world, modernist techniques for representing consciousness can be seen as an attempt to highlight how minds at once shape and are shaped by larger experiential environments. (Herman 249-50)

Woolf’s narrative style is thus in line with other “modernist techniques” that combat the lure of solipsism<sup>7</sup> and serve to stress the materiality of the external world. *To the Lighthouse* sharpens the reader’s awareness of the “incalculable connection between bodies, human and nonhuman, across and within the biosphere” (Sultzbach 5) and, what is more, of the diversity and vibrancy of non-human life on this earth. For it is, as Cam Ramsay notes, present in “all those paths and the lawn, thick and knotted with the lives they had lived there” (Woolf 155).

<sup>7</sup> Solipsism, according to the Encyclopaedia Britannica: “an extreme form of subjective idealism that denies that the human mind has any valid ground for believing in the existence of anything but itself”. For further information visit <https://www.britannica.com/topic/solipsism>.

Through the free indirect style that creates a fluid continuity of consciousnesses, the narration fans out the present moment – horizontally and vertically – and exposes the simultaneity and non-linearity of life. Lily Briscoe reflects that “[o]ne wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with” (ibid., 182), which would be a good start to begin to grasp the infinite number of perspectives that one is always surrounded by, and thereby the equally infinite number of agencies simultaneously experiencing the world. *To the Lighthouse* is, as per Sultzbach, an “invitation to recognize other nonhuman communities we already belong to” (85). The text dismisses the anthropocentric hierarchy of phenomena in which we have placed ourselves on the very top. Instead, it proposes the validity of all experience on earth, identifying our human point of view as simply one among many.

If the stream of consciousness in parts 1 and 3 conveys a sense of our connectedness to the non-human world, the middle part largely eradicates human experience altogether to focus on the house and its various inhabitants during the absence of the Ramsay family – in Lostoski’s words, it “continues the narrative after its characters have left” (72).

[T]he body of the wind crept round corners and ventured indoors. Almost one might imagine them, as they entered the drawing-room, questioning and wondering, toying with the flap of hanging wall-paper, asking, would it hang much longer, when would it fall? Then smoothly brushing the walls, they passed on musingly as if asking the red and yellow roses on the wall-paper whether they would fade [...]. (Woolf 118)

Woolf visibly “gives narrative prominence to entities – a snail, a house, a beach – that exist independently of human action, intention, and perception” (Hegglund et al. ix). Indeed, “Time Passes” gives life to all kinds of individuals that thrive and proliferate in the absence of humanity and are attuned to their own laws and cycles. Life, far off from human involvement, is portrayed as rather peaceful:

Loveliness and stillness clasped hands in the bedroom, and among the shrouded jugs and sheeted chairs even the prying of the wind, and the soft nose of the clammy

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sea airs, rubbing, snuffling, iterating, and reiterating their questions – “Will you fade? Will you perish?” – scarcely disturbed the peace, the indifference, the air of pure integrity, as if the question they asked scarcely needed that they should answer: “we remain”. (Woolf 121)

In stark contrast to the two enveloping sections which are narrated through the eyes of the characters, the middle section might be framed as an attempt<sup>8</sup> to tell nature’s story without human focalisation. Lostoski fittingly describes “Time Passes” as “one of the first instances in literature where we can view the world as it is when we are not looking” (72). Human voices are, as discussed in chapter 3.1, resolutely kept at bay to let non-human agents themselves demonstrate their agency. In fact, the novel quite explicitly ridicules the Romantic trope of nature being merely a mirror for the human soul and relieving us of our emotional baggage whenever needed (cf. Sultzbach 4-5):

Also the sea tosses itself and breaks itself, and should any sleeper fancying that he might find on the beach an answer to his doubts, a sharer of his solitude, throw off his bedclothes and so go down by himself to walk on the sand, no image with semblance of serving and divine promptitude comes readily to hand bringing the night to order and making the world reflect the compass of the soul. (Woolf 119-20)

The narration thus breaks with the anthropocentric view that nature is only worthy of attention where it is of instrumental value to humanity. Rather, this passage clearly establishes it as a powerful and independent agent *in itself*, stressing the key term through repetition: “Also the sea tosses *itself* and breaks *itself*”.

*To the Lighthouse* thus exemplifies how modernist literature not only “revises environment-as-object to acknowledge environment-as-being” (Sultzbach 13), but also “depicts the environment as a dynamic, fully rounded character in its own right” (ibid., 88). Consequently, the narration provides an incentive to question one’s own positioning in a multidimensional

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8            Emphasis on *attempt*. I will discuss this at length in chapter 4.

network of agencies. It invites us to consider the presence of life that exists around us and also lives on in human absence – especially that which is imperceptible to us, and most of all does not matter any less for that.

### 3.3 Anthropocentric vs. Ecocentric Values

“What was the value, the meaning of things?” (Woolf 113)

What the structure and the narration of *To the Lighthouse* essentially convey is that there is intrinsic value on this earth in all non-human forms. They also accentuate what is invariably outside of humanity’s control: natural processes such as growth and decay, the passing of time, the rotation of the earth, the inevitability of death. I argue, therefore, that this novel advocates an ecocentric attitude, positing that “there is objective good to be found in the world without any relation to human preference or even human existence”, and reminding us that “[t]his good was here long before us and will outlive us” (Kopnina et al. 121). It creates a space in which human joys, sorrows and tragedies fade – passively – into “the perfectly indifferent chill air” (Woolf 106) as the non-human world is given the active role, thus pushing the realisation that “the environment itself is full of nonhuman agencies and beings that trouble an anthropocentric view of the world” (Hegglund et al. xiv). The characters of *To the Lighthouse* sporadically encounter brief moments of such ecocentric enlightenment,<sup>9</sup> but are ultimately unable to escape their anthropocentric frame of mind: “[Mr Ramsay] turned from the sight of human ignorance and human fate and the sea eating the ground we stand on, which, had he been able to contemplate it fixedly might have led to something; and found consolation in trifles” (Woolf 45). Briefly, they embody the two fundamental attitudes attached to anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, namely hubris and humility (cf. Sadler-Smith and Akstinaite 1-2). To adopt an ecocentric view of the world requires to acknowledge and value its existence

<sup>9</sup> Remember Mr Ramsay thinking: “The very stone one kicks with one’s boot will outlast Shakespeare”, or Mrs Ramsay feeling “the lives of all the people in the world, for ever, [reduced] to nothingness” (Woolf 37, 72).

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also in the non-existence of humanity – a very demanding exercise for us humans indeed. The bracketing of various characters’ deaths in “Time Passes” raises the awareness that what we perceive as loss or tragedy is in fact no such thing in the larger, *planetary* scheme of things. Lily Briscoe summarises this quite well:

How aimless it was, how chaotic, how unreal it was, she thought, looking at her empty coffee cup. Mrs Ramsay dead; Andrew killed; Prue dead too – repeat it as she might, it roused no feeling in her. And we all get together in a house like this on a morning like this, she said, looking out of the window – it was a beautiful still day. (Woolf 138)

In other words: the world moves on even as human life ends and, although the death of loved ones might call forth strong *feelings* of emptiness, they do not produce a material vacuum as such. In fact, as Lily observes, they do not affect the natural environment at all.

This alignment with an ecocentric view of the world is also, as I proposed in chapter 3.2, an orientation towards that which is ever-present. With its rich imagery, *To the Lighthouse* makes non-human presence visible, audible and tangible, as for example “those sliding lights, those fumbling airs, that breathe and bend over the bed itself”, or “the hum of an insect, the tremor of cut grass” (*ibid.*, 118, 131). I concur with Sultzbach who maintains that Woolf “consistently values humans not as a superior species, but as a single component jostling in an undulating network of larger natural forces. Her openness to other forms of sentience indicates a willingness to listen and perceive with humility” (87).

Of course, being a species with an in-built instinct for survival and commitment to progress, it is quite natural that we put ourselves first. In all likelihood, other alien species with comparable cognitive capacities are equally self-centred, and I suggest that there is nothing inherently wrong with prioritising the welfare of one’s kin. Thompson and Barton point out that the part of anthropocentric thinking which recognises the conservation of nature as essential for the survival of humanity

is in the Anthropocene, however self-serving, quite beneficial: “Anthropocentrism support conservation because human comfort, quality of life, and health can be dependent on the preservation of natural resources and a healthy ecosystem” (149). The crucial point at which anthropocentrism becomes dangerous, even harmful, is where we start prioritising ourselves *at the expense of* everyone and everything else on this planet. As Hayward maintains, speciesism and chauvinism, respectively the “arbitrary discrimination on the basis of species” and the specification of “relevant differences in ways that invariably favour humans”, are the true villains in the human narrative leading up to the Anthropocene (52-3). In my view, the supreme discipline to master as an “attractive” species would be to ensure one’s own survival and progress in a non-harmful, non-exploitative way that respects other species as equals even if one has the means to harm and exploit them. Anthropocentrism *as a whole* might therefore not be the prime evil to combat.

#### 4 Speaking on Nature’s Behalf: The Inescapability of Anthropocentrism

In 1974, the philosopher Thomas Nagel famously raised the example of a bat’s consciousness to argue that there is simply no way of objectively representing its experience because we do not know what it is *like* to be one. He writes that “even to form a *conception* of what it is like to be a bat (and a fortiori to know what it is like to be a bat) one must take up the bat’s point of view”. Yet “if I try to imagine this, I am restricted to the resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task” (442, 439).

As chapter 3 has shown, *To the Lighthouse* is fairly innovative and prolific in its various ways of bringing non-human scales and experience to the fore. Importantly, however, Woolf does at no point pretend that she is somehow privy to such experience. Rather, she offers a lyrical, metaphor-laden vision of what a plant-, animal- or wind-consciousness *could* feel like, whilst admitting that this is merely a human fancy that projects the human point of view onto non-human agents. In chapter 3.2, I quoted the following passage to applaud Woolf’s vivid im-

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agery of the wind as it enters the holiday house of the Ramsays:

[T]he body of the wind crept round corners and ventured indoors. Almost *one might imagine* them, as they entered the drawing-room, questioning and wondering, toying with the flap of hanging wall-paper, asking, would it hang much longer; when would it fall? Then smoothly brushing the walls, they passed on musingly *as if asking* the red and yellow roses on the wall-paper whether they would fade [...]. (Woolf 118, emphasis added)

While this attentiveness to the material world is, as aforementioned, extraordinary in itself for a text produced in the 1920s, what is perhaps still more applaud-worthy is the diligent care applied to clarify that this is not in fact what the wind experiences but what “one *might imagine*” its experience to be. Similarly, Woolf does not write that those winds “asked the red and yellow roses”, but that they “passed on [...] *as if asking*” them. Thereby, she demonstrates her striking awareness and acceptance of the inaccessibility of non-human subjectivity.

If, therefore, a first glance at “Time Passes” seems to promise a narration entirely devoid of human focalisation that passes on the narration to other non-human entities, a closer look reveals subtle hints such as the ones in the quote above that point out the inescapability of the human point of view, even in narrative fiction. Further evidence for this is provided by the description of the house from 1910 to 1920. Although there is no doubt that a whole host of natural agencies has taken over and inhabits the house to the point of it almost being more alive than it was in the presence of the Ramsay family and their guests, it is repeatedly described as “empty” and “deserted” (Woolf 120). One almost senses a certain deliberate irony in observations such as “[t]here it had stood all these years *without a soul in it*”, or “[i]t was left like a shell on a sandhill to fill with dry salt grains *now that life had left it*” (ibid., 126, 128, emphasis added), that are then just a few paragraphs later contradicted by extensive enumerations of all the souls that do live there, among them “toads”, “swallows”, “rats”, “tortoise-shell butterflies”, “poppies” and “dahlias” (ibid., 128).

On the one hand, this juxtaposition once more stresses

the anthropocentric inability to grant other life forms the same interior complexity as humans. As a matter of fact, as Nagel laments, “if one travels too far down the phylogenetic tree, people gradually shed their faith that there is experience there at all” (438). On the other hand, it corroborates the text’s inherent criticism of narratives that pretend to defend nature’s interests by speaking on behalf of it, which is not ecocentric but in fact anthropomorphism<sup>10</sup> at its finest. Sultzbach aptly outlines the problematic nature of such narratives, asking: “To what extent are writers who attempt to ‘speak a word’ on Nature’s behalf selflessly translating underrepresented perspectives and to what extent are they usurping the subjectivity of another to make it say what one might wish to hear?” (3). However, the impossibility of understanding the fabric of non-human consciousness does not lessen the importance of developing ways and means to approach such an understanding as far as is humanly possible. For this reason, it is crucial to differentiate between foregrounding “underrepresented perspectives”, and actually voicing them. While the former is an important part of ecocentric thinking and thus of valuing non-humanity for its own sake, the latter is rather problematic in that it is, as already mentioned, simply anthropomorphism in an ecocentric dress. I fully agree with Nagel who argues:

The fact that we cannot expect ever to accommodate in our language a detailed description of Martian or bat phenomenology should not lead us to dismiss as meaningless the claim that bats and Martians have experiences fully comparable in richness of detail to our own. [...] And to deny the reality or logical significance of what we can never describe or understand is the crudest form of cognitive dissonance. (440-41)

What he is conveying is, plainly, that it should be common sense to acknowledge the complexity of any other life forms, regard-

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<sup>10</sup> Anthropomorphism, according to the Online Cambridge Dictionary: “the showing or treating of animals, gods, and objects as if they are human in appearance, character, or behaviour“. For further information visit <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/anthropomorphism>.



less of our incapability to make sense of them. *To the Lighthouse* not only sets an example for such an acknowledgment, it also extends this duty to all terrestrial entities, including those we perceive as inanimate and declare as non-sentient.

Thus, Woolf humbly admits that she has no clue whatsoever what the wind's experience is like when it roams through a deserted house, what it asks "the flap of hanging wall-paper", or what the "red and yellow roses" on it will respond – that is, if they care to respond at all (Woolf 118). "In its most self-aware practice", Sultzbach asserts, "ecocritical analysis should also readily admit the limits of human knowledge and notice when demarcations, differences, and exclusions are also a valuable component of ecological representations" (7). In this light, *To the Lighthouse* is a piece of ecocritical writing itself, authenticating its author once more as a forerunner in such ecological reflection. The novel criticises the anthropomorphic practice of imposing one's own point of view on nature and selling it as "nature's interests", and accepts non-human entities as equally important inhabitants of this planet with individual experiences that differ in inconceivable ways from ours.

Lastly, I would like to revisit the structure of *To the Lighthouse* to demonstrate how, next to promoting an ecocentric insistence on non-human agency, it also uses form to convey the inevitability of a certain degree of anthropocentrism in human nature. Although the novel imagines what it could be like to be non-human in the middle section, it begins and ends in the human mind. Structurally speaking, this produces an anthropocentric frame, with parts 1 and 3, representative of our all-encompassing subjectivity and human-centeredness, wrapping around the middle part. Interestingly, in "Time Passes", Woolf turns this on its head by bracketing human experience and surrounding it with non-human presence. However, as established in this chapter, even the narration of this part is not entirely human-free, in truth not even a little. Following this line of argument, the broader structure of the novel is an expression of the fundamental unavoidability of perceiving and expressing life from a human point of view – reflections about *planetary time* and the interconnectedness of all terrestrial phenomena included. Our natural environment surely exists for its

own sake, but it is also, in all its parts that we lay our human eyes on, and therefore in everything that we identify as ‘natural environment’, culturally constructed. Remembering what Lily Briscoe wishes for on page 182, “[o]ne wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with”, we can now add that, besides her realisation of the multiplicity of consciousnesses and perspectives coexisting on this earth, this is also a recognition of the fact that she only has this one set of eyes, and therefore only one perspective from which she can perceive the world.

In utterances such as Lily’s resides what Alt dubs “Woolf’s fatal pessimism” (7), or what Sultzbach identifies as Woolf’s “frustration of getting at how to both write within a human consciousness and yet point beyond familiar structures of meaning toward a shared human-and-nonhuman-animal consciousness” (21). When Mr Ramsay thus exercises his brain to find out “But after Q? What comes next?” and admits that “[h]e would never reach R” (Woolf 35, 37), he really might be onto something on multiple levels.

## 5 Conclusion

Language may be frustratingly inadequate to capture “the complexity of things” as well as “the fluidity of life” (Woolf 95, 148), on top of not having, as discussed, any objective truth about the experience of non-human beings to report in the first place. Nevertheless, it is a helpful tool to express respect and compassion for them. As Sultzbach suggests: “Respecting the life of another living being in part depends upon a capacity for imaginative empathy” (104). Furthermore, even though anthropocentrism is deeply ingrained in our thinking, this does not mean that we cannot alter our behaviour in favour of a respectful cohabitation with all communities in this world. It seems to me that even, or perhaps especially, in the Anthropocene and within an anthropocentric frame of mind, we should be able to cultivate a non-speciesist and non-chauvinist attitude and consequently develop a non-discriminatory treatment of our fellow non-human earthlings.

In short: although our species might not be the most attractive, what with our cognitive faculties being rather limit-

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ed and our hubris easily outweighing our humility, we are well capable of understanding the non-linearity of consciousness, guessing at the richness of non-human subjectivity, and feeling the interconnectedness that underlies all experience – human, animal, plant, matter, and whatever else might be out there. *To the Lighthouse*, specifically in its structure and narration, challenges “the primacy of human agency” (Lostoski 55) and orients its readers towards more-than-human agency by offering lively imaginations of it and pointing at dimensions that by far transcend the human – “distant views” that “outlast by a million years [...] the gazer” (Woolf 24). In its experimental nature, combined with its progressive environmental consciousness, this novel and, by extension, modernist literature, yields valuable material for ecocritical studies. In fact, as I argue in this paper, *To the Lighthouse* can also be identified as an ecocritical text itself, testifying perhaps to an earlier onset of ecocritical practices than has hitherto been determined.

Such readings through an ecocritical lens as the one carried out in this paper might help indicate “where we have yet to go to understand our role within a world we can never fully comprehend” (Sultzbach 7). Literature seems to hold great potential in raising environmental awareness, since it helps readers to think about and conceptualise the environment and anthropocentric effects such as the current climate crisis in aesthetic terms, thus making them more accessible to a broader readership. In any case, the belief in the interconnectedness of all terrestrial phenomena necessarily entails that literature “does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, and ideas interact” (Glotfelty et al. xix). Ecological work should therefore not be limited to the so-called ‘hard-sciences’, and *To the Lighthouse* successfully shows that narrative prose is able to participate in ecological debates and speak to readers in ways unknown to the fields of biology, chemistry or geography.

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# Child Fantasy in ‘Lolita’ and ‘The Bluest Eye’

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The child characters in ‘Lolita’ and ‘The Bluest Eye’ all fall victim to the fantasy of young girls as white, pure and gentle. Dolores in ‘Lolita’ is sexualised for her childishness, and turned into the fantasy Lolita girl, while Pecola in ‘The Bluest Eye’ suffers from the unachievable beauty standard of the white, Shirley Temple ideal. This argument will be explored in three aspects: images of fantasy, fantasy versus reality, and adults maintaining fantasy, before finally exploring the texts’ literary scandal.

## **Images of fantasy**

Before analysing the theme of fantasy within the narratives, it is important to understand how fantasy is visualised. ‘Lolita’ has two layers of fantasy: the representation of Lolita in the original text, and the idea of Lolita in pop-culture. In the novel, Lolita is a conception of Humbert’s imagination, placed on the body of Dolores: Humbert’s “own creation”.<sup>1</sup> Dolores is what Humbert calls a ‘nymphet’: girls “between the age limits of nine and fourteen”, who are “not human, but nymphic” (16). The language style Humbert uses when describing nymphetts is reminiscent of fantasy tales. He describes men as “bewitched travellers”, captivated by “maidens” with the “nymphet’s spell” (16-7). Humbert uses this fantastical description to mask his sexualisation of young girls. To distract from the fact she is a child, Dolores is de-humanised as the damsel-in-distress character of Humbert’s story – a precious, fragile creature.

In contrast, the image of Lolita in pop-culture paints Dolores not as a victim or even a maiden, but as a seductress. Vickers explains how it was in the poster for Stanley Kubrick’s 1962 film adaptation of *Lolita*, where “we first encounter a co-

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p.62. Further references to this edition are included in the body of the essay.

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lour photograph of an entirely bogus Lolita wearing red heart-shaped sunglasses while licking a red lollipop”.<sup>2</sup>

Figure 1: *Poster for the 1962 film 'Lolita'*.<sup>3</sup> Image omitted.

This poster portrays a different fantasy from what Humbert describes. The lollipop as a euphemism for fellatio created a perception of Lolita as an erotic, willing participant in her abuse. Connolly explains how Nabokov was opposed to any representation of little girls on book covers of 'Lolita', as he did not want to “offer up a girl’s image to whet the reader’s imagination”.<sup>4</sup> However, many book covers have since published the story with images of girls in seductive positions, or with further fellatio symbols.

Figure 2. *International Covers of Lolita*.<sup>5</sup> Image omitted.

This misrepresentation has established Lolita as a pornographic figure rather than the victim of the original text. As Connolly writes: “‘Lolita’ has become broadly associated in the soft and hard core pornography industry with the theme of sexually charged teenagers”.<sup>6</sup> Through this distorted image of Lolita, the idea of innocent-but-erotic girls is perpetuated as a new standard of desirability – evoked both in the novel and through its reputation.

The beauty standard of pure, beautiful girls is also visualised in 'The Bluest Eye' through the idealisation of Shirley Temple. Although Shirley Temple is not sexualised like Dolores, the text demonstrates a similar infatuation of innocent, white children. Pecola is fascinated with the image of Shirley

<sup>2</sup> Graham Vickers, *Chasing Lolita: how popular culture corrupted Nabokov's little girl all over again* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2008), p.8.

<sup>3</sup> IMDb, *Poster for the 1962 film 'Lolita'* <<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0056193/>> [accessed 09 January 2022].

<sup>4</sup> Julian Connolly, *A Reader's Guide to Nabokov's 'Lolita'* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2009), p.7.

<sup>5</sup> Temple, Emily, *The 60 Best and Worst International Covers of Lolita*, 2018 <<https://lithub.com/the-60-best-and-worst-international-covers-of-lolita/>> [accessed 04 January 2022].

<sup>6</sup> Connolly, p.169.

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on her milk cup and takes “every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley's face”.<sup>7</sup> Morrison shows how for black girls in the 1940s, the adoration of Shirley is inevitable. Claudia, who loathes the fantasy of “little white girls whose socks never slid”, says how she “learned much later to worship [Shirley]” (17-21). As Greaves describes, nearing the end of the Great Depression, many films “offered the simple promise of returning to more innocent times” and Shirley became “the poster child image for goodness and purity” in the 1930s.<sup>8</sup> While historically Shirley Temple was the epitome of hope for the United States, she also became the epitome of white beauty and perfectionism. In ‘The Bluest Eye’, whiteness as beauty is displayed through the superiority of Maureen, a light-skinned girl who “enchanted the entire school” (60). Maureen’s lighter skin is the source of Claudia’s insecurity, as she wonders: “What was the secret? What did we lack?” (72). Seemingly, the quality that makes Maureen superior is that she is closer to the Shirley Temple fantasy.

Maureen is able to use her beauty as an asset of power, calling herself “cute” and condemning Claudia, Pecola and Frieda as “black and ugly” in comparison (71). Morrison shows that not only does Hollywood teach these children that whiteness symbolises beauty, but that blackness symbolises ugliness. Greaves delves into how during the 1930s, “thoughtful screen portrayals of black life experiences were totally non-existent”.<sup>9</sup> Morrison shows how the poor representation of black people Greaves describes badly affected black children. Pecola prays for a fantasy image of herself with blue eyes, knowing that “if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different” (44). As a black girl she has been taught to desire the looks of Shirley Temple because anything darker than white is inherently unattractive.

7 Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (London: Vintage, 2016), p.21. Further references to this edition are included in the body of the essay.

8 Sharron Greaves, ‘Shirley Temple: Dimples, Dichotomies and the Great Depression’, in *The 1930s: The Reality and the Promise*, ed. by J.B. Bennington, Zenia Sacks DaSilva, Michael D’Innocenzo and Stanislaw G. Pugliese (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), pp. 171-180 (p.171-178).

9 Ibid., p.177.



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In both texts, the authors show how children are harmed by images of fantasy. Dolores is harmed by the sexualised fantasy of childishness, whereas Pecola, Claudia and Freida are harmed by the romanization of whiteness. The children in both novels become victims of an unrealistic, dangerous beauty standard.

**Fantasy vs Reality**

'Lolita' and 'The Bluest Eye' each present the reader with a comparison of the fantastical ideal versus the reality. In 'Lolita', although Humbert tries to fantasise their relationship, small moments of Dolores' reality as an abused child appear. Compared to the beginning of the text where Humbert sees Dolores as a nymphet, as they start spending more time with each other, his romanticization of her fades. Humbert starts describing her as an "exasperating brat" and says, "mentally I found her to be a disgustingly conventional little girl" (148). Although Humbert feels physical attraction to Dolores' pubescent body, her childish behaviour is a distraction from his fantasy. Pifer explains that Humbert has tried to transform Dolores into an "aesthetic mirage" but "with her bad manners and juvenile clichés, the real Lolita offends Humbert's good taste".<sup>10</sup> As Pifer suggests, Nabokov removes us from Humbert's fantasy by showing Dolores doing normal, unattractive things such as swearing or "picking her nose" (165). As a result, this reiterates the reality behind Humbert's fantasy.

Mooney compares Lolita to the story of Peter Pan:

While his children friends grow up, Peter remains always a child. [...] Peter Pan posits the child as an erotic object for a desiring adult audience. [...] Unlike Peter, Dolores is not a fantasy child and cannot escape the adult.<sup>11</sup>

Building on Mooney's point, whilst Dolores is indeed a normal child, she is fantasised in the same way as Peter Pan for Humbert's desire. Humbert directly references Peter Pan when

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<sup>10</sup> Ellen Pifer, *Nabokov and the Novel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), p.165-170.

<sup>11</sup> Susan Mooney 'Lolita: American Mimetic Fantasy, Ethical Reading, and Censoring Narrative', in *The Artistic Censoring of Sexuality: Fantasy and Judgment in the Twentieth-Century Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008), pp. 112-160 (p.125-126).

he pleads children to “Never grow up” (21). It is exactly when Dolores does begin to grow older, that the illusion of Lolita is shattered. Humbert has an epiphany during his travels with Dolores that she is no longer a nymph: “I perceived all at once with a sickening qualm how much she had changed [...] Her complexion was now that of any vulgar untidy highschool girl” (204). This strays so far from Humbert’s fantasy, that now Dolores is ‘old’, he sees her as “another young prostitute” (204). The reality of Lolita is that she is really Dolores Haze – a messy, rude teenager. Humbert can now only see her as a sexual body to manipulate, not an ethereal goddess.

‘The Bluest Eye’ contrasts the white-family fantasy with the reality of black-families, specifically how they are excluded in the American Dream. Imagery of the perfect, white family begins in the prologue: “Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick and Jane [...] They are very happy” (1). As Roye comments, this primer which “loudly proclaims white bourgeois family values” completely contrasts next to the story of “the little known world of black girls”.<sup>12</sup> Furthering Roye’s point, while the family of Dick and Jane has no connection to the story, it is a symbol of the white family fantasy, overlooking the reality of black exclusion and prejudice. The white neighbourhood that is present in ‘The Bluest Eye’ is not so different to the Dick and Jane world: “houses looked more sturdy, their paint was newer, porch posts straighter, yards deeper. [...] This sky was always blue” (103). This pleasant mirage is broken when Morrison reveals why the neighbourhood is idealised: because “black people were not allowed” (103). Morrison shows how black families were ostracised from the American Dream, unable to build happiness or success in environments such as the Breedlove’s apartment where “people had owned it, but never known it” (33).

This contrast between white-life versus black-life is also shown through the theme of motherhood. Claudia is given a white baby-doll for Christmas and expected to “fabricate storied situations around it” and fantasise about white mother-

<sup>12</sup> Susmita Roye, 'Toni Morrison's Disrupted Girls and their Disturbed Girlhoods: "The Bluest Eye" and "A Mercy"', *Callaloo*, 35:1 (2012), 212-227 (p.213) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41412505>> [accessed 02 January 2022].

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hood: "the doll represented what they thought was my fondest wish (18). Claudia, however, knows the reality of black-women, that "motherhood was old age" (18). Bernstein justifies this as Morrison showing the "imagining of white girls as tender, innocently doll-like, and deserving of protection, and black girls as disqualified from all those qualities".<sup>13</sup> Claudia knows that black-motherhood is not a fantasy, but a difficult reality of social and economic difficulties. She desires to dismember the white doll to find "the desirability that had escaped me" (18). Claudia learns that this fantasy is false, and the doll is simply empty - symbolising how the idealisation of the perfect life is false and futile, when her race excludes her from that dream.

'Lolita' and 'The Bluest Eye' contrast a romantic imagining of reality with the actual truth. 'Lolita' uses this to disrupt harmful idealisations of children with the actuality of children's nature, whilst 'The Bluest Eye' demonstrates black aspiration of the American Dream obstructed by the discriminatory nature of society.

#### Adults and Society Maintaining Fantasy

Common themes in both 'Lolita' and 'The Bluest Eye' are the power of adults in maintaining problematic fantasies, as well as the child characters being powerless in their lives. The entire narrative of 'Lolita' is controlled by Humbert, and as we never truly know Dolores' viewpoint, Humbert's account is unreliable. One form of Humbert's unreliability is his suggestion that Dolores is sexually willing and responsible. Humbert suggests that Dolores initiated her own rape and maintains that Dolores "saw the stark act [of sex] merely as a part of a youngster's furtive world" (133). This puts the onus of abuse onto Dolores' actions as Humbert rids himself of responsibility. Humbert sustains the delusion of his fantasy and attempts to manipulate the reader into believing that a likely, scared, vulnerable child was instead a consenting, sexually mature Lolita.

Whilst Humbert is the main adult creating fantasy in 'Lolita', the text shows a more widespread issue harming children: Hollywood. Vickers explains that "The 1950s would

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<sup>13</sup> Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), p.29.

be the province of a new breed of adult women displaying childlike qualities [in films].<sup>14</sup> This idealisation of childlike movie-stars played into a new standard for young girls. Friedan explains how around this time, there was a new expectation for girls to be mature: "Manufacturers put out brassieres with false bosoms of foam rubber for little girls of ten. And an advertisement for a child's dress [...] said: "She Too Can Join the Man-Trap Set."<sup>15</sup> This sexualised standard Friedan depicts evidently feeds into Dolores' vulnerability. Humbert mentions how the glorification of Hollywood has made Dolores an easy target: "I knew I could kiss her throat [...] I knew she would let me do so, and even close her eyes as Hollywood teaches" (48). Humbert also mentions how his actions would not be unusual to a child who idolises these romantic movies of the time: "an avid reader of movie magazines, an expert in dream-slow close-ups, might not think it too strange" (49). Overall, this suggests that 'Lolita' is not just showing us the harmfulness of Humbert as an individual, but how society's role-models and beauty standards was contributing to the danger of its children.

'The Bluest Eye' similarly shows the contribution of adults in the media maintaining damaging constructs of beauty: "The master had said, "You are ugly people." They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance" (37). Morrison is highlighting how the same racist ideologies from slavery are upheld by the perception of black-people in pop-culture. The media's endorsement of white superiority reflects the attitudes of the adult characters in 'The Bluest Eye'. Unlike 'Lolita', we are shown the children's perspectives in their experiences with the world. When Pecola visits a shop to buy candy, she experiences "the total absence of human recognition" from the white shopkeeper, who "does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see" (46). Pecola recognizes this discriminatory treatment: "she has seen interest, disgust, even anger [...] lurking in the eyes of all white people" (47). Although she is

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14 Vickers, p.69.

15 Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963), p.16.

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only eleven, Pecola is not exempt from the prejudice of white adults and has even become used to the alienation of her race, all because she does not fit the white fantasy.

However, this issue is not only maintained by white adults, but also the community of black adults in the story. After Pecola is raped and impregnated by her father, she receives scrutiny, not compassion. Many adults in the community blame Pecola for her rape, asking, "How come she didn't fight him?" and saying her baby would be "better off in the ground" (187-8). The only people who have empathy for Pecola are the other children. Claudia says: "I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live - just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals" (188). Lorde writes about how the racial structure in the United States "wants racism to be accepted as an immutable given in the fabric of existence, like evening time or the common cold".<sup>16</sup> The inferiority of black-people that Lorde describes is so ingrained into society, that it changes the way black-people feel about their own community and children. Even Pecola's unborn baby is deemed unworthy because of its blackness.

Both 'Lolita' and 'The Bluest Eye' show adults' power in maintaining the perfect-child fantasy. Each novel delves into the contribution of media in the self-esteem of young people and the lack of power children have in their poor treatment.

### **Literary Scandal**

There has been heavy debate between critics about whether 'Lolita' is a piece of literary art or an indecent text condoning paedophilia. Connolly discusses how this controversy began with two contrasting reviews of the book in 1955. Graham Greene first called *Lolita* "one of the best books of 1955", but in 1956, John Gordon denounced Greene, calling the text "the filthiest book" he had ever read and "unrestrained pornography".<sup>17</sup> Since this, many other critics have provided ideas about either side of the argument. Martin Green in 1966, for example, wrote that *Lolita* is not itself corrupt, but is "the product and the

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16 Audre Lorde, 'The Uses of Anger', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 9:3 (1981), 7-10 (p.8) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40003905>> [accessed 03 January 2022].

17 Connolly, pp.5-6.

agent of a corrupt culture".<sup>18</sup> Connolly explains that Nabokov denied accusations that his work was pornographic, and wrote to his publisher: "I calmly lean on my conviction that [Lolita] is a serious work of art".<sup>19</sup> While the text does include taboo topics of sex and paedophilia, it seems illogical to discount the work without appreciating its overall value. In 1956, Nabokov claimed that "Lolita has no moral" and defended the book as affording 'aesthetic bliss': the feeling of connection "with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm".<sup>20</sup> However, this contrasts with the message we are given from the 'Lolita' itself. In the foreword to 'Lolita' the fictional John Ray Jr tells us 'Lolita' "should make all of us [...] apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world" (6). While there is merit in Nabokov's idea of aesthetic bliss, that the work is a form of art, it is also reasonable to say that 'Lolita' does in fact have a moral teaching. Perhaps John Ray Jr's notion that the book is a warning about child-abusers is correct to an extent. However, another suggestion is that 'Lolita' defines the danger of modern society on children. Films, magazines, advertisements, products, have all contributed to the idea that young girls should achieve the level of the fantasy child. Humbert is able to manipulate Dolores easily because she has been taught by Hollywood that being a romantic, angelic girl is attractive to men. 'Lolita' shows us not only the immorality of child sexualisation, but the consequences.

A large source of 'The Bluest Eye' criticism is American school boards and parents. There has been a vast history of debate over the novel, and whether or not it should be banned from children's libraries and syllabuses. Foerstel outlines some examples, such as in Maryland, 1998, a mother "told the board of education [...] "I am sickened knowing that my tax dollars are being used to provide children with — and instruct them

18 Martin Green, 'The Morality of Lolita', *The Kenyon Review*, 28.3 (1966), 352-377 (p.376-377) <[https://www-jstor-org.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/stable/4334658?sid=primo&seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www-jstor-org.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/stable/4334658?sid=primo&seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents)> [accessed 23 December 2021].

19 Connolly, p.6.

20 Vladimir Nabokov, 'On a book entitled Lolita', in *Lolita* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), pp.311-317 (p.314-315).

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in using— lewd, adult books” and in Oregon, 1999, the book was banned by a school board after “parental complaints were received [...] about a section in *The Bluest Eye* that describes a father raping his eleven-year-old daughter”.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, Morrison has achieved great success from ‘*The Bluest Eye*’ and her other work, winning the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature for her “visionary force and poetic import [that] gives life to an essential aspect of American reality”.<sup>22</sup> In the same way that ‘*Lolita*’ should not be discredited because of the theme of pedophilia, ‘*The Bluest Eye*’ should not be denoted simply due to its taboo elements, such as rape. In the afterword, Morrison explains that the point of the book was a “disclosure of secrets”, showing how “the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child”.<sup>23</sup> However, Morrison says that Pecola’s story is “a unique situation, not a representative one”.<sup>24</sup> Some critics disagree with this idea, such as Roye who suggests that Pecola is “a representative figure, reminding us of many other black girls who keep making wishes for similar things”.<sup>25</sup> Ultimately, although Morrison is correct in saying that Pecola’s life is an isolated, specific story, it is also warranted to see Pecola as a representation of black-girlhood. ‘*The Bluest Eye*’ exposes some of the secrets of the racial system in the United States and demonstrates the continual generational trauma it creates. While Pecola is one girl, she is one of many black children harmed by these injustices.

### Conclusion

While the established scandal of the texts ‘*Lolita*’ and ‘*The Bluest Eye*’ is their explicit discussion of sexuality, the true scandal is the destructive, inescapable beauty standard of children. From this discussion, there are three clear aspects which

21 Herbert N. Foerstel, *Banned in the U.S.A. : a reference guide to book censorship in schools and public libraries* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002), p.231.

22 The Nobel Prize, *The Nobel Prize in Literature 1993* (2021) <<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1993/summary/>> [accessed 30 December 2021].

23 Toni Morrison, ‘Afterword’, in *The Bluest Eye* (London: Vintage, 2016), pp.205-212 (pp.206-208).

24 Ibid., p.206.

25 Roye, p.215.

perpetuate this idea: the glorified images of beauty, how unrealistic the fantasy is, and how adults sustain a harmful standard of children. Although these books are controversial, their censorship would only further hide the truths about society that they reveal – how systemic racism and the media nourish the fantasy of the white, ethereal child. These stories are necessary to give a voice to some of the most vulnerable in society. Censoring them may lead to further acceptance of the belief that a girl's value is in her whiteness, purity, and beauty.

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# The Embodiment of Abjection: A Foucauldian Analysis of “The Creature” in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*

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“We all know what a person is, or at least we think we do” (Danaher et al. 117). To French philosopher Michel Foucault, a person is a subject, but “who or what the subject is has never been either simple or obvious” (Danaher et al. 117). Determining the identity of the subject becomes increasingly complicated when considering the creature in Mary Shelley’s 1818 gothic novel *Frankenstein*. Technically, the creature’s body is completely human. If he is human, then he is a person; if he is a person, then he is a subject. Nonetheless, not a single character in the book considers him fit for any of these categorizations. His unique hideousness causes children to shriek, women to faint, and villagers to attack him violently. The creature is mysterious, unidentified, and unknown, yet strangely familiar. His appearance is the epitome of uncanny, and people react with an automatic and visceral hatred. He becomes ostracized from society and thereby isolated from the discourses, institutions, and relations of power that Foucault claims not only produce subjects, but “script” their lives, thoughts, and activities (Danaher et al. 116).

However, the creature’s isolation is not complete. He is exposed to discourses, institutions, and relations of power in bursts, thrusting him into a peculiar space-- one that can only be described as abjection. To Bulgarian-French philosopher Julia Kristeva, abjection is the human reaction to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object (“II: On the Object”). The creature, although not included in society, is not completely excluded, and therefore does, and does not, fit Foucault’s description of the subject. Put more simply, he is both subject and object,

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and neither subject nor object. No one, not even the creature himself, can define who-- or what-- he is. The opening line of Kristeva's 1980 work, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* perfectly encapsulates the creature's condition. Kristeva asserts, "There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being...It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated" (Kristeva 1). By applying the Kristevan definition of abjection and the Foucauldian notion of "the subject," it becomes clear that the creature, who arguably becomes a violent, dark revolt of being, evades the definitive labels of subject or non-subject, and instead enters a liminal space in which he truly becomes the abject. "Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either" (Kristeva 2).

Discourse manufactures the conditions under which the creature is excluded from society. Foucault contends that discourses are "language in action: they are windows [that]... shape our understanding of ourselves, and our capacity to distinguish the valuable from the valueless, the true from the false, and the right from the wrong" (Danaher et al. 31). From his first breath, the creature is examined through the discursive window surrounding appearance, in which beauty is equated to goodness and ugliness is equated to evil. Or rather, there is an attempt to filter the creature through this binary. Really, he has no place in it. The creature is not devoid of beauty-- Victor selected attractive pieces with which to construct him. "His limbs [are] in proportion," his hair is "of a lustrous black, and flowing," and he has "teeth of a pearly whiteness" (Shelley 59-60). But when stitched together to produce a single body, these elements create a "horrid contrast" with his watery eyes, shriveled complexion, and straight black lips (Shelley 60). Although disturbing to look at, this contrast is more uncanny than merely ugly. The other characters, however, mistake their discomfort with the former for an aversion to the latter and ultimately categorize the creature as a "hideous monster" and "ugly wretch" (Shelley 126). The discourse of appearance chokes on the foreign object that is the creature and, like jamming the wrong key into a lock, the creature is stuck somewhere he doesn't belong: under the label "ugly."

The creature's relationship to institutions is also difficult to define. To Foucault, and in general, an institution is a large, important organization with a particular purpose. The creature becomes aware of institutions after discovering a trunk containing volumes of *Plutarch's Lives*, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, and *Paradise Lost*. By interacting with these popular and influential works of literature, the creature is engaging with education as an institution-- partially. He has no real teacher(s), no classmates with which to discuss his interpretations, and no classroom. From *Plutarch's Lives*, the creature learns "the histories of the first founders of the ancient republics" (Shelley 115). He studies "men concerned in public affairs, governing or massacring their species" and even forms his own opinions, telling Frankenstein that he [admired] peaceable lawgivers" (Shelley 116). But the creature himself laments that he was "perfectly unacquainted with towns, and large assemblages of men" (Shelley 116). Ignorant to the existence of religion, the creature reads *Paradise Lost* as a "true history" (Shelley 116). He lacks a minister, congregation, and place of worship, yet is still influenced by the stories he reads. He compares himself to the biblical Adam, but ultimately becomes dejected and decides that Satan is the "fitter emblem" of his condition (Shelley 116). Adam is "a perfect creature, happy and prosperous," while Frankenstein's creation is "wretched, helpless, and alone" (Shelley 116).

The creature is granted a glimpse of institutions through the books he discovers, although even he can recognize the common theme of his existence they underscore: he has never-- and will never-- have a physical presence within institutions. He can study them from afar, and form a sort of parasocial relationship with education, governments, and religion, but these institutions do not know he exists, and thus they do not desire his participation. Even if they did, there would be no place for him; no role for him to fill. "The life...of the subject [is] 'scripted' out for them by...institutions" (Danaheer et al. 116) The creature is an anomaly, and therefore left scriptless.

The creature's connection to relations of power confirms his coinciding identities of subject and object, and

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neither subject nor object. For Foucault, “power now functions in terms of the relations between different fields, institutions, bureaucracies, and other groups...within the state” (Danaher et al. 71). Within the scope of power relations, Foucault coined the term “biopower.” Biopower can be understood as “technologies...used for analyzing, controlling, regulating, and defining the human body and its behavior” (Danaher et al. 64). Essentially, the state saw people, or subjects, “as resources which had to be used and taken care of...to ensure the development and viability of the state” (Danaher et al. 64). The creature, as discussed previously, has a human body-- and also does not. In this way, there are no established technologies with which to analyze, control, regulate, or define him. His existence within the state means that he was a potential resource, but because discourse defined him as a monster and institutions are but intangible ideas to him, he does not fit into any of the groups whose interactions shape power relations.

The creature’s evasion of such groups is demonstrated in the Genevan magistrate’s impartial response to Victor’s confession in Chapter 23. Victor claims that during his admission of guilt, he observes the magistrate listening “with that half kind of belief that is given to a tale of spirits and supernatural events” (Shelley 171). In his response, the magistrate announces that if it is in his power to “seize the monster,” Victor should “be assured that [the creature] should suffer punishment,” but his capture is “impracticable” and thus Victor should “make up [his] mind to disappointment” (Shelley 171). Based on Victor’s description, the state (personified by the magistrate) does not recognize the creature as a human body, and thus lacks the same urgency Victor feels in trying to control and regulate the creature. The creature is not a valuable resource to the state and is thus inconsequential to its development and viability. No resource would be spared in hunting down a human (subject) on a murderous rampage. Even an animal (non-subject) that was terrorizing a community would receive similar treatment from the government. Although power relations do not include the creature, his life, thoughts, and actions are still influenced by his exclusion from them. Presumably, the creature knows that no one is coming after him besides Victor, and

Victor will never defeat him. The creature is able to continue deceiving and psychologically torturing Victor until Victor ultimately dies. Only after Victor's death does the creature reflect on his actions and grapple with his immense guilt. Unable to gain forgiveness from his creator, the creature acts as his own judge, jury, and executioner, sentencing himself to a solitary death at the hands of the dark, icy sea.

The three elements that Foucault deems essential to the production of subjects-- discourse, institutions, and relations of power-- all reject the creature, leaving him alone on the outskirts of society. He is so confusing to look at that it becomes upsetting. This means he is never physically welcomed into a single institution. Without ties to any group within an institution, he is seen as useless and thus dismissed by power relations. These components of society construct a wall around themselves, allowing in subjects (of course), as well as non-subjects (they are secondary to subjects, but accepted nonetheless because they are able to be defined). The creature, however, is like a nail in the road; society is an unknowing driver. He pokes holes in the systems that could, at one time, easily differentiate subject from non-subject. But he will never be able to squeeze through these apertures and into a society that will allow his assimilation. So, the creature is left with leaks out: fragments of discourse, indirect exposure to institutions, and confirmation of his pointless, wretched existence by his exclusion from power relations. He is a subject because he is influenced by these components, but he is not a subject because they deny him a designated space in society. The creature's identity cannot be qualified because he is an abnormally fluid being, able to identify with attributes on either end of the human-nonhuman spectrum; the subject-object spectrum. His inability to be defined is the reason for his abjection, and perhaps our fascination with his abjection is the reason the creature has become such an iconic villain, permeating our culture for the past two hundred years.

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# From Ascension to Abandonment in Caravaggio's *Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy*

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There she met Sleep, the brother of Death;  
and she clasped him by the hand.  
– Homer, *Iliad* (*Il.* 14.231-2)

In 2014 a “long lost masterpiece” by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio was claimed to be rediscovered in a private collection in Rome.<sup>1</sup> The painting in question, Caravaggio's *Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy* (Fig. 1), was previously known only through numerous copies. That is, until art historian Mina Gregori claimed with “one hundred percent certainty” that the painting which resurfaced in 2014 was by the master himself: “I know a Caravaggio when I see one.”<sup>2</sup> This assertion was instantly met with vivid debates among scholars, which prompted other copies of the painting to be reevaluated as potential “originals.”<sup>3</sup> Since Caravaggio's other depictions of the saint (e.g. *Martha and Mary Magdalene*, Fig. 2, or *Penitent Magdalene*, Fig. 3) have long been part of public collections and their attribution is universally accepted, an obvious question arises – why does this particular portrayal of the Magdalene continue to be a point of contention and interest for viewers and schol-

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1 Vogt, “Caravaggio's Original Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy ‘Discovered,’” October 24, 2014 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/italy/11185264/Caravaggios-original-Mary-Magdalene-in-Ecstasy-discovered.html>

2 Vogt, “Caravaggio's Original Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy ‘Discovered,’” October 24, 2014 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/italy/11185264/Caravaggios-original-Mary-Magdalene-in-Ecstasy-discovered.html>

3 Vogt, “Caravaggio's Original Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy ‘Discovered,’” October 24, 2014 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/italy/11185264/Caravaggios-original-Mary-Magdalene-in-Ecstasy-discovered.html>



ars alike?

In this essay, I will argue that Caravaggio's *Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy* marks the transition in depictions of Magdalene's death in the XVI<sup>th</sup> century from ascension (Fig. 4) to eroticized abandonment of the body. To that end, I will first examine the pictorial precedents for the erotic Magdalene type, focusing on *Penitent Magdalene* (Fig. 5) by Titian. But since Titian's idealized Magdalene does not account for the corporeality of Caravaggio's portrayal, I will then consider the sensory visions of Saint Teresa's ecstasy and the carnal abandonment in Caravaggio's own earlier *Saint Francis in Ecstasy* (Fig. 6). These works lay the foundation for the emphasis on somatic pain and bodily abandonment in the XVI<sup>th</sup> century images of saints, as seen in Caravaggio's Magdalene.

After Gregori's attribution in 2014, the version commonly referred to as the "Klain Magdalene," has been universally accepted as the original.<sup>4</sup> In this painting (Fig. 1), Mary Magdalene is seen reclining on a bundle of twigs, wrapped in her characteristic scarlet cloak and a crumpled white chemise, which contrasts with the smoothness of the exposed skin on her neck and shoulders. Her gaze is lifted upwards, head forcefully thrown back in a gesture of rapture. Magdalene is not aware of the viewer, but she is emphatically aware of a different, invisible kind of presence. Her body is contorted in both pain and ecstatic pleasure, hands tightly clasped under her chest in her effort to bear the agony. Scintillating tears stream down her cheeks, harkening back to the requisite post-Tridentine pathos.

Philosopher Julia Kristeva argues that Mary Magdalene was one of the first figures to establish suffering as historically a woman's prerogative: "Always somewhat a *stranger* to phallic ordeals, a woman is easily drowned in loss and separation, which she floods with her tears: it is this wild weeping that heralds every tomb, even Christ's, which, we recall, was discovered empty by Mary Magdalene, one of those first women grievers."<sup>5</sup> But Caravaggio's Magdalene is not simply in mourning – her moan is that of pleasure too, creating a complex

<sup>4</sup> The painting currently belongs to Mario Croce in Rome.

<sup>5</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 117.

relationship between the two experiences. Philosopher Didier Anzieu argues that pain is not the reverse of pleasure, instead the connection between the two is asymmetrical.<sup>6</sup> While pleasure denotes an economic equilibrium between two parties – the more pleasure one gives the more one receives – pain is typically experienced alone.<sup>7</sup> And that distinction may help account for Caravaggio’s imbuing the scene with the depiction of pleasure – if his aim was to portray a relationship with an invisible deity, simply portraying the Magdalene in pain would be insufficient, as agony is a solitary experience. Magdalene’s pleasure implies the presence of another participant, even if an invisible one. The only type of pain that can be shared, according to Anzieu, is when it is “eroticized in a sado-masochistic relationship,” which further sets the context for the eroticized nature of Magdalene’s agony.<sup>8</sup> Thus, by placing the Magdalene squarely in the most painful moment of her life, Caravaggio unearths the erotic pleasure of her mystical union with God, teetering at the edge of the precarious balance between the two.

### 1. *Penitent Magdalene* by Titian

Yet Caravaggio’s painting was not the first to present Mary Magdalene in an eroticized way. Almost a century earlier Titian caused a stir by depicting the saint with her breasts exposed. Titian responded to numerous accusations of blasphemy by explaining that the *Penitent Magdalene* (Fig. 5) details the moment before Magdalene repents, hence she is still a prostitute, which accounts for her nudity.<sup>9</sup> A century later Caravaggio’s Magdalene also faced critiques of blasphemy and “plebeian elements,” demonstrating that the convergence of

6 Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, 26.

7 Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, 200

8 Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, 200

9 “An intriguing anecdote bandied about among art historians has it that when Titian (1487-1576) was questioned about the sensuality of his famous Magdalen (1531; Fig. 1), now located in the Pitti Palace, Florence, he explained that he had painted the saint as she appeared just moments before she repented—that is, when she was still a prostitute.” – Ben-Aryeh-Debby, “Vittoria Colonna and Titian’s Pitti ‘Magdalen,’”<sup>29</sup>

sacred and profane was still controversial.<sup>10</sup>

But the connection between Titian and Caravaggio is more than simply the eroticized nature of Magdalene's representation. Starting in 1584, Caravaggio spent four years as an apprentice to one of Titian's pupils, Milanese painter Simone Peterzano.<sup>11</sup> It is during these years that Caravaggio's work becomes imbued with a sense of immediacy and intimacy (which would later be seen in his Mary Magdalene as well) in part due to borrowing Titian's technique of painting directly on canvas without preparatory drawings.

The depictions of Mary Magdalene by Titian and Caravaggio also share a familial connection: they are closely linked to the aristocratic family of Colonna. The original owner of Titian's painting is Vittoria Colonna, a renowned poet.<sup>12</sup> The next known document about the painting states that in 1630 it is listed in the inventory of the Duke of Urbino.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the painting stayed with Colonnas for an unidentified amount of time between 1531 and 1630 – a time span wide enough to encompass the years of residency with the Colonnas of our other protagonist, Caravaggio.

Caravaggio's father held a position in the house of Constanza Colonna Sforza. And it is at Colonna's estates, first outside of Rome, and then in Naples, that Caravaggio spent his years of exile from Rome following the murder of Ranuccio Tomassoni in 1606-1610.<sup>14</sup> During Caravaggio's exile in Naples in 1606 Marzio Colonna commissioned him to paint *Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy*. The year of 1606 falls within the years

10 Poseq, "The Compositie 'Pathosformel' of Caravaggio's St. Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy," 130

11 "[Peterzano] came from nearby Bergamo, which was Venetian territory, and had evidently studied with the aged Titian in Venice since he signed one painting "student of Titian" [114]. Venetian art was so clearly dominant in north Italy during the Cinquecento that most Lombard artists were at least touched by its light and color, its fluid and sometimes dynamic rendering of forms in space, its lyrical themes. [...] Perhaps Peterzano was in Titian's studio together with El Greco in the 1560s." – Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 3

12 "The original commissioner of Titian's painting, Federico Gonzago (who will be mentioned again later) never directly owned the painting and instead gave it as a gift to Vittoria Colonna." – Aikema, "Titian's Mary Magdalen in the Palazzo Pitti," 27.

13 Aikema, "Titian's Mary Magdalen in the Palazzo Pitti," 30.

14 Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, 17.

when Titian's *Magdalene* could have still been with the Colonnas.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, even if by then the painting already left the Colonnas, it is still likely that Caravaggio was at least aware of its existence otherwise, namely from its numerous copies popular during Caravaggio's lifetime and its panegyric, written by his close acquaintance Giovanni Battista Marino.<sup>16</sup> The poet emphasizes the pathetic expression of religious rigor in Titian's *Magdalene*, which would be similarly fitting for describing Caravaggio's painting.

Before giving the painting to Vittoria Colonna the original commissioner Federico Gonzago requested Titian to paint "...una Sta. Maddalena lacrimosa più che non si può, in un quadro ... che metteste ogni studio farlo bello."<sup>17</sup> Already in this letter from March 5, 1531, the connection between pain (*lacrimosa*) and beauty becomes evident – Titian's *Magdalene* is beautiful *because* she is in pain, not despite of it, which can be equally said about Caravaggio's agonized but captivating *Magdalene*.

In this blending of pious agony and erotic pleasure lies the innovation of Titian's *Magdalene*. The typical representations of the saint fall into two categories – narrative or iconic. On the one hand, the semblance of a rocky landscape in the background and the ointment jar connect this image with traditional narrative depictions of the saint. And yet, although the *Magdalene* is seen frontally, it would be amiss to call it simply an icon. *Magdalene* seemingly attempts to cover up her body with her arms and hair, as a kind of *Venus Pudica*, with whom this *Magdalene* has frequently been compared, but her breasts stay exposed.<sup>18</sup> As art historian Bernard Aikema suggests, "reli-

15 Poseq, "The Compositie 'Pathosformel' of Caravaggio's St. Mary *Magdalene* in Ecstasy," 122

16 Poseq, "The Compositie 'Pathosformel' of Caravaggio's St. Mary *Magdalene* in Ecstasy," 124

17 "A *Magdalen* as tearful as possible in a painting...as beautiful as you can make it." C. Fabbro, *Tiziano. Le lettere*, Belluno 1977, p. 24; and Ingenhoff-Danhauser (as in n. 2), p. 86.

18 "Art historians have often pondered the eroticism of the Pitti *Magdalen*, characterized by some as a seductive Venus-like figure. Viewing sensuality and spirituality as mutually exclusive, equating sexuality with secularism, these scholars have discounted the potential for a religious interpretation of the painting. Recently, several scholars have revisited this dichotomy: David Rosand seeing

gious edification and profane fantasy are at the beholder's own discretion.<sup>19</sup> Thus, Titian combines elements of both representations to create a new iconography of an image that is simultaneously pious and erotic.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, Caravaggio's Magdalene does not fall squarely into one of the two categories either. The narrative elements in Caravaggio are relatively scarce, with only a vague suggestion of a rocky desert in the background. But his painting is certainly not a devotional icon either. Instead in Caravaggio, like in Titian, according to Poseq: "the religious theme became an excuse for a very explicit rendering of the feminine allure," thereby promoting an "erotic Magdalene type."<sup>21</sup>

In representing sleep as erotic, Caravaggio's Magdalene is also connected to the archetype of the sleeping nude, to which Titian made his own contributions as well. Art historian Millard Meiss argued that in his depictions of the *Sleeping Venus* (Fig. 7), Titian uses sleep as a pictorial device allowing for a comfortable distance between the viewer and the eroticized subject: "the sleeper is always unaware of spectators, and the *vacatio* serves along with important aspects of Renaissance style to maintain a distance between the pictorial and the real world. Sleep is a means of idealization, especially valuable in the new and emotionally charged sphere of the erotic."<sup>22</sup> That is, Titian's Venus can be eroticized precisely because she is out of reach, romanticized. Similarly, Titian's Magdalene too, although physically present, epitomizes an idealized type, not a specific woman. Her gaze is drawn pensively to the upper

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the work as representing a type of religious image; Monika Ingenhoff-Danhäuser alluding to its spirituality; and Bernard Aikema arguing that the sensuality of the figure was deliberate, a religious test for the beholder." – Ben-Aryeh-Debby, "Vittoria Colonna and Titian's Pitti Magdalen,"<sup>29</sup>

19 Aikema, "Titian's Mary Magdalen in the Palazzo Pitti," 49

20 Titian's painting is, in turn, based on earlier depictions of the nude Magdalene by artists of the Leonardo school, such as Giampietrino and Bernardino Luini (Nirit Ben-Aryeh Debby's *Vittoria Colonna and Titian's Pitti Magdalen*) but I would argue that those depictions although nude are not eroticized.

21 Poseq, "The Compositie 'Pathosformel' of Caravaggio's St. Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy," 124

22 Meiss, "Sleep in Venice. Ancient Myths and Renaissance Proclivities," 359

right, hair lustfully streaming down her torso, hands folded in a classicized gesture. This idealization allows for a comfortable distance from the viewer and thus her eroticized nature.

Unlike Titian's idealized saint, Caravaggio's Magdalene is a suffering human body, which allows Caravaggio to remove Titian's idealizing distance between the subject and the viewer. Her face twists in a grimace of both pain and pleasure. Her chemise is stained, her nails are coated with dirt (in somewhat of a Caravaggio's signature detail). And therein lies the most important distinction between the two paintings and the greatest innovation of Caravaggio's depiction – he does not glorify his subject but represents her pain and pleasure as a mortal woman.<sup>23</sup> Even the contemporary response to Caravaggio's painting, although decrying it for its blasphemy, noted the vividness of his imagery and accurate portrayal of reality.<sup>24</sup> It is precisely in this lack of idealization and embodiment of a human, fallible body lies Magdalene's unique role as a saint. In that Caravaggio's image is closer to the medieval discourse,<sup>25</sup> which was centered on the corporeal nature of her feminine body.<sup>26</sup> According to an art historian Amy Neff, "Mary's suffering is clearly the prelude to an active and beneficial role. In identifying with Mary's anguish, which was not only an emotional or spiritual sorrow but also physical pain, medieval beholders might have gained a reassuring sense that their own suffering was shared."<sup>27</sup> Thus, Magdalene's mortal pain elicits the viewer's compassion, allowing them to put themselves in her shoes.

As Kristeva argues: "a continuity gradually develops between, on the one hand, the Virgin Mother-Mary Magda-

23 Scholars argue that Caravaggio's "most important accomplishment" was painting from life, with real people as models. – Hibbard, Caravaggio, 17.

24 "...the ambivalence of the contemporary evaluation of Caravaggio's work, deploring the "plebeian" elements, which he drew from his accurate study of reality and at the same time praising the vivacity of his imagery." – Poseq, "The Composite 'Pathosformel' of Caravaggio's St. Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy," 130

25 Neff, "The Pain of Compassion," 254.

26 Neff argues that a lot of the discourse debates whether Mary Magdalene could menstruate or bear children. (Neff, "The Pain of Compassion," 270)

27 Neff, "The Pain of Compassion," 270

lene-Veronica and their attributes, hymen-hair-veil, which suggest the carnal love, eroticism, and fertility of the woman, and, on the other hand, the universe of the spirit evoked by the son of God. From this continuity or contagion, the spiritual, invisible Son obtains, precisely, flesh and fabric."<sup>28</sup> Thus, it is the very corporeality of her female body, a foil to the invisible spirit of the divinity, that allows for Magdalene's importance as a saint.

Yet although Titian's *Penitent Magdalene* and *Sleeping Venus* can help account for Caravaggio's eroticized representation of the Magdalene, they still fail to explain the origins of depicting her as a suffering mortal body. As art historian Avigdor Poseq argues: "the preliminary concept of the pathetic mode of his ecstatic Magdalene may have been inspired by the poet Marino's praise of Titian's work, but the actual rendering of her suffering was probably motivated by the reports of the physical ordeal experienced by mystics."<sup>29</sup> Hence to trace the origins of her agony we will look to descriptions of bodily rapture by mystics popular during Caravaggio's time. Of particular relevance are the textual and visual representations of ecstatic pain by Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Teresa of Avila.<sup>30</sup>

## 2. *Saint Francis in Ecstasy* by Caravaggio

Caravaggio's very first religious painting, *Saint Francis in Ecstasy* (Fig. 6) depicts Francis of Assisi in a moment of bodily abandonment, similar to that of the Magdalene. Art historian Howard Hibbard argues that this painting is the first to portray the saint's death as an ecstasy instead of ascension: "Caravaggio's St. Francis seems newly felt and imagined, as if he had experienced the subject before he painted it. The picture gives the impression that he began with no preconceptions, no tradition whatever, and simply relied on his own thought and feeling."<sup>31</sup> This corporeal abandonment becomes a pictorial

28 Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 43-44

29 Poseq, "The Compositie 'Pathosformel' of Caravaggio's St. Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy," 127

30 Poseq, "The Compositie 'Pathosformel' of Caravaggio's St. Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy," 128

31 "Innovation in Caravaggio's picture is the passive, indeed unconscious form of the saint, who in conventional Stigmatizations actively welcomes his divine affliction. [...] In this new iconography

precedent for Caravaggio's later painting of the Magdalene.

Caravaggio depicts Francis with no signs of the stigmata or drops of blood, nothing marking him as the saint except for his ascetic Capuchin robe.<sup>32</sup> This omission of attributes is aligned with the post-Tridentine emphasis on Saint Francis's sensory experiences over his usual attributes.<sup>3334</sup> The omission of the attributes and modeling Francis's appearance after Capuchin monks enable Caravaggio to construct an intimate, worldly scene, which sets the stage for the humanization of his portrayal of Mary Magdalene a decade later. Caravaggio's Magdalene similarly lacks any of her traditional attributes, only her scarlet red robe and the mystical light streaming from above identify her as the saint.

Francis's appearance as a Capuchin also highlights the connection to the writings of the mystics of the Franciscan and Capuchin orders.<sup>35</sup> At this time Franciscan mystics were most

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Francis reclines, sometimes even in bed; or he sits up in his woodland retreat and has a vision of an angel, who often serenades him. Such paintings depict a vision that was necessarily private and internal. Caravaggio's St. Francis is more precisely another new subject, his Ecstasy, in which the swooning, ascetic saint is supported by angels."— Hibbard, Caravaggio, 58

"In a painting that has no exact precedent, Caravaggio seems to have combined the Stigmatization and the Ecstasy in a scene that is not outwardly a vision but an actual physical manifestation, a mystic Stigmatization in which light alone carries the full force of God's recognition and love. [...]"— Hibbard, Caravaggio, 60-61

32 E.g. as compared to Giotto from 1290, Bellini from 1480, etc. This omission of attributes will later become important in *Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy*, where the Magdalene is depicted as a mortal human, not an idealized saint.

33 "It is, in fact, the penitential and visionary proclivities of his contemplative nature, the commingling of joy and suffering attendant upon his heavenly visions, and his meditations on Christ's agony that become stressed in late sixteenth-century painting." Askew, "The Angelic Consolation of St. Francis of Assisi in Post-Tridentine Italian Painting," 19

34 "The new appreciation for St Francis's mystical experiences as spiritual phenomena closely connected with the senses and subjectively experienced." Askew, "The Angelic Consolation of St. Francis of Assisi in Post-Tridentine Italian Painting," 19

35 "[Saint Francis's] transformation into a suffering mystic was the result of gradual evolution. The influence of harsh Spanish asceticism was one source of this change. — Hibbard, Caravaggio, 58  
"Caravaggio, like most artists of the period, shows Francis as a Capuchin, reformed order of zealous Franciscans founded in 1529.



popular in Spain and had a particular influence on Teresa of Avila, which will be discussed in further detail below. Coincidentally, it is Franciscans who were responsible for bringing the cult of the Magdalene to Italy and Spain, as her penitence and contemplation naturally made her a favorite saint of the mendicant orders.<sup>36</sup> In painting from the mid-thirteenth century onwards Saint Francis even starts replacing Mary Magdalene at the foot of the cross.<sup>37</sup> The Colonna family were followers of the Franciscan order as well, which accounts for their interest in owning portrayals of the Magdalene by both Titian and Caravaggio. Hence the history of Saint Francis and the Franciscan order is intimately linked to both Mary Magdalene as a figure and her portrayal by Caravaggio in particular.

Thus, a decade before Caravaggio painted the Magdalene, he already grappled with the paradoxes of depicting a body undergoing a metaphysical experience in this painting of Saint Francis. Yet while Saint Francis is listless and passive, Magdalene is strained with intensity, fully focused on her mystical union with God.<sup>38</sup> To trace the origins of Magdalene's pathetic fervor we will turn to her connection to another mystic, Saint Teresa of Avila.

The Capuchins taught St. Bonaventure's threefold way to God based on mystical ascent through purgation, illumination, and union. [...] This mysticism flowered above all in Spain." Hibbard, Caravaggio, 60-61

36 "The cult of the Magdalen seems to have been popularized in Italy by the mendicant orders. [...] Shortly after their foundation, [Franciscans] established Second Orders for female contemplatives and Third Orders for penitents. The Magdalen, who was the exemplar of feminine penitence and contemplation, was naturally a favorite saint of both." – Wilk, "The Cult of Mary Magdalen in Fifteenth Century Florence and Its Iconography," 687

37 "The Franciscan cult of the Magdalen developed to such a degree that her veneration came to be closely associated with that of St. Francis himself. Franciscan breviaries of the fourteenth century use the same liturgy for both saints. The parallelism is revealed in the visual arts in certain depictions of the Crucifixion. Mary Magdalen had traditionally been placed at the foot of the cross. From the mid-thirteenth century on, however, St. Francis often usurped the Magdalen's customary position. This replacement of Mary Magdalen by St. Francis stressed their common devotion." – Wilk, "The Cult of Mary Magdalen in Fifteenth Century Florence and Its Iconography," 688

38 Philosopher and mystic Simone Weil declared that "the highest ecstasy is the attention at its fullest."

### 3. Writings of Teresa of Avila

In the year of Caravaggio's birth, 1571, Teresa was fifty-six years old and already a well-known author.<sup>39</sup> Poseq argues that Caravaggio based the depiction of Magdalene's pain on Teresa's ecstatic visions: "St. Teresa was especially explicit in her vivid description of the intense pain and physical spasms, which paralyzed her body, while she was subject to her visions. On the assumption, that St. Magdalene may have experienced similar symptoms, Caravaggio would have studied the sign gestures, by which inner suffering is conveyed."<sup>40</sup> Among such bodily gestures in Teresa's texts were the abandon of the head and upturned eyes, which expressed spiritual affliction (*mestizía*) as well as hands pressed to the body with tightly twisted fingers (*mani a pettine*), symbolizing the inability to move, both also found in Caravaggio's Magdalene.<sup>41</sup> In borrowing these expressive gestures Caravaggio eliminates the classical decorum traditionally expected from images of the Magdalene and therein further roots her in the worldly realm as a mortal body.<sup>42</sup>

Teresa's own account of her transverberation sounds as though Caravaggio's Magdalene were able to speak:

He left me completely afire with a great love for God. The pain was so sharp that it made me utter several moans; and so excessive was the sweetness caused me by this intense pain that one can never wish to lose it, nor will the soul be content with anything less than God. It is not bodily pain, but spiritual, though the body has a share in it - indeed, a great share. So sweet

39 By 1571 she already published *El Camino de Perfección*, *El Castillo Interior*, *Meditations on the Song of Songs*, her autobiography written under the direction of Fr. Pedro Ibáñez, among other works.

40 Poseq, "The Compositie 'Pathosformel' of Caravaggio's St. Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy," 127

41 Poseq, "The Compositie 'Pathosformel' of Caravaggio's St. Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy," 128

42 "Omitting or replacing the equally expressive gesture of her hands, which, being drawn from reality, may have seemed lacking the conventional "decorum", the artists removed the non-classical ingredients of the Magdalene's posture." - Poseq, "The Compositie 'Pathosformel' of Caravaggio's St. Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy," 130

are the colloquies of love which pass between the soul and God.<sup>43</sup>

These “sweet colloquies of love” hint at the conflation between human and spiritual union, which develops into the simultaneously sacred and profane imagery as seen in Titian’s and Caravaggio’s *Magdalenes*, as well as later in Lorenzo Bernini’s *Saint Teresa in Ecstasy* (Fig. 8). An anonymous critique of Bernini’s sculpture, although degrading the piece, makes the connection between Titian’s *Sleeping Venus* (previously discussed in relation to Caravaggio’s *Magdalene*) and Bernini’s *Saint Teresa in Ecstasy* explicit: “in forming his St Teresa in the church of the Vittoria, [Bernini] dragged that most pure Virgin not only into the Third Heaven, but into the dirt, to make a Venus not only prostrate but prostituted.”<sup>44</sup> This critique inadvertently foregrounds the analogy between the mystical unity with God and the corporeal union between husband and wife, just as in Teresa’s transverberation, and in Caravaggio’s eroticized *Magdalene* (which faced similar criticism).<sup>45</sup>

43 Teresa of Avila as quoted in Warwick, *Bernini: art as theater*, 63.

44 As quoted in Warwick, *Bernini: art as theater*, 66.

45 Some modern philosophers, however, put it in much more prosaic terms by arguing that Teresa of Avila had nothing more than hysterical cardiopathy or veiled sexual satisfaction under the guise of religious visions. “For the psychiatrists at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris, the pains in her side about which the Spanish mystic Teresa of Avila had written so profusely, seemed to be none other than hysterical cardiopathy.<sup>57</sup> Far from being a physical manifestation of the transverberation - the curious way in which the arrows of God’s love pierced the saint’s heart - her cardiac pain corresponded to the pattern of chronic and unspecific suffering frequently observed in nervous disorders: “the pain from this wound was so keen that it tore sighs from me [...]; but this incredible martyrdom made me, at the same time, enjoy the softest delights so that I could not find the moment to wish it were over,” wrote the Spanish saint.” – Moscoso, Pain, 153

“There was no shortage of opinions suspecting more graphically that [...] veiled desires for sexual satisfaction hid behind the enjoyment of mortification. When, already in the twentieth century, the philosopher Lacan pointed out the eroticism of Bernini’s statues of Saint Teresa and Saint Ludovica, he was not discovering anything new: “You only have to go and look at Bernini’s statue in Rome to under that she’s coming, there is no doubt about it,” he wrote.” – Moscoso, Pain, 153

Thus it should come as no surprise that, not in the least thanks to Bernini, contemporary culture from art house films to *Infinite Jest*, turned Saint Teresa into the default eroticized saint perhaps even more so than Mary Magdalene.

The mystical unity as a conflation of the ascent into heaven and a bodily rapture – crucial to understanding the transition from assumption to abandonment in depictions of Mary Magdalene – was also evident in a liturgical hymn performed during Teresa’s funeral:

This is the day when  
 Like a white dove  
 The soul of Teresa  
 Flew off to the holy temple of Jerusalem.  
 But a sweeter death awaits you  
 A milder penance calls  
 With the dart of divine love  
 Thrust into your wounds you will fall.<sup>46</sup>

This convergence of ascension with Teresa’s death turns it into a reenactment of the crucifixion.<sup>47</sup> Teresa’s body becomes a kind of a Eucharistic embodiment of Christ, therein connecting it with Kristeva’s continuity of the Magdalene as a flesh and blood transfiguration of Christ’s invisibility. The ceremonial performance of the Eucharistic death also emphasizes that, as philosopher Javier Moscoso eloquently puts it, “pain is a drama.”<sup>48</sup> Moscoso argues that since pain is a liminal phenom-

Bernini’s *Teresa in Ecstasy* plays an important role in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, where the sculpture appears in the scenes containing sexually explicit imagery or “ecstasy” induced by drugs. “The base frees and condenses, compresses the whole experience to the implosion of one terrible shattering spike in the graph, an afflated orgasm of the heart that makes her feel, truly, attractive, sheltered by limits, deviled and loved, observed and alone and sufficient and female, full, as if watched for an instant by God. She always sees, after inhaling, right at the apex, at the graph’s spike’s tip, Bernini’s ‘Ecstasy of St. Teresa,’ behind glass, at the Vittoria, for some reason, the saint recumbent, half-supine, her flowing stone robe lifted by the angel in whose other hand a bare arrow is raised for that best descent, the saint’s legs frozen in opening, the angel’s expression not charity but the perfect vice of barb-headed love. The stuff had been not just her engaging god but her lover; too, fiendish, angelic, of rock.” David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 235.

46 Composed by Maffeo Barberini, as quoted in Warwick, Bernini: art as theater, 63.

47 “This convergence of ecstasy with death, central to the Christian mystical tradition and recurrent in the history of its written accounts, broaches a Eucharistic conformity. That is to say, Teresa’s death from the wounds of love inflicted by the angel’s arrow dramatises anew Christ’s death by crucifixion.” Warwick, Bernini: art as theater, 66-68.

48 Moscoso, Pain, 6

enon, one that is expected sooner or later to pass, it acquires a dramatic, performative nature.<sup>49</sup> In that are the seeds of the theatrical pathos of both Caravaggio's *Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy* and Bernini's *Saint Teresa in Ecstasy*.

While the theological connection among the three saints – Teresa, Francis, and Mary Magdalene – is well-documented, Bernini's *Saint Teresa in Ecstasy* also makes an implicit formal connection with Caravaggio's *Saint Francis in Ecstasy* and *Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy* in particular. Some scholars suggest that Bernini references Caravaggio's Magdalene, which was completed forty years prior.<sup>50</sup> Similarly to the Magdalene, Teresa is seen moaning (Fig. 9), her eyes closed, abandoning her body to complete a mystical union with God. Art historians Jonathan Unglaub and Genevieve Warwick argue that Bernini's *Teresa* was also influenced by Caravaggio's *Saint Francis*, specifically in the sculpture's depiction of the supine, unconscious body of the saint.<sup>51</sup> The editors of *Saint Teresa's Sua Vida* changed her description of the angel from a cherub to a seraph, in accordance with its fiery appearance, thereby making an implicit analogy to Saint Francis, which Bernini adopts for his portrayal as well. Thus, Bernini's *Teresa in Ecstasy* creates a pictorial connection between the three saints while simultaneously further promoting the iconography of bodily abandonment, initiated by Caravaggio's *Saint Francis* and *Mary Magdalene*.

Yet a crucial difference that distinguishes *Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy* from both *Saint Teresa in Ecstasy* and *Saint Francis in Ecstasy* is the vanishing of the second figure. Philosopher Simone Weil, who converted to Christianity after experiencing her own mystical ecstasy at the Basilica di Santa Maria degli Angeli in Assisi, the home of Saint Francis, argued that God reveals himself through his universal absence from the world.<sup>52</sup>

49 Moscoso, Pain, 6

50 Unglaub, "Amorosa Contemplatione," 27.

51 "Teresa's pose has no clear antecedent in the history of her visual representation, although it does draw deeply on the bodily figuration of mysticism in High Renaissance altarpieces - of swooning Magdalens, of Mary at the cross, or of Caravaggio's Ecstasy of St Francis" – Warwick, Bernini: art as theater, 69-71

52 Basevich, "View of God Comes to Her: St. Teresa of Avila, Simone Weil, and the Kantian Conception of Modern Religious

The entire upper half of the painting is pure darkness, enveloping the Magdalene as though in an embrace. The asymmetrical positioning of her body against the dark background and the severe foreshortening of her head imbue the painting with a sense of intimacy, turning the viewer into an eyewitness of a personal exchange they were not part of. The impalpable deity inhabits Magdalene's embodied presence, thereby revealing God's appearance in the worldly realm.<sup>53</sup> According to Kristeva, that corporeal nature, paradoxically, is what allows for Magdalene's complete unity with the invisible God.<sup>54</sup>

### Conclusion

Thus, the accomplishment of Caravaggio's *Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy* is in combining the pathos of traditional representations of the Magdalene with elements drawn directly from life, allowing for the viewer's compassion for the ravished saint.<sup>55</sup> Caravaggio turns the erotic Magdalene type created by Titian into a flesh-and-blood human being in the state of internalized rapture, as earlier expressed by Saint Teresa and Saint Francis.

Caravaggio's impact is evident in Artemisia Gentileschi's numerous subsequent versions of the *Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy*, where the eroticized (Fig. 10) and sometimes even nude (Fig. 11) mortal body of the Magdalene becomes the primary focus of the paintings. The legacy of Caravaggio's dramatic representation can also be seen in Bernini's *Saint Teresa in Ecstasy*, which brings the influence of Saint Teresa's writings on Caravaggio's Magdalene full circle. Since the painting was rediscovered in 2014 new studies on the painting are yet to appear.

But perhaps the sheer amount of influence attributed to *Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy* even before the original was found is a testament to the radical power of Caravaggio's imagery.

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Experience," 317

53 Basevich, "View of God Comes to Her: St. Teresa of Avila, Simone Weil, and the Kantian Conception of Modern Religious Experience," 325

54 Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 117

55 Poseq, "The Compositie 'Pathosformel' of Caravaggio's St. Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy," 130

## Appendix

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## Images

- Fig. 1 Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy*, 1606. 103.5cm x 91.5cm, oil on canvas. Private Collection, France.
- Fig. 2 Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Martha and Mary Magdalene*, 1606. 103.5cm x 91.5cm, oil on canvas. Detroit Museum of Art, Detroit.
- Fig. 3 Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Penitent Magdalene*, 1594. 103.5cm x 91.5cm, oil on canvas. Doria Pamphilj Gallery, Rome
- Fig. 4 Antonio del Pollaiuolo, *The Assumption of Saint Mary Magdalene*, 1606. 103.5cm x 91.5cm, oil on panel. Museo della Pala del Pollaiuolo, Staggia Senese.
- Fig. 5 Titian, *Penitent Magdalene*, c. 1531. 85cm x 68cm, oil on canvas. Palazzo Pitti, Florence.
- Fig. 6 Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Saint Francis in Ecstasy*, 1595. 103.5cm x 91.5cm, oil on canvas. Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford.
- Fig. 7 Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, c. 1534. 119cm x 165cm, oil on canvas. Uffizi, Florence.
- Fig. 8 Lorenzo Bernini, *Saint Teresa in Ecstasy*, 1647, life size, marble. Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome.
- Fig. 9 Lorenzo Bernini, *Saint Teresa in Ecstasy (detail)*, 1647, life size, marble. Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome.
- Fig. 10 Artemisia Gentileschi, *Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy*, 1620. 81cm x 105cm, oil on canvas. Private Collection, France.
- Fig. 11 Artemisia Gentileschi, *Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy*, c. 1620. 81cm x 105cm, oil on canvas. Private Collection, France.



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