

THE
FOUNDATIONALIST
a literary journal



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THE FOUNDATIONALIST

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The Foundationalist

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Fiction, poetry, nonfiction, and literary analyses are accepted twice a year in October and March. There are no page limits, word counts, or specific themes. Visit our website for full submission guidelines and deadlines. All contributors must be current undergraduate students.

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EDITOR'S LETTER

1.29.2024

Dearest Writers and Readers,

Fashionably late.

This edition has been a long time in the making, but like all amazing things, they take time to deliver. With more submissions (and more editors) than ever, *The Foundationalist* is delighted to present another incredible edition of selected pieces. We are so grateful to all of our writers for having the patience to stick with us as we read each of their remarkable works.

To everyone who decides to pick up the pen or delights in finding a comfortable nook to read in, this edition is for you. You will find pieces that shock, charm, or inspire you in ways you never could have believed before.

Thank you, as always, to our contributors, readers, and supporters who make *The Foundationalist* possible in the first place. Enjoy the adventure that awaits in these pages, you won't be disappointed.

Sincerely,
Editors of *The Foundationalist*

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How to Make a Man

EMMA KRAB

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2023

I: FLESH

As the sun rose again over the snow, Ezra tossed the last piece of the stagecoach into the fire. It was the spoke of a wheel, and the yellow paint ignited immediately with a crackle. Around him lay the other pieces he couldn't burn — metal frames, nails, the broken glass of the window. It had taken him two days to burn through it all, and help had still not come.

He roused Father Martin, who slumbered at the base of the fire, his beard and exposed nose pressed against the collar of his buffalo coat, which had accumulated a layer of white translucent frost overnight. Blinking away his sleep, the priest sat up, his stout form rolling over like a bowling ball, and he looked around himself.

“The fire's going out,” he observed.

“There's no more fuel left and no more rations.” Ezra scratched at the patchy hair that spread over his chin. He was twenty, and should've had a full beard now like the other stagecoach drivers, but the hair didn't ever come in. A genetic thing, it had afflicted his father, too.

“What does that mean for us?”

Ezra toed the ground with his boots. Even the topsoil was frozen solid.

“It means we can't wait for help anymore. We've got to make our way back to town ourselves.”

The priest rose, the buffalo coat throwing his balance with its weight. “I'm not an athletic man. I don't know how well I'd do out here.”

Ezra shouldered his satchel, carrying the supplies they had left with them: a fire-starting kit, an empty canteen, and a gun. “I wasn't asking a question.”

They moved at the priest's speed, which wasn't very fast. The old priest was awkward in the snow, he noticed. He'd insisted on bringing his beaver skin hat — gaudy, tall, and without a drawstring on it — and now he clasped it to his head

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with a wrinkled hand. The wind did not care. It teased him, sweeping the hat up at the brim, toying with the idea of ripping it completely from his scalp. He could've used his other hand to steady himself except it was also occupied, weighed down by a big, dark book: the Holy Bible.

A book and a hat, Ezra thought to himself. He refused to leave behind a book and a hat?

The sky they passed under was clear and blue, a distant sun burning brightly above them. Just days ago, a blizzard had rolled through only hours after the stagecoach had set out from Sidney, trapping them in a white-out. Ezra had tried to steer them towards safety — he knew these hills well — but the blizzard made navigating impossible. When the storm cleared, they found themselves far from the road with a broken wheel. Now, the snow had melted just enough for the rocks and cacti to pop to the surface, making a quilt of brown and white. The landscape was endless and barren, but all they needed to do was keep going.

Ezra was following the tracks of the horses. He'd let them go in the storm, figuring they would freeze to death if he kept them tethered to the stagecoach. Now, he tracked the imprints they had gouged into the earth during their panic. At best, perhaps the horses would lead them to a ranch house or a trapper. At worst, he would find them just as lost and disoriented as he was, and then he'd at least have a faster way to move across the nothingness.

"You know, this landscape just fascinates me," Father Martin huffed after a few blissful hours of silence. His coat was so thick his arms were permanently suspended at an angle, and they bobbed as he walked. "We get snow in Staten Island, of course, but it's not nearly so mighty and terrifying."

Ezra paused, staring at the snow for a second, then carried on.

"When I received my mission from the cardinal," Father Martin continued, "to soften the hearts of the rugged West, he told me the snowfall was dangerous, but by the time I arrived here, I guess I had forgotten. I was in Missouri for a long time, you see, baptizing sinners in the churning brown water of the Mississippi."

After another mile, the tracks split suddenly, one veering

towards a valley to the north, the other continuing straight on, over the western hills, where the sun was now inching towards minute by minute.

“Hold up.” Ezra shushed the priest, who was going off about converting a community of blind hermits in the badlands of the Dakota territory. “We’re gonna need to split up, just for a few hours.”

“Split up?” the priest said. “What makes that a good idea?”

Ezra pointed to the tracks. “The hoofprints have been changing patterns. At first, these horses were running away, desperate to get out of the storm. A couple hours ago, they turned into a trot pattern.”

He shuffled over to another set of prints, his boots crunching against the snow. “Now, they’ve been walking, which means they probably started grazing.”

The priest nodded slowly, his eyes obscured by the fancy beaver hat.

“It means they haven’t gone too far,” Ezra tried again, and his former passenger nodded heartily.

Before they left, Ezra laid out the rules. Each man would follow a set of horse tracks. If he found the horse somewhere near civilization, he would get the two of them rescued. If he found the horse all alone, he would ride it back to the convergence point. Each man would measure the distance of the horizon from the sun with his hand every five minutes, and with one pinkie finger left, they would both turn around and come back no matter what.

Ezra took the straight path up the hill. Without the burden of the priest, he churned through the snow, and the cynical part of him thought of how much ground he would cover if he simply left the priest behind. After all, he was the man with the gun. But he knew better. Though he lived a rough, nomadic life, he was no criminal, and he took pride in protecting the people like the priest who most obviously could not protect themselves.

He heard the horse before he saw it. After an hour of plodding through the snow, he stopped for just a moment to catch his breath, in the silence of late afternoon, he heard something else, the crunch of snow under a foot that didn’t belong to

him. He held his breath, certain that his mind was just playing tricks on him, but then he heard a snort and rushed over the hilltop.

It was the black mare — Kentucky Treasure, all the boys at the station called her. She came to him by whistle, well-trained like their horses were. He patted her nose with his gloved hand, and he pressed himself against her massive flank, which radiated warmth. He swung over her bareback, though he had kept the reins on them both for exactly this reason.

Though the sun was sinking low by the time he arrived back, Father Martin was not back, so Ezra urged Kentucky Treasure through the valley, which then became a thicket of trees. The sun cast each object in silhouette so that each trunk and stump looked just enough like the priest's stout form to make him pause.

Then, as he followed the trees, he came to a river, and there, nearly invisible against the new darkness, he saw the outline of the priest and heard him crying. The figure twisted as Ezra rode next to the riverbank, rocks sliding onto the frozen water below.

"The poor thing!" the priest cried. "Oh merciful Lord."

He had found the second horse torn open by predators and scavengers alike. Ezra figured that judging by the frost that had covered its face and hide, it had probably died a couple days ago. It had likely been the victim of a coyote that was spurred by its post-storm hunger to attack a larger, lonely animal. Its name was Mission.

"We should camp here," Ezra said. "We'll ride on tomorrow."

"Here?" The priest couldn't look away from the wound ripped and shredded in the horse's side.

"In the thicket somewhere. If we can get a fire started, there's plenty of wood." He paused, not sure if he should say it aloud, but he did anyway. "We should cook up the meat and gather our strength."

II: FLAME

They moved through the trees until Mission's body was out of sight. Then, Ezra dug into the frozen ground, his hands protected in his leather gloves, while the priest collected more twigs. The moon rose higher, carved in half and eerie yellow, as they continued their work, the horse tethered to a nearby tree, stomping its back legs against the snow, skittish.

When they had assembled their pile of sticks and arranged their firepit, Ezra produced the flint from his pocket. He thought of how much his supplies differed from the priest's. How many times over would they both be dead, he thought, if they were both men of God?

The driver crashed the rocks together and a spray of red sparks leapt into the air. They lived bright and lively for only a fleeting moment before crashing down upon the twigs and sizzling out of existence. The two men waited for the smell of smoke, the sight of a saving gray column rising from the darkened earth, but nothing came.

Ezra tried again, more sparks dashing their little bright bodies into the makeshift tinder, but again the fire did not come. "It's too wet. It's all just too damp to light. Dammit!"

He had never been too good about controlling his anger, a vice he'd inherited from his father, but they had never choked like this before. Nature didn't give a damn if they were angry or holy or walked a dozen miles through the snow the day before. The cold would kill both of them and do it without malice, the worst way for anything to die.

Father Martin shuffled around inside his coat, though the sudden cold made his teeth chatter even more. Then, he forced open the top button and his hand emerged from the warmth, holding out the Bible, its title scrawled across the front in gold calligraphy.

"Take it," he told Ezra. "I've taken good care of it and kept it from the moisture. Just light it quickly."

"You're sure, old man?" He held the book aloft, his gloved fingers steady against its raised surface.

"I am, son."

Ezra tore a page from the front and struck the flint against it. The paper burned slowly, sweeping each word up into a

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wave of flame. When the page was nearly through, he placed another atop it, then a few more in a wider circle, creating a bigger, hotter flame that brought warmth to the men's faces. The priest sighed and buried his face deeper in the lining of his jacket, his nose twitching with the smell of smoke. The driver held out a twig and warmed it against the flame. He figured that if he could dry out the branches with the paper fire, perhaps he wouldn't need to use every page.

"I'll do my best to save it," he told the priest.

"No, you were right," the priest said. "I know that book by heart, and it's doing us a fine favor tonight."

Still, Ezra was impressed. Perhaps he had misjudged this man. He knew now that he most certainly misjudged what was useful and what wasn't when starting fires.

"I am sorry." The driver didn't know any men who cried in front of other men. Trying his best to be sympathetic, he leaned over and thumped the priest on the back. "Can I tell you a piece of wisdom?"

"Wisdom? If you mean holy wisdom..."

"I sure do not." The driver leaned back against the snow, the fire and his straight-brimmed hat carving shadows over his features. "I mean worldly wisdom. My father wasn't with us for very long but he was a good man. He was always sharing inspiring ideas with me."

"Such as?"

The twig in the driver's hand ignited with a slow coil of smoke and he dropped it into the fire. The wet trails that marked the priest's tears froze to his cheeks.

"Possessions don't make a man. Only actions can do that."

The twig crackled. Embers that once were sacred words lifted into the air, united with the milky tendrils of the galaxy and the stars that sprinkled and surrounded it. For the stage-coach driver, these stars were memories set alight, a familiar pattern in a hectic world of movement and impermanence. For the priest, he knew nothing of constellations or guiding himself by the cosmos, but there were never this many stars in New York City.

"Your father seemed like a genuine man. I'm sorry for your loss."

“Oh, he ain’t dead.” The driver pulled another twig and lifted it over the fire. “He’s just drunk somewhere in California. If you drink your way through enough saloons, you’ll land on his stool soon enough.”

“But you said — ”

“A good man and a present man aren’t the same thing,” the driver said through a yawn. “Sometimes the best thing a man can do is disappear.”

Before it was too late into the night, Ezra disappeared into the thicket and came back with a frozen slab of meat. He cooked it over the fire, and both of them ate in silence, the priest’s hands shaking a little bit.

When it came time to sleep, they agreed to switch off halfway through the night. The priest slept first, curled up in his fancy black coat, and the driver tended to the flame. In the beginning, he just tore the pages and tossed them in, oblivious to the words on them. Then, when he came to the bold, big words NEW TESTAMENT, which sounded fancy and important enough, he began to read them before letting them burn. He didn’t consider himself well-educated — a nuisance for every schoolmarm and traveling librarian who set him behind a book — but he knew his basics. Jesus Christ didn’t use big or smart words anyway. He didn’t talk like the rich, clever men that blew through Sidney on their way to somewhere more important. Instead, Jesus Christ spoke like he was talking to the driver himself, like he’d reached through the pages to place a hand on the boy’s shoulder.

He read and burned through the night. This was partly because of the fire of Christ burning deep within him, new revelations unfurling and compassion expanding. Of course, it was also because he feared crouching beside the old priest and finding him cold. In the end, only the presence of dawn returning to the far horizon soothed him enough to allow sleep to carry him away.

III: SKIN

For all the trouble it had taken them to leave, once they climbed on Kentucky Treasure and rode alongside the curve of the river, they reached town rather simply. The entire ride Ezra scanned the horizon, searching for his hometown, but his mind was thinking up all sorts of questions of theology to ask the priest. He wanted to know everything about his mission. Who all had he met? How did he go about teaching people about Jesus? Was it true the Church never turned nobody away, even if they were awful, unbaptized sinners who drank as children and swore too damn much?

By noon, the trees cleared and two of them could see salvation — there were big, dark shapes and small, moving ones up ahead. When they trotted through town, people rushed out from their shops and saloons to watch them pass.

“Survivors,” people whispered to each other. “God have mercy.”

He brought Father Martin to his church as requested, a big white chapel near the town square. As he helped the priest from the horse, Ezra leaned in, his voice filled with a degree of admiration and respect that was rather foreign to him.

“Sir, may I speak with you about that book sometime? I’ve got a lot of questions.”

“I’ll send for you,” he replied. “Then we’ll talk all about it.”

Ezra returned to the bunkhouse on the edge of town, a shabby tenement for the stagecoach drivers to squat in between rides, but it had warmth and shelter — and a bathhouse. The other boys teased him a bit for crashing the coach, something his bosses were fuming about, but mostly they were in mourning for Mission, a good and cherished horse.

He hunkered down in his room and waited for the priest to call him to Jesus. The day passed him by, and then the night, and then one more day until a letter came addressed to him. He tore it open, but it was not from the priest. Rather, it was an invitation to a dinner party at the mayor’s house, a place he had never been in his life. The message was hand written in scrawling calligraphy he struggled to read. It said:

You are cordially invited to attend an evening commemorating the miracle of the survival of Father Martin McKenna. Dinner is served at six with parlor games to follow.

Ezra didn't know what a commemoration of a miracle was supposed to look like, but he asked around the bunkhouse and the boys told him to dress nice, so that night he threw on a pair of black trousers and his nicest, cleanest shirt and walked across town, all the drunk leering at him in his fancy but ill-fitting clothes. Truthfully, he was wary about it all, the pomp and circumstance, but he still had a fleeting hope that if Father Martin was there, maybe he'd get to talk to him.

He trudged across the town square where he had often played as a poor, grubby child. In the distance, the mayor's house glittered with lantern light, and folks were arriving in much cleaner, fancier clothes. When he reached the front steps, a servant asked for his invitation, which he handed over, and then the servant ushered him inside.

He followed the guests down a long white hallway trimmed with gold, probably worth more than every paycheck he'd ever received. When they reached the dining room, people began looking around — there were name placards for everyone. *Ezra Norville* was down at the end, but it was technically the head of the table, and he felt very proud.

The folks around him chatted to each other, but not to him. He thought to join the conversation and make himself known, but they kept speaking about things he knew nothing about. Some couple was going on about an opera they attended last month. Another group of men were talking politics. A little further down, he heard a conversation brewing about horse breeding.

Then, all at once, the conversation ceased and the mayor entered with the guest of honor: Father Martin, his shiny beaver skin hat perched atop his round head.

"My esteemed guests," the mayor said. Ezra had never seen him so close before. "I present to you our very own hometown miracle, a man of God, a survivalist."

The mayor took his seat, but Father Martin remained standing above the guests. He had a confidence about him Ezra had not seen on the prairie, like a singer finally standing in front of his preferred audience.

"I received my mission," he began, "from the cardinal of Boston. 'Go,' he told me, 'and bring the Lord to the West.' And

so, I began my mission. I baptized sinners in Nebraska in the muddy waters of the Platte River. I converted a colony for the deaf in the Dakota Territories. But by his grace, I have never truly seen a miracle like I have seen in the prairie.”

Ezra looked around, but all the other dinner guests were entranced by his words. Perhaps Ezra had heard him wrong the first time, but wasn't it a colony of blind folks?

“I am joined tonight by my witness of this miracle.” Father Martin extended his arm with a flourish to the end of the table, where Ezra was trying not to redden under the weight of a dozen stares. “We were alone and cold, and we were not going to make it through another night. I even sacrificed my own beloved Bible, which burned through the night and kept us from succumbing to the intolerable cold. Isn't that right, Ezra?”

He nodded.

Father Martin smiled at him, and continued with his story. He began to move now, pacing around the table, coming to rest by a guest's chair and, from time to time, seized their hand in his.

“We came across our horse, the wild stallion we had turned out days before, but the coyotes and vultures had done the poor thing in. We were desperate, and so I turned to this young, sinful man, and I asked him to pray with me. Together, we called upon the intercession of the Lord, and upon the conclusion of our prayer, the miracle took place.”

He stared into the eyes of one of the women, clutching her hand.

“When we opened our eyes from our prayers, the horse stood over us, breathing just as easily as if it had never died. A miracle of resurrection! That's what brings me to you today.”

Ezra frowned. Was the priest reciting a joke? A tale of fiction? Surely, he didn't mean to genuinely tell the crowd that the horse they'd rode in on had been the same one slaughtered by coyotes and frozen against the snow?

“It is true!” The priest shook the woman's hand, and she looked about the swoon, enraptured by his conviction. “Enough so that even my companion, born of lowly and drunken folks, has now been filled with the Holy Spirit!”

He felt the shift of gazes towards him, but this time, instead

of seeking out the reassurance of the priest, he dropped his head. Was that all his faith was for? Justification of a fabrication, a grift?

Father Martin, now having made a circuit around the long table, collapsed into the chair directly across from Ezra at the head of the table.

“God’s radiance upon you all,” he said, and the group erupted into cheers and applause.

“How magnificent!” the woman next to him said, breathless.

“Sainthood!” others shouted. “Canonization!”

“And where is this horse?” one of the guests to his left shouted over the noise. “Surely you wouldn’t abandon God’s holy stallion?”

“Of course not. I’ve acquired him from the stagecoach company, and he’s comfortable now in the mayor’s stables. When I depart, I’ve decided to arrange for the horse’s companionship in the hopes he will inspire more miracles and conversions.”

The mayor’s wife leaned in. “They would be so lucky to have you, a blessed man. And so stylish with that lovely hat.”

The priest touched it gingerly, the way Ezra had seen mothers in town touch the crown of their babies’ heads. Erza thought back to their isolated night in the cottonwood grove, how Father Martin had been so earnest in his giving up of the leatherbound Bible, a possession the young man had thought had been his favorite. All along, it had been the luxury hat he had truly valued; a man of finery, not a man of God. It seemed, just as the priest had fooled his prestigious dinner audience, Ezra too had been deceived.

He stood, drawing the gazes one final time of the guests who looked at him not like a savior but like the savior’s pet. His face burned not with shame but with the anger and vulnerability that came with betrayal, and he darted from the room, the guests’ gazes scattering over him, their minds lighting up with questions: What makes him so flustered? Where is he going? Who does he think he is, leaving dinner with the mayor so early and rudely?

He stalked down the hallway, though he didn’t know which

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way to go. He'd never been in such a big building before, with more rooms emerging with every turn. At one point, he passed the kitchen, full of cooks and servants placing the last garnishes on a dozen plates of steaming food. A couple of them looked up, taken aback by his scowl and his rugged, unshaven face.

"Where's the stables?" he asked, and one of them pointed out the way.

The wind had picked up outside, and Ezra walked to the stables with his shoulder leaned against it. He did not mind the wind, which was constant here. If anything, it was nostalgic, reminding him of kite-flying in the summer, or the rush of cold air when sledding down the town's many hills. This town was his home, it always had been, and yet he realized now that he would never be truly understood or valued by the people who ran it.

Kentucky Treasure was in the final stall, grazing on a block of hay. He whistled softly through his teeth, and her head rose with recognition, turning so that her neck stretched fully beyond the gate.

"You be smart out there," he said, stroking her nose. "You find yourself a herd of mustangs or a quiet little ranch family, and you disappear alright?"

With a soft click, almost undetectable with the whooshing of the wind, he undid the gate. Kentucky Treasure followed him to the edge of the stables, where the hills of the open prairie resumed. He wound his hand back and slapped her across the rear, and with a flash of confusion and rage across her massive, black eyes, she galloped into the darkness.

Ezra wove his way back through the massive house, but instead of sitting back down at the dinner table, he came to the front steps. At the other end of the town square, the church bells began to ring. The building before him was just as regal as the bible's cover had been, adorned with spires and shapes. Every color shimmered through the stained glass windows, and the driver took a step toward the beacon of white — but then stopped. Wrenched by the wind, the church door flapped open, revealing empty pews. He craned his neck to search the bell tower, but it seemed the chimes weren't brought about by any devout follower or divine power. It was only the wind that

knocked them together. There was nobody there.

A sudden ruckus turned his head. A duo of desperados chuckled as they tied their horses outside the saloon, hats knocked back to reveal ruddy complexions, spurs jangling. The older one with a gray-flecked beard patted the back of his younger companion. The younger one smiled like the driver had never seen, so free and still so wise, and the two men descended into the stupor of piano tunes and whiskey. The snow felt soft beneath Ezra's feet as he followed them in, clenching his fists and swallowing his sobs until they hit the bottom of his stomach and disappeared.

Pornographic

O'NEILL HATHCOAT

St. Olaf College, 2025

Moonlight filtered through the curtains as they fluttered ever so slightly in the cold night breeze. I lay awake on her bedroom floor, sweating profusely and unable to do anything but stare, my friend vaguely obscured by the blankets. I could barely think as I listened to her steady breathing, the only sound piercing the thick silence of the early morning.

Nothing could compare to the feeling of being so close to her. Every drug I had tried, every orgasm I had shaken through, paled in comparison to lying just a few feet away from her. But I was greedy, so sinfully greedy that these few feet couldn't bring me the high I remembered. After a minute or so of contemplation I sat up slowly, so slowly that I would not wake her, and crawled to her bedside.

Now that I was closer, I could feel the heat radiating off her body. All that life that was kept under a thin layer of skin, and it all belonged to her. I was jealous of that, being so unapologetically alive that it seeped from every pore of her skin.

I wanted to know everything about her. I wanted to know what was happening inside of her. I wanted to be so close to her that I would not be able to tell where I ended and she began. I wanted to be able to feel her warmth every second of every day. I was jealous of how bright she was, and I just could not contain myself anymore.

With all the hesitancy and tenderness of holding a newborn, I raised my hand to her forehead and brushed some of her hair away from her face. I shivered as a wave of unadulterated pleasure washed over me, and in that moment I just knew.

I hurriedly crawled back over to my backpack, arms shaking in anticipation, teeth clenched and toes curled while my knees ground painfully into the hardwood floor.

I rummaged in my bag as quietly as I could, but as quiet as I had tried to be, I still heard the shifting of blankets behind me.

"Why are you awake?" a sleepy voice croaked.

I turned, and there she was, sitting up and gazing at me with sleep-filled eyes. "It's like...two in the morning."

All the air in my lungs vanished within moments. Every feature of her delicate face was outlined by the moon: the graceful slope of her nose interrupted by a subtle bump of cartilage partway down, her usually soft arching lips dry from sleep, her hair matted to her head and saturated with sweat. A little bit of drool had crusted around the corner of her mouth, and as my eyes drifted up I could see the faint red imprint of the sheets on her face. She was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

My whispers were entirely too loud in the stillness of the room, "Can't sleep."

She sniffed, blinking a couple times before holding up the sheets. "You can climb in bed with me if you want." I could have died right there in that darkened bedroom. My head was completely filled with thoughts of how warm she must be under there. A fortress I had never had the courage to penetrate. A beacon of light that I could not bear to look at for the burning behind my eyes.

And I was being invited inside.

I stood wordlessly, creeping to her bedside and stopping just shy of the tent of the sheet. I peered down at her, anticipation pooling in my stomach, but she just smiled sleepily up at me.

She wanted me, and she wanted me close to her. I had dreamed of this for so long with countless sleepless sleepovers leading up to this moment, and all I needed to do to fulfill my dream was accept.

So I did.

I climbed into bed next to her, curling up in her warmth and relishing the slight dampness of the sheets where her own warmth had snuck out of her as sweat. I basked in the feeling of her hair brushing against my cheek and the smell of her body all around me. It was absolutely heavenly just barely touching her like this. Then, almost as if on instinct, one of her arms found its way under my neck while the other draped unceremoniously over my chest. What could this be, if not a wordless invitation. How could this possibly be nothing? Years of keeping my distance had congealed into an awful longing,

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and this couldn't possibly sate my hunger.

I needed more.

I hoisted myself on top of her, her eyes following me lazily, almost like she had expected this from me. I could make out a faint blush dusting her cheeks as she sucked in shallow breaths beneath me. I straddled her hips as best I could, trying to appear confident in such unfamiliar territory, but I could feel the blood rushing through her veins being pushed through every corner of her body by her heart. It was beating quicker now as I rested my hands first on her cheeks and then on either side of her head, effectively pinning her to the mattress. How did I get here? What was I doing? Her eyes roamed slowly across my face, picking up instantly that something was amiss. She had always been good at that.

"What's up?" she rasped, her sour breath fanning over my face. God she was just delicious.

I felt her shiver as I carded my fingers through her hair, caressing her scalp and nearly groaning in delight as heat seeped into my fingers.

"I don't know," I replied. That was a lie and we both knew it. I knew exactly what I was doing, I knew what I wanted.

She smiled, the cracked skin of her lips stretching to the point that the blood just beneath the surface was practically begging to be let out.

"That's bullshit." And of course she was right. When she looked at me, it was like she could see every thought churning, organ squirming, vein quivering inside of me. I hated it, that she could see everything and I was left blindly waiting in the dark for her.

We had been here before, so close that we could feel each other pulsing with desire while anticipation grew unchecked over our heads. It was never enough then.

It still wasn't enough. I would get what I wanted tonight.

"You're right," I said.

She reached one hand up towards my face, and cradled my pallid cheek as she had many times before. She never flinched away. I always wondered why she never pulled away from me. Surely she could sense what I wanted from her. Maybe she wanted it too.

I made up my mind for the final time, my hands sliding down the planes of her face as slowly as I could muster. Down, down, down. Brushing over fine hairs growing on her cheeks, begging for my touch with their mere presence on her face. Close, she was so close. I was so close to her. Closer, closer, close.

For a moment, I paused with my hands on her shoulders. I locked eyes with her again, giving her one final chance. I was always giving her chances like this, escape routes she could use if she ever realized what a wretch I was. She placed a hand over one of my own, squeezing it tightly and bringing it to her lips. Kissing my palm without ever seeming to notice that I was absolutely slick with sweat.

The roughness of her lips made me tense, and tears pricked my eyes when she carefully placed my hand back on her shoulder.

She wanted me, she wanted this, I wanted her and she knew it and I knew it and I only needed to do it just go and do it because she wants me wants me wants me.

And in one swift movement, my hands were clasped around her neck, squeezing as hard as I could. My fingers dug hard into the soft flesh of her neck, pressing as hard as I could with my thumbs into the very center of her throat.

She struggled furiously beneath me, digging her nails into my arms in a futile attempt to stop me. She wheezed out a pathetic scream, one that could only be heard by me. I smiled down at her, gasping when her nails scraped down my back. She was so so perfect.

An absolute vision. Her eyes bulging and bloodshot, slender legs kicking behind me, mouth agape and gasping. She threw her hand to the side, grabbing a pillow and smacking me in the head as hard as she could. I stayed firm. She had invited me in. I wouldn't stop now.

Drool pooled in the corners of her mouth, eyes rolling back into her head as red began to encompass the whites of her eyes. She struggled for a good long while, her hands pawing at mine in a way that was so determined. But after a few drawn-out minutes we both heard the wet pop of her trachea under my hands. Her head fell limply to her side, and her eyes be-

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came dull as bloody spittle bubbled in her mouth and spilled past her lips down her cheeks.

I pulled back and marveled at the scene I had created. Her body posed delicately upon the mattress with her sheets bunched up around her legs and hanging precariously off the side of the bed, acting almost like a frame for a painting. I cradled my aching hands, cracking my knuckles and massaging my palms. These hands took the life she had been hoarding all to herself and captured it forever. I took a moment to kiss my palm where she had brushed her lips just moments before, her taste lingering stubbornly on my skin. She was absolutely breathtaking.

Practically vibrating with excitement, I climbed off of her corpse and retrieved a pair of scissors from my bag, ones I had fondled thoughtfully many nights before, just waiting to be used. I yanked her shirt over her head, running one hand down the length of her stomach. Even in death she was so, so warm.

I positioned the blades over the center of her midriff for only a moment before I swung them down into her skin as hard as I could, taking the time to admire how her blood gushed vivaciously from the gash. I brought my attention back to my work. She would be cold in only a few minutes. I had to be fast.

I took just one more moment for myself to look upon her stiff expression, gaping into eternity like the most beautiful idiot in the world. I became excited, digging my hands into the gash and pulling until flesh began to tear.

I was dying to feel how warm she was underneath.

Culloped

EMILIO MOSCOSO

University of Chicago, 2024

They sat in the pavilion by the rugby fields with eyes fixed on each other, yet glancing sporadically towards the window through which they could see the rain falling in thick, opaque sheets and hitting the ground where the rain pooled and the mud roiled. Thin boys, the lot of them, swaddled in those enormous blue and maroon shirts and clenching body and jaw to avoid the semblance of trembling. The cotton shorts barely reached down enough to cincture the thigh and so left bare most of the upper leg and the socks were hiked up to the knees. In the middle of the room the games teachers stood huddled. Barrett, MacAngus, Partridge. They whispered amongst themselves, not willing yet to divulge the verdict waited upon by all the boys. Barrett broke away from the huddle and walked towards the pavilion entrance, every step a suspended agony, and he peered curiously through the glass as if he had not noticed the rain until just now. He opened the door. They clenched tighter as the cold wind announced itself and without it needing to be said they stood up and walked out onto the fields.

Amidst the downpour they were barely discernible, like images seen through warped glass. They ran and tackled and when the boy hit the ground he would present the ball and cover his head with his hands as they rucked over him. He lay there curled, glancing up at their strained faces and the spittle that frothed at the corners of their mouths and in his own gumshield he could taste the rainwater, pure and fresh and sweet. When he stood up he was lathered in mud. The ball had progressed downfield but was soon knocked-on and Barrett blew his whistle and dug his heel into the ground and gestured with his hand pointed towards one side. They prepared to scrum and each pack assembled and bent down and gripped the sleeves of each other's shirts. Barrett gave them the orders. Crouch, touch, bind, engage and and the two packs came together in a collision of bovine groans and the ball came

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in from the scrumhalf and they drove with their necks until the ball emerged and the scrumhalf collected the ball and scampered away.

None of them had brought towels. They took off their shirts and shorts and socks and heaped them onto the changing room floor like discarded cuts of meat. The steam rose from their blushed and naked bodies as they scurried from the showers. MacAngus was regarding them all from the corner while Barrett and Partridge paced around the room, telling each boy to shower and dry themselves off and change into uniform. The boy used his socks to dry his body and ruffled the water droplets from his hair. As he was reaching for his shirt, he felt a cold hand press against his back.

Very cold out there wasn't it, Stephens, said Partridge.

Yes sir, he said, removing the starched shirt from the peg.

I can't even feel my hands. Look.

The boy felt the palm rest on his back once more. He looked at Partridge and smiled briefly. Yes sir. Very cold out there.

Partridge laughed softly and nodded. Well hurry along now and get changed. Your mother'll have some work to do with those dirty socks of yours.

He smiled and put on his shirt as Partridge strolled away and asked another boy whether his hand felt cold to him. He finished getting dressed and stuffed his dirty kit in his games bag. Barrett had moved to the doorway where he leaned against the wall as the boys looked to leave. Tuck your shirt in, he said. Then he pointed to his jugular notch. Top button.

The rain had lessened by the time the final bell rang. The students walked along the path towards the gates with their bags slung over their shoulders. As soon as they exited they removed their ties and folded them and put them in their blazer pockets. The wind was fierce across the bridge. Down below, the shallow river gathered at low tide bisecting the school and the city. They waited for the buses at the station and chatted about the rugby session and how many tries they had each scored. When he got home he found a letter from the school addressed to his mother and father sitting on the kitchen table. It had already been opened so he drew the letter from the en-

velope and flattened it on the table and read it.

The next day they gossiped in congregation around the alcoves before the first period. They had all read the letter. What was the accident, they asked. While they deliberated on what the letter might signify and what would happen regarding their Latin lessons, he waited patiently for an opportunity to provide his theory. I think it was a car crash, he said.

How do you know, Stephens. Who told you that.

He shrugged. The letter said he was involved in an accident. I think that means he was caught in a car crash.

Do you think he was run over or was he driving.

Probably run over. Babcock is too old to be driving.

Wait what accident.

As more boys arrived they deduced that only the parents of those students whom Babcock taught had received the letter. They came to a consensus on his theory of the car accident and when the bell rang they dispersed and made their way towards their form tutor rooms. Barrett was sat at his desk watching them shuffle through the door. In, he ordered. Sit down. While he took the register they glanced at one another furtively as if in apprehension of the expected moment when Barrett would reveal to them the cause behind the accident. But he did not do so. Only instructing them to stand up and grab a hymn book and make their way in single file towards assembly. They spoke no more about the accident for if Barrett was unwilling to speak the matter into existence then there was nothing of which to speak.

MacAngus took them for the swimming session that morning. He stood by the edge of the pool observing them as a toad would, squat and large-eyed and bulbous, his stout flesh ballooning with every breath. Their pale forms coruscated under the water, lithe in undulating graces. He oversaw them in the changing rooms and told them to dry off and change into uniform. You ever hear about the American lady and the Scotsman, he asked.

No sir, they answered.

He grinned. An American lady is walking around Edinburgh when she runs into a Scotsman dressed in full tartan. She's never seen such an outfit before. So she asks, excuse me,

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is there anything worn under the kilt. And he responds, why don't you feel for yourself lass.

They laughed and looked around at each other. That's a good one sir, they said. Is it based on a true story.

MacAngus guffawed. That I can't answer. Here's another. There were three nuns trying to pass through the gates of heaven. An angel came to greet them and told them that they must each answer one question before being allowed to pass. He asked the first nun, who was the first man on earth. She responded, Adam, and the angel let her pass. He asked the second nun, who was the first woman on earth, to which she responded, Eve, so he let her pass too. Finally, the angel asked the third nun, what was the first thing that Eve said to Adam. The nun paused. Oh that's a hard one, she said. The gates opened and the angel let the nun pass.

They stood half-naked in silence contemplating what MacAngus had just said. The storyteller himself surveyed the room, grinning wildly. One of the boys started laughing. Then a few more started laughing. Then as they all began to realise, the room erupted into a choir of falsetto hysterics with MacAngus' croak emanating from the corner of the room.

Hurry up and get changed, he shouted amidst the noise. You don't want to be late for the next period.

During the break the teachers would order them to stay outside. The younger students would run around, screaming at play, uncaring of the wind that cut through their thin shirts. It was too cold for him so he stood with Browning and a few others in the lee of the building where they could hear the intermittent contact of the bat and the cricket ball caroming off the walls. He kept his hands in his blazer pockets and raised his shoulders tightly about his neck. A door opened. Two boys tottered out of the building. Hobday and Fayne. Behind them, Barrett, expelling them at the threshold with his scowl alone. They all could feel the momentary warmth diffusing from there, then dissipating as Barrett closed the door.

You guys get caught, asked Stephens.

Hobday nodded. Yeah. We said we were getting a football from the alcove but he wasn't fooled.

Barrett's a wanker.

Yeah. The football trick worked on MacAngus yesterday though.

That's because MacAngus doesn't care. He isn't a wanker like Barrett.

They laughed and swore at Barrett some more.

Did none of you see what MacAngus was doing during the history lesson yesterday, said Browning.

No, said Fayne. Was it during the test.

Yeah. Did none of you see.

We were doing the test. What was he doing.

I was looking over at MacAngus' desk and I saw he was looking at something. You won't believe what he was looking at.

Who. MacAngus, asked Hobday.

Yeah. You won't believe it.

What was it, said Fayne.

Browning's eyes darted around spastically in excitement. He was flipping through the pages of some magazine. And on each page there were these photos of these women. But the women weren't wearing any clothes. They were completely naked. And he was looking at them right there, turning the pages but he wasn't even smiling or anything. He was just looking at them.

Bollocks, spat Hobday.

I swear. It's true. I saw the photos there on the page. The naked women. Stephens, you were next to me. You saw it too right.

He shook his head. I didn't see it. I was doing the test.

I know you saw it. You were looking at them too.

The boys jeered and questioned Browning on the nature of these photographs but he did not describe much more apart from the fact that they were naked and they asked him if in the photographs he could see the women's breasts and he said that he could see them but that he could not provide many details about them because he was afraid MacAngus might notice if he looked for too long. While the boys revelled at the idea, Stephens walked towards the door.

What are you doing, asked Fayne.

I'm going inside. It's too cold.

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There was nobody in the foyer. A dim light came through the window that looked out onto the courtyard. To the right of him, the third year corridor where he had been situated the year prior stretched emptily. He knew Partridge would be sitting there in his classroom so he took the staircase to the left, craning his head upwards to keep the door on the top floor within view. When he reached the top he opened the door slowly and looked left and right before stepping into the corridor. There was glass panelling everywhere so he could see if someone was passing along the other three lengths of the floor. He did not see anyone. There would be no teachers here. They would all be in the common room. Faint cheers resounded from outside, and the tennis balls hitting against the upper windows.

At the end of the art hallway was Babcock's classroom. The name plaque had been removed and when he looked inside the lights were off and the desk was barren. He tried the door. Locked. He wandered on through the second year corridor and took into account the wooden floorboards. Around halfway he began to hear a whispering. It sounded like two voices, ciphered into one conglomeration of secrets and unknowns. They seemed to come from Grabham's room. Yes, it was his room, his voice. He neared until he could distinguish the other individual, then paused. Barrett. The unflappable and domineering tone that no boy could mistake. The words came plainly now. Still hushed, but plainly so.

He's not coming back, Barrett said. No chance.

It's terrible, said Grabham. How sad, really. And you just know they're going to put his photo in the papers and they're all going to see it.

It doesn't surprise me. He did always seem off didn't he.

I'm not sure. I rarely spoke to him. The school can't let it reach the papers but you just know it will.

We'll see. They've dealt with it before haven't they.

That was over thirty years ago, Simon. With the choirmaster. They won't be able to do much now will they.

We'll see, he said.

And all the others. God forbid more cases come to light.

It wouldn't surprise me if they did.

At that Stephens ran back along the corridor, not caring about the sounding floorboards, and he thrust the doors open and turned down the art hallway and ran past Babcock's classroom wondering why they had even put a Latin classroom in the art hallway and when he reached the end he stopped and canvassed the entire floor through the glass. Neither of them had left the classroom and he panted and thought about all the noise he had made by running down that corridor. He checked the clock on the wall. There was an hour of break yet to go. He swore and stared at the paintings of old teachers and headmasters that decorated the walls. They looked stoic, those of recent years properly attired in their black robes and blazers and ties, their hands folded on their laps and their eyes unwavering. Those from the antiquated era, beginning perhaps some five hundred years past, resplendent in finery and silk shirts and wigs. Their names were etched beneath each portrait and he imagined which of those now would in time have their likeness upon the wall.

He found Browning and Hobday and Fayne inside an empty classroom. They had shut the door and were sitting on the tables and bantering one another. When he asked them what they were doing, they said it was too cold to stand outside. Browning said that nobody would find them because they would shut the door and no teachers patrolled down this corridor anyway.

Where'd you go, asked Hobday. We came inside only a few minutes after you.

Just walked around. Trying to avoid whoever's on duty.

It's Barrett on duty today. That's how he found us earlier.

I know. I heard him.

What do you mean you heard him.

I heard him talking to Grabham. In his classroom. I think they were talking about the accident.

They slid down from the tables and converged around Stephens.

The Babcock accident, said Browning.

Probably. They didn't say his name but it sounded like they were talking about him.

What did they say.

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It was all strange. They said his photo would be in the papers and the school couldn't let anybody find out but that people would find out and that the school had dealt with it before and Grabham said that it had been thirty years ago and something about a choirmaster and Barrett said that he wouldn't be surprised if there were more cases.

Thirty years, questioned Hobday. What is that about.

Yeah the choirmaster that killed himself, said Fayne.

They turned to look at him.

The choirmaster that killed himself, he repeated. Cullop was his name. He taught my father in the choir back when he went to school here. Strange man is what my father said about him. He told me about how he'd audition boys for the choir. During each music lesson he'd sing a tune for the whole class then he'd call certain boys to come and sit on his lap, the ones he thought would be good at singing, and tell them to sing the tune back while he accompanied them on the piano and after they sang for maybe a minute or two he'd give them a half crown and when everyone had sung he'd announce who had made the choir and to those who had not made it he'd give another half crown so that they wouldn't be too sad. My father said that those who got called up to sit on his lap and sing were said to have been Culloped. That's what they called it back then. But there was some sort of accident with him and he had to leave the school and some months later he jumped in front of the tube and killed himself.

Nobody said anything because they did not know what to say. They felt unwell, all except Fayne eagerly awaiting their response. Browning swore and shook his head. What the hell, he said. That's creepy. That he killed himself like that.

I know. I wouldn't have believed it if it weren't for my father showing me the newspaper he kept from when they announced it. They had his photo there and everything. They had to close down the whole station for several days after he did it.

Let's go ask MacAngus, said Hobday. If he knows about the accident with Babcock.

Yeah MacAngus will tell us, agreed Browning. Let's go ask him.

When they stepped out of the classroom they saw Barrett

standing at the end of the corridor. They began to run.

Don't, he spoke. Stay right where you are, boys.

They stopped and stood with their backs turned to him. He sashayed towards them, smiling and rolling his eyes. Did you honestly just try and run. Unbelievable, boys. Don't go anywhere. You're all getting misdemeanours. He held them by their blazer collars. Is there anybody else in that room.

No sir, they said.

And I just caught two of you before. Unbelievable.

He escorted them down to the foyer then unhandled them and watched them with his arms crossed. They went outside. The group of boys was still there, standing in the lee of the building. A tennis ball rolled towards their feet. Stephens kicked it away.

What happened, someone asked.

Nothing, he said, not even able to look at the rest. Barrett's a fucking wanker that's all.

Yeah, said Browning. I hate Barrett.

They remained there in the cold for the rest of the break. They spoke about other things. And when the younger students laughed and ran in circles around the school, they wished that they would trip and fall onto the concrete ground and cry.

Salt and Rum

JAVIER MELO

Purdue University, 2024

You are holding eleven broken hearts, bled into Times New Roman, still warm from the printer. You couldn't find a suitcase—or hell, even a folder—but you've become blasé to your own misfortune, and walk into the office nevertheless. You are greeted and presented to a handful of different people, who ogle at you with a distant mix of admiration and sobriety that you don't have time to understand. Before long, they seat you in a creaky office chair, in front of her, and abandon you.

“Your name, please.”

“Ernesto Baker.”

“The sad stories?”

You nod, and she opens a laptop with a garden of stickers, flags and pins. There are company logos, concert tickets, even a handicapped sign. She types loudly, with sharp, piercing strikes that annoy you, but the blue light glistening off her round, yellow-rimmed glasses capture your eye. You try to make out what she's looking at, but neither the reflection of her glasses, nor her own expression gives anything away. After a moment, her eyes snap back to you.

“You ought to know,” she says, “everyone loved your stories. You even made Miss Carla cry. Which I thought was impossible.”

She pauses to readjust her glasses, and you feel the ghost of her coming words tugging at your chest.

“But I have some issues with them. You have a lot of style, but not a lot of substance. Your writing is flowery and beautiful, but at the end of the day everyone dies and nothing gets better. Every. Single. Time.” Her voice, robotic and rehearsed, has no palpable reaction to the blushing of your cheeks, or the crimson on the tip of your ears. “I know that these stories probably come from a personal place for you. But you are allowing some emotions to overpower the narrative. These aren't stories.” She closes her laptop with a

sudden slam you see her briefly regret. “These are rants.”

And now you are in full view of her, and you feel yourself disintegrate upon her headlights. Was it anger, or sorrow, or shame that your heart felt then? Whichever the case, you slip into character too, the familiar part of a dignified loser.

“I understand. I’ll get out of your hair.”

“You don’t understand, I don’t think.” For the first time since you sat down, you hear the true tones of her voice.

“I’m willing to work alongside you to edit the stories. I think they hold a lot of potential, with the right amount of polish. I believe in you.”

“Are you serious?”

She explains the structure of your partnership and you shyly accept, afraid the moment will fly away from you if you move too fast. As you agree to her conditions, she grows slightly softer, and you could swear, before she left, that you saw her smile. But after she shakes your hand and says goodbye, she doesn’t stand up, she rolls away on a gray wheelchair with yellow-rimmed tires, and a daisy key-chain hanging from its arm.

...

It’s taking a lot from you to bar her from your mind. On the walk home, the streets scream and gnash at your ankles, but it does little to silence her fingers against the keys, like raindrops against a tin roof, playing on repeat between your ears. You didn’t let yourself look at her, think about it even; your mind was somewhere else. But she had broken through your defenses, she had demanded your attention. Like a lit candle in a hurricane, her words survive every time you squint your eyes, every time you slap your face.

“I believe in you.”

You hadn’t even asked for her name. You scramble to discover it amongst the jungle of letters and receipts within your pockets. You barely remember what she looks like. Her name, like a treasure chest beneath the sand. Her name, tire marks across the beach. Esmeralda.

...

S A L T A N D R U M

You get home, and you hate it again. The dishes form a delicate mountain of filth and the blinds are wide open, all of Boston invades your apartment. Sebastián is a defeated heap of blankets and hoodies, laying on the couch and basking in the sun. The Dominican flag on the wall is showered by stuttering shadows dancing in clouds of smoke, ascending from Sebastián's huddled figure like a chimney inside an igloo. He asks you for money. You tell him to get a job.

He tells you he's been talking with this girl again as you scrub the grease off the pots and pans. "The girl you cheated on?" You ask, but it's not really a question.

"She doesn't know." And despite that not really being an answer, the conversation dies as quickly as it had started, with the melody of scrubbing and smoking filling the afternoon air. ...

The first day you work with her, you find yourself undone. Despite your best efforts to the contrary, your eyes are magnetically drawn to her features, and you start impossibly describing her in your mind. Sebastián, your novels, her wheelchair, everything slowly melts away, and she blossoms. Her hair: a turbulent caramel waterfall.

She talks about your story, Sir Timothy the Brave, of a little boy who imagined he was a mighty warrior-prince. In your story, the little boy dies once he faces the mighty troll, who was really his father all along. It was all in his head. She asks about your family, and you tell her: about your mother from Santo Domingo, who sang poems by Balaguer. About your father from Carmel, whose brown belt would sometimes grow fiery red eyes. Her eyes: stones from the Moon.

She asks about your story, Their Love, of a woman losing her parents, and having to raise a monster made from their bones. In your story, the woman cuts herself every other night to keep the beast alive, until she has nothing left to give. She asks about your brother, and you tell her: about Sebastián, who knew as little Spanish as you did, and had less than half the prospects. About his nose, which you both share, like a crooked little nook. Her nose: the

first time a child laughs.

She's concerned about your story, *The Lifeguard*, of a man who learns how to hold his breath for as long as humanly possible. He said he wanted to save more people, but he really wanted to stay underwater forever, which he did in the end. She asks about you, but you don't really tell. You look away and smile. Her smile: the colors of Fall.

...

The morning visits you with the warmth and anticipation of the chapter following a cliffhanger. Every session in her studio thaws the icy sheet between the two of you, the professional pressure keeping who you really were at bay. Before long, you ask for her number under laughable pretenses, and she obliges with wary enthusiasm. You start texting her at random times throughout the day, when you see the faint outline of stories woven in the fabric of your everyday life. You ask her about her life, about her family. She tells you about her accident.

"I used to be, like, the best dancer ever." It's past midnight, and your head is turned towards the groaning fan. The phone burns your cheek.

"What did you use to dance?"

"Salsa was my favorite. Back home, the guys would literally queue up to dance with me like in the medieval times, it was crazy."

"What was your favorite song?"

"I don't remember." She lied. "I haven't listened to any of it since then."

You let the sound of her breathing lull you to sleep, and she doesn't seem to mind. ...

It takes until you are Esme and Ernie before you manage to ask her out. You take her to a Mexican restaurant, since neither of you are Mexican so it feels like neutral ground. Her Spanish is a lot better than yours, but she insists that you order. There are candles, hung inside see-through baskets and she tenderly glows in their fleeting visits. You talk about nonsense, but live again in every second of her laughter. After you gently push her down the humming street, adorned by rows of hanging light bulbs

S A L T A N D R U M

engaged in a fierce competition against the night sky, you drop to your knees and kiss her beneath the oaken threshold of her house. The yellow-rimmed tires softly bounce against your legs as she cups your chin in her hands. For a moment, she seems to breathe you in, running her fingers through your brown curls and staring into your eyes. Her headlights fog. You remember all she's seen. All she's read. All you've told her. But despite these glimpses inside your heart, she pulls you in close, pressing every corner of her body against you, and kisses you in Spanish.

...

The hearts you send each other in an endless barrage of texts change from yellow to red. You ask her to tell you when she gets home at night. She wants to know what you had for breakfast. You want to help her with her chores. She wants you to meet her friends. You want to see her all the time. She wants to see you all the time.

She wants you to change your stories. She wants the prince to defeat the dragon. She wants the woman to find a solution. She wants the lifeguard to go up for air. You turn venomous at the thought of happy endings.

"What does the reader take away from your story, if you overrun it with emotion?" "Emotion."

"But not closure."

"Which I lack."

"Which you aren't willing to share."

You want her to see herself through your eyes. You want her to understand that her chair doesn't strap her into a lower level of the world; that she can fly away because she has enough, and she wants it bad enough. You see her as a miracle to mankind. And though she has more realistic opinions, you push her into interviews, promotions, competitions. You watch her hunched over her desk, a corner of light in the darkness of the room. The familiar sound of raindrops hitting a tin roof. As you drift asleep, shirtless in her bed, you watch her pray.

...

You are home again, but you don't hate it this time. Sebastián comments on the pep on your step. He tries to

insult you, but you calm him down. You've been finding him a lot easier to deal with lately. He sits up on the couch; he looks like a nun draped under black blankets. He's not smoking.

"I'm going to take her back"

"You quit for her?"

"Yeah."

"That means that you have to tell her. You know that you will want to tell her." He looks at you, his eyes very softly reddened by the remains of his recently abandoned lifestyle.

"I know. I'll tell her."

He abandons your gaze and looks beyond the apartment wall, and something much farther away.

"But until then, I'll have her again. For a while. Until I can't take it anymore. Then I'll tell her. Then it'll be over. Another go."

"Like a ride, on a rollercoaster?"

He chuckles, a pitiful attempt to hide the birth of tears, and says:

"I had something more romantic in mind. But I guess you can't have it all."

...

You cry. You spend two hours crying. She tells you it'll be ok. She tells you that you are both going to try. But in the hollow space behind every sentence, you hear the finality of her words. Off to New York. A fantastic editor. She was leaving in a week. Professionally you two were done four months ago. You had yielded to her insistence on happy endings, and had found that your stories became a lot better, and nuanced. A best seller. Two dreams have come true, but as you wipe the snot off your nose with a napkin, you bitterly ponder their price.

Then you see her again, reading the same sentence over and over, the computer resting on her chest. Her eyes retracing their steps. A fantastic editor. You lay your head on her shoulder, and press her hair against your face.

...

S A L T A N D R U M

Her apartment complex has a pool. She hadn't swum since the accident. You want to swim with her before she goes. It's a night away.

You bring a speaker and a bottle of Dominican rum. You've already shared a whole bottle of wine. She's wearing a yellow swimsuit. You are wearing blue swimming trunks. You lock eyes and slowly drop to your knees. She drapes her arms around you, burying her face into your shoulders, and you lift her, gently, readjusting your arms until you can look at her again. Your noses touch as you lower her, step by step, into the pool. When the water reaches her hips, she squeals in delight.

You help her go under the water. You hold her close beneath the salty waves, the bubbles from her nose tickle your eyelashes. You emerge again, and press her shivering, giggling body against yours. You swim towards the speaker, and press the play button. It only takes her three seconds to recognize the song, and she starts crying, wiping tears and wet hair away from her face. As you move towards the middle of the pool, you start describing her again. Left.

Right.

Left.

You spin her under your arms, holding her steady by the hips. Her hair: a marble stream to paradise.

Right.

Left.

Right.

You lift her up and bring her down, rocking the salty waves. Her eyes: The endless reach of space.

Left.

Right.

Left.

She closes her eyes, and you can tell that in her mind, the guys from her hometown were fighting over her. Her nose: Spring in Hades.

Right.

Left.

Right.

You close your eyes too, and escape into the moments

S A L T A N D R U M

that await you, into the seconds haunted by her absence. And as she softly hums along to her favorite childhood song, you try to imagine how you will remember her. You try to imagine the shape she will take in your stories. Through your squinting eyes, the warm light of the pool casts the soft shadow of the angels and flowers that will embellish your pages.

As you draw circles in the pool, keeping perfect time, you open your eyes, and see her smile. Her smile: salt and rum.

Look

ANNA KALABUKHOVA

University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, 2024

At the moment that the sky blushed with the oncoming tide of dawn, Nara was already pushing the skiff into the water, the rotting wood groaning on the damp sand as the sandcrab shadows scurried out from under its weight. The night-cooled water crawled unpleasantly up her legs, reaching her waist as she led the skiff out through the shorebreak, each wave slapping away the lingering haze of sleep. She hopped in once she was out far enough, grabbing the oars and taking off across the glassy down waters as a star would dart across the sky. She watched the slanted stilt house grow smaller and smaller with each row, basking in the temporary distance she put between herself and the boxy room she shared with her sisters, herself and her father that would just be getting back from a sleepless night of fishing, a thin man with a thinner temper. Nara's back ached between her shoulder blades where her youngest sister had elbowed her during her restless sleep.

She stopped at the shallower end of the bay, the green, brown, and gold colors of the coral bleeding together beneath the hull of the boat, the clear water making the reef seem deceptively within arm's reach. She grabbed her circular dive mask and spat in it, pensively rubbing her saliva on the glass, defogging it. Despite half of her body already being soaked, she shivered at the prospect of having to slip back into the water. Her fingers felt numb and clumsy as she tied the bow line and pouch around her waist, sleep still sluggishly flowing through her veins.

She stepped up onto the narrow bow of the skiff and stood there a few breaths, gazing out at the rosied mirror of the dawn ocean, the sandbank curving along the bay like a crescent moon. Inhale, exhale. The ocean salt, the jungle sweetness – the island air saturated her lungs, gave her strength, awakened her. Between one breath and the next she leapt in, into the heavens that were below, instead of above. The mirror rippled as it swallowed her and then stilled, as if she were never there.

Max had never gotten over the discombobulation of climbing into a large metal bird and ending up in a completely different part of the world after many noisy, and at times bumpy, hours. The Fleming family wanted to go somewhere *exotic* this year. He had rolled the word around in his mouth like a marble on the unpleasant way over, still tasting it in the disorienting and blinding tropical sun as he set foot on the cracked tarmac, squinting against the glare of the metal stairs.

The beach bungalow they rented was too small, too stuffy – too many Flemings and not enough beds and windows that could open. Max was designated to the living room with his sister, left to fight for territory on the overstuffed, tropical-print couch cushions. The time-shift induced insomnia only made matters worse. He found himself on the floor, watching the sky slowly bleed from black to burgundy between the half-closed curtains, his sister's soft snores mixing with the caws of stirring seabirds drifting in through a cracked open window. He gave in to his sleeplessness and slipped outside, letting the chilled breath of the ocean blow away the haziness in his head, the rising sun burn away the tiredness clinging heavy to his eyelids.

He'd been watching the skiff come lugging through the incandescent morning waters for three days, its sole passenger bent over the task of rowing, her head gleaming like a drop of oil in the rising sun. The skiff would circulate throughout the bay as if by ritual, the childishly small wooden vessel swirling through the azure waters like a leaf caught in its eddies. Arbitrarily – at least to Max's perception – the skiff would come to a stop in various places throughout the bay, and the rower would rise from her seat with a dive mask dangling from her hand, the glass lens throwing sharp light refractions that reached the shore. She'd gracefully leap from the bow, her sleek honey-gold limbs extending out in the air in a perfect arc, the image lingering in Max's eyes for a few seconds even after she would slip below the water. A line from the boat would trail behind her, and he would see the skiff drift along by what looked like a phantom force from land. However he knew it was the girl just walking the depths below, pulling the skiff along her as a child would a balloon.

On the fourth morning of Max wandering the shores to avoid the musty and cramped quarters of the bungalow, he

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came to stand within the licking ocean's range, a cheap dive mask found shoved in the bottom of a closet dangling from his hand. His eyes were raised to the skiff that was currently making its closest orbit to the shore. He watched as she again stood on the bow, something so still and chilling about her silhouette that made him think of the Greek gods he'd read about in school.

She dove in, slicing through the calm surface cleanly as a knife, the bottoms of her feet flashing as the tail of a fish would before disappearing into the depths. He could only think to follow her, wading in until he was waist-deep, from there slipping head-first into another realm.

Nara would always go slow, go shallow, shake off the lingering cobwebs of sleep and equalize properly. She once blew out her ears from pushing too deep too fast – they still rang some mornings, ached some nights. Her body was the most expensive thing she owned; without it there would be half a plate less of food at dinner. Once she could stay under and feel as comfortable as she did above – without, of course, the building fire in her lungs – she'd begin her scavenging.

As her sister busied herself picking specific flowers for the garlands she'd sell to tourists, Nara would find shells among the ocean floor, tucked into nooks among the coral and slipped between the shifting fingers of sand. One would assume she would hunt for the prettiest ones – the startling pink and purple conch shells, the finely patterned horn shells, the sleek cowries, the textured mulberry drupes. Yet she would often leave them be, running her fingertips along their garish surfaces, admiring them for a few moments as a gift to herself before tucking them back away into the reef and sands. Instead she'd gather the duller ones, the ones that were slowly draining of their evidence for life inside. For she knew that for the foreigners, it didn't matter – what was mediocre to her was extraordinary for them, and what they needed was only an ephemeral keepsake of their exotic travels, forgotten in a drawer or on their decorative bathroom shelves the moment they arrived back in their landlocked homes, faded as the shells that she provided for the tourist trap stores.

Something glistened among the folds of a coral head, the

morning sun rays digging their fingers into the shadows and holes. The speckled surface of a cowrie materialized, flowing in and out of the color of the reef. Nara slipped her fingers into the crevice and gently extracted the shell, finding the smoothness among the roughness. A nearby eel wound its head out from under a rock to soundlessly hiss at her, its blank eyes judgmental. *I am not the one you should be hissing at*, she wanted to say. She rolled the shell around in her fingers, inspecting it – it blushed with the vivid violet of a nourished, inhabited cowrie, the soft gray mass of the snail pulsing through the lips of the shell.

A series of violent splashes disturbed the muffled quiet of the deep blue. Nara looked around, the shell still clutched in her hand – a school of fish darted past her, and she traced the direction they were fleeing from to a figure up on the surface, flailing in the water. She dropped the shell and stretched herself across the reef, gazing up.

She could make out straw-blond hair and pale skin, banana-patterned swim trunks. A boy, about her youngest sister's age, based on size – the same lanky limbs to a disproportionately small body. He seemed to be struggling, though. His hands clawed at something on his pale torso, his feet kicked spasmodically beneath him. Nara let go from the reef to float up, and as she came closer to the boy, she could see the slimy blue tendrils of a man o'war wrapped around his body.

The boy seemed to finally see her. His foggy dive mask swung towards her as air escaped from his childish round cheeks, squished down by the bottom mask. Nara swam up to the surface beside him, his head popping up the second that she came up. He sputtered a series of waterlogged words in a language she didn't know, but she wagered it had something to do with the unpleasantly stinging organism currently wrapped around his torso. She grabbed one of his hands, helping his body stay buoyant beside hers. She could not think of a single word to explain what was happening or to comfort him, so she did what her mother used to do to calm her down, what the island always whispered in her ear.

"Shhhhh," she said to the boy, "shhhhh." He seemed to understand – stopping his flailing and letting his limbs melt to

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the surface, allowing himself to be held by the salt.

Nara drew in some air and dipped her head below the water. She gently took the man o'war by its translucent head and began to peel the jellyfish from the boy's body, the tentacles standing out like grotesque veins against his ghostly skin, leaving streaks of angry welts wherever she pried them off. She floated him over to the skiff, climbing in deftly herself before hauling him over the side. The extra weight depressed the boat into the water, making it much wobblier than before. Nara balanced the boat without thought – feeling the shift of waves and water in her bones, through the soles of her feet against the curved bottom. The boy had trouble even sitting up, his uncoordinated movements rocking the boat from side to side. After a few more violent rocks he sunk onto the bottom, curling his knees and arms in as if to make himself a stone.

He pried his mask off, the imprint of it on his face matching the bright red flush of his cheeks. His eyes were still round with shock, the blue in them bright as the sky, flooded with adrenaline. His rosy lips parted as he continued to gasp for breath, as if he might go under the water again at any moment. His blonde hair seemed so bright under the unforgiving sun that Nara almost had to squint to look at him – she'd never seen hair like that up close, only the stray sun-drenched streaks that ran through her and her father's hair.

“Okay?” She said, the word welling up from some far recess in her mind. She heard it used at the market by vendors sometimes, when they showed the foreigners something – the amount of shrimp they put into a bag, the specific palm frond that they were trying to sell. It was the closest she could get to asking if he was fine.

The boy looked up from where his hands were ghosting over his chest and released a barrage of words, none that Nara could understand. She shook her head and took the oars, beginning to paddle to shore as the boy blabbered on. At least he wasn't crying, or writhing in pain from the sting. She took his talkative state as a sign of good health.

She wasn't exactly sure where he had swum out from, but assumed it would be the nearest point from the shore. When they approached the shallower, sandy waters by the beach, the

boy began to gesture wildly – pointing back out to the ocean, miming her rowing, and then standing up and pretending like he was going to dive back into the water. She briefly stopped rowing and gave him a blank stare, to which he gestured between himself and her and pretended to dive and swim.

“No,” she said, shaking her head and resuming her rowing. The one word her mother had taught her – *for the foreign boys*, she’d said. Didn’t matter what they wanted – it was all the same in one form or another. It was the single most powerful word in their odd language, yet it felt frail with unfamiliarity in her mouth.

The boy pouted, said more words. His hair had dried slightly, standing up at odd angles from the salt – it gave him the disheveled appearance of the numerous baby chicks that ran amok on the island, at which Nara suppressed an amused smile.

The soft sand bottom whispered against the hull of the skiff as they reached the shore. Nara pointed at him and then the beach, miming walking with her fingers. Much to her annoyance, he didn’t move – rather he pointed to himself and repeatedly echoed a word. It took her a moment to understand he was saying his name. Max.

She nodded and pointed out of the boat again. “Go.”

That night Max could not sleep because of the lines of fire stitched across his stomach and chest, his lower back. It turned from a dull burn throughout the day into the most torturous itch he’d ever known – he squirmed in the shirt he refused to take off all day in fear of his mother’s reprimands, the sweat and scratchy cotton only making it worse. But even without the alien-jellyfish inflicted wound he would not be able to shut his eyes. His whole mind was electrified with the terrifyingly beautiful realm below the surface of the ocean – he’d briefly felt like a god, soaring over the cathedrals of reef below, watching the numerous candy-colored fish dart and levitate around, their lives so separated from his own. Somehow he’d stumbled upon the greatest yet most blatantly obvious secret of the world, to think how so few knew of it despite it engulfing so much of the land, cloaking so much of the world in its mystifying blue.

Yet what most haunted him was the girl. How she lurked

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in the hazy depths, weightless, moving so easily across the reef and through the blue, as if she were of the ocean, flowing as the water. Before Max had floated into the jellyfish – and perhaps, the reason why – his attention was caught on the shell she seemed to conjure out of the reef, the beautiful round form appearing in her fingers as if by magic, big as her palm and shimmering like a gem. Something within it seemed to move, to pulse, to breathe, in some sense. Even from the surface he could feel an ember of life radiate from it, seeming so incongruous with the bare, skeletal echoes of similar shells he'd seen lining the gift shops. Before he'd hopped out of the skiff he'd glimpsed a few small pails nestled by the stern, holding an amalgamation of various shells and other odd finds, yet nothing seemed to catch his breath like the one she'd swept from the ocean floor.

His feet carried him naturally back to the water the next morning, his whole body teetering on the edge of somnambulism. The ocean seemed to magnetize him – haunting his mind, calling him out of his sleep. The whisper of the waves on the shore sung to him, the endlessly shifting blue hypnotized him, teasing him with all its hidden wonders. And the salt, he could not escape it – always on his tongue, in the air, crusted on his feet and coated on the windows.

The skiff swept along the line of the bay and he cleaved his way through the ocean to meet it – through the pounding waves and stubborn current, across the stretch of open water that made his stomach twist. The water was so clear that he spotted the girl from afar, a shadow gliding along the reef, her body cloaked in the shades of the ocean.

She must've seen him, sensed him – for when he got close enough to see the thin shadow of the skiff darkening the ocean floor below, she was already sitting inside of it.

He swam up to the boat's side, popping his face out of the water to meet hers gazing down. Her dark eyes were narrowed at him, beads of water from her still-wet braid dripping right onto his nose and cheeks. He hadn't realized how much older she was than him until this point – her age seemed to press down upon him, lined in the tight set of her mouth and lurking in the deep brown of her eyes.

“Go,” she said. The word seemed to sound like it was lodged in her throat, like all the other two-letter words she had uttered to Max. Her voice sounded unsure, but the intention behind it was anything but.

He swam closer to the skiff and put his hands on the rail. She didn’t move, but her brows furrowed as if she’d gone deep into thought. He could see the dried salt clinging to them, crystallizing in her eyelashes, collecting in the weathered corners of her eyes. She put her hands over his, and he knew exactly what she was going to do.

“Please.”

Max didn’t know if she understood the word, if she’d even acknowledge it. He looked up at her and she looked down at him, her hands layered over his – he felt like he was begging to be let into the heavens, and she was the angel judging his soul. The word seemed to echo over the ocean, carried on the waves to faraway shores.

In a quick movement she flicked her hands under his and grabbed the underside of his wrists, his hands naturally settling upon the same part of her forearm. She hauled him onto the boat, the narrow vessel rocking as he unceremoniously slid onto its floor – but she was quick to balance it, her graceful movements reminding him of a cat.

Once the rocking stopped she sat down on the narrow bench bisecting the width of the boat, pointing at a similar bench closer to the aft end, by the pails, before she grabbed the oars. Max took it to mean she wanted him to sit there – he’d been too distressed the day before to realize he could’ve been perched there instead of curled over the briny bottom, sulking over his wounds.

For a moment he was terrified that she’d be bringing him back to shore again, but then much to his delight she pointed the bow of the skiff out into the ocean. She rowed silently, her face tilted to the side towards some invisible point in the ocean. He watched as the salt-stiff strands of her hair seemed to play over her face, disturbed by the slight ocean breeze, as the muscles just below her collarbones rippled with each stroke of the oars, as stray beads of saltwater glistened on her shoulders and sparkled along her chest. Even though she was young – albeit clearly a bit older than him – there was some-

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thing immortal within her appearance, the way she seemed to absorb into nature and it into her. She seemed as timeless and unshiftable as the ocean. Everyone around would come and go, get ravished by age – while she will forever be out rowing in her skiff, circling the bay each morning as surely as the sun arcs over the sky.

She looked over at him, her eyes seeming to darken at his attention. Max felt his cheeks flush with heat to rival the sun, pretending to be busy himself by looking into the pails behind him.

Something suddenly caught his eye – an orange-and-white filigreed shell nestled among other shells in the bucket, its surface so smooth it seemed as if it were made of porcelain. He reached in to grab it, assuming it was fine – for if she handled these shells with her bare fingers, why couldn't he?

Its surface was cool and slick in his fingers, the weight comforting, the short point of the shell satisfying against his palm. He turned it this way and that under the sunlight, watching the colors glisten and deepen, the orange turning fiery and the white a perfect ivory. He then flipped it over to its long, thin opening – inside he noticed a soft brown mass, appearing slimy as the light hit it. He could feel the girl's eyes back on him as he inspected the shell.

He watched curiously as the fleshy thing in the opening began to slowly unfurl, tentatively seeping out of the crevice as if it were growing out of it. He was about to stick his finger inside the shell when he heard the oars clang down, followed by the girl's hand clamping over his wrist. Max dropped the shell in surprise at her sudden movement. It hit the bottom of the skiff with an unpleasant clang and rolled out of sight beneath the bench.

"No," she said, her eyes suddenly wide, staring at his now-empty hand. Max looked back at her confused, the memory of the shell still caught on his fingers. She shook her head and bent down to grab the shell. The brown creature inside of it seemed to have retreated back in, but a long, thin tendril of it seemed to still stick out of the curl on the bottom. She held the shell up and pointed at the odd part on the outside, shaking her head again. She then took Max's arm and pinched it, just to

the point where it flared with the slightest pain, her hand then traveling up to settle loosely on his neck, as if to choke him.

The ocean was terribly beautiful, but the life within it was beautifully terrible. He swallowed and nodded, and she dropped her hand.

To think a shell no longer than his thumb could stop his heart, eradicate him from this earth. He looked away and stuffed his hands under his legs – the pails behind him suddenly feeling forbidding, sitting there like loaded guns. The girl continued to row in silence, and he found himself watching the seabirds whirl above.

After the boy called Max nearly ended his own life on her watch by way of cone snail sting, Nara decided that perhaps she did make a deadly mistake in letting him come along with her. He had so carelessly stuck his hand in the bucket and pulled out the first thing that struck his fancy, and then proceeded to nearly pry his fingers into the most lethal part of the creature – acting like he was in a tourist store, where all the snails were long boiled away, their shells no more dangerous than a piece of chalk. The more she brewed on her frustration though, the sadder she realized it all was – how would a landlocked boy know of the lethal venom the cone snails carried, when he probably didn't even know that all these shells held life? She could not fault him for his curiosity, not when she tried to shove her fingers into everything as a child before her parents taught her better.

Nara stopped rowing once they reached another stretch of reef, farther out in the bay – she could find the spot by lining up with the copse of palm trees on land. Max seemed to have drifted off into his own thoughts during the monotonous travel across the bay, his eyes squinting at no particular point on the horizon. He jerked up once she dropped the oars, his eyes igniting with excitement, their unusual light blue color making his expression seem brighter.

Nara silently got ready for the dive – there wasn't much to be said given they didn't speak the same language, and even then there was no need for explanation. If the ocean is all around, the only place to go is under. When she was younger, she'd spend all day on her father's boat without a word ex-

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changed, just comfortable industrious silence between them as they'd sort through fish and nets. The world around them was loud enough for the both of them – birds cawing above and fish thumping below and water whispering all around.

She looped the bow line around her waist, attached the small netted pouch she put her finds in just below at her hip. She slipped a small dive knife right beside it as well, which received a quizzical look from Max. She nodded at him to say she was ready, and with that she stepped up onto the bow and off the boat.

It was too deep for him to dive down, so she brought the world to him. Magnificent tiger cowries as big as her palm, massive conch shells kissed with pink that could only be held within two hands. A vacated marble cone shell now inhabited by a spindly hermit crab, a sea urchin seeming to bristle at being disturbed, its spines clanking together. And finally a deep-purple spiny starfish, which seemed to thrill him the most – every fiber of its body seemed to ripple with life, so unlike the colorless, bone-dry whispers of the creatures that they sold as trinkets.

Nara gently flipped the lanky starfish over, to show Max its underside, where all of its thin spines seemed to flow and pulse together along the lines of its legs, all intersecting at the single point of its mouth. Behind his mask his eyes were moon-wide in childish wonder, his light hair fanning out around his head at the surface like a caricature of the sun. The awed smile brought even more brightness to his face, despite the ocean sucking away the warmth of his rosy lips, beginning to bleed into gray. Nara reached out and grabbed his hand, placing the underside of the starfish on his palm – and she watched his expression curiously to see the moment he felt suction from its mouth and legs, his eyes lighting up in terrified wonder, his lips parting.

And he looked at her, his mouth opening and closing, bubbles forming around words stolen into the ocean. She knew what he was saying, what he was thinking – the thought so inherent it transcended all language. *It's alive, it's alive, it's all alive.*

Mass cemeteries inside gift stores, soulless shells hanging

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around necks and wrists, set collecting dust on shelves, forgotten in drawers. Fallen stars, fallen starfish – burnt, brittle, dry, turning into dust between fingers. The ocean roared with life, and humans silenced it, closing their ears and shutting their eyes. But there was Nara, tearing their hands away, shouting *look, look, look, just open your eyes and look.*

When she rowed them back to the shore, she pointed to herself and said, “Nara.”

Max felt electrified, nearly paralyzed in his giddiness as he had stumbled onto the shore, everything vivid and surreal as in a dream, his head now on land but his mind still in the ocean. He could see the numerous sandcrabs dancing between his feet, the seabirds wheeling above, a beached man o’war roasting in the sun. He looked back at the piercingly blue ocean, wanting to shout to the whole wide world, *there’s so much inside that blue, look, look, look.*

“Shhhhh,” the ocean whispered. “Shhhhh.”

THE FOUNDATIONALIST

The Moon and Its Craters

ANJALI KLINDER
University of Edinburgh, 2025

This story contains sensitive material relating to suicide.

Ophelia Banks was not immune to the poetic irony of her own death.

Especially not as she lay in the cold grip of the shallow pond, the blood from her wrists mixing with the icy northern water. There was not much to think about as one lay dying, she realized. Nothing to think about, except for that idiotic, useless phrase of recognition: *I am dying*. Again and again, that chorus in her head, and all she had to look at was the light between the leaves, the sky between the trees, the clouds and the shadows they claimed. Her hair - like an onyx sheet of carefully carved obsidian, a sheen of oil atop an ocean wave, the blue-purple black of a raven wing - drifting out around her pale, deathly face like a shroud, like a veil turned over from vows to funeral oaths. Her eyelashes fluttered against the brightness of the day, her fingers floating just barely on the surface of the water, twitching in the final poignant seconds of life. Her eyebrows unknitting themselves from the proud bow of her skull, her lips twisting in a mournful grimace for what she had and what she lost, and the chorus ringing through her head one last time: *I am dying*, gracelessly interrupted by the act itself.

And she was 12 again, sipping iced tea in the shade of her grandma's favorite apple tree, hidden within the orchard, nestled up against the trunk with a grey blanket and a worn through book: *Alice Through the Looking Glass*.

"You know what would be more impressive?"

Ophelia glanced up from the open pages of the book, flitting affectionately in the wind against her thumb where it lay splayed against the crease of the spine. "Than what?" she heard

herself say, her voice younger, innocent, reedy, bubbly. The words bouncing off of her tongue like young soldiers going to war, like hunting dogs for a fox.

Her grandma turned her weathered face down to look at Ophelia, and for a brief moment she was overcome with awe at the absolute artwork of the way the light caught the hard edges of her grandma's face - the way the deep grooves within her cheeks, the permanent lines on her forehead, the happy wrinkles in the corners of her eyes, were all cast into stark, immortal relief by the afternoon sun. "Than naming six impossible things," her grandma said in a mixed accent, her lips carrying the posh consonants of London and the honey vowels of Virginia.

Ophelia glanced down at the book in front of her, furrowing her brows as she pieced together where she was. This was a few weeks before her grandma died, she realized, running two fingers absentmindedly down the sketch on the page in front of her - Alice facing off against the Queen. "What's more impressive?" she mumbled, remembering her lines even as her younger self uttered them.

Her grandma leaned forward in the old wicker chair she'd dragged to the orchard from the porch. She had a tendency to do that - to lead Ophelia on to some profound answer she held within her battered heart, and when she was finally releasing it, to lean forward like she was sharing a divinely-protected secret or to lean back against the old wood of her chair until it creaked, and lift her chin up so she was gazing down her nose as she uttered the answer. Ophelia much preferred the former. She liked to feel like she was a member of her grandma's secret forum, a worthy advisor who had earned the right to know this thing, not an outsider - a student who had merely begged long enough.

"Naming six *possible* things," her grandma said, and winked.

A playground at midnight, the full moon reflected on the white tips of her converse boots. The blacktop beneath her crumbling with age, an insect silently crawling beside the toe of her shoe. She stood still, staring down, and it felt as though she were stuck here. Not an unwelcome trap, but a lingering. She felt subdued. She could see the individual pebbles of the

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concrete below her, the smoothness of the white paint the school had just paid for - the line spreading out beneath her feet to form a clean circle around the tetherball pole.

Staring, staring, staring at the insect as it crawled around its world, as its legs clambered over the insurmountable rubble of each minuscule pebble. Ophelia knelt down, rocking forward so her toes were the only thing touching the ground, so she sat on the harsh rubber of her heels, her knees creaking with unease as she bent. She felt inexplicably connected to the world and simultaneously isolated. She felt the coldness of detachment like a hand around her throat, felt it like an ache in the back of her head, growing and growing until it pushed against the back of her eyes.

She was alone, she remembered. This was in middle school- or was it high school? She blinked her eyes against the emptiness, but it never receded, never even faded.

The moon. The insect. The blacktop. The shiny white toes of her converse. The hand against her neck, that tight feeling in her throat. Her arms were shrouded in her favorite sweater, a soft worn cotton tinged with the faint smell of smoke from the fireplace, hay in the barn, the soft comfort of home soil. She'd lost the sweater years later at university - somewhere in a New York subway station.

Ophelia rocked back on her toes, let herself fall back, so she was sitting on the blacktop now, knees curled up to her chest, nose tucked between her knees. She wanted to cry, but she couldn't. It was not a sadness so much as a lack of feeling, and she figured - or she remembered figuring - that that was a gift. To feel nothing was better than feeling pain.

(Vaguely, she realized these thoughts were as much memory as the world around her. *To feel nothing was better than feeling pain.* She felt this realization like a mild itch at the base of her skull, like something just barely visible under foggy water. *These are not your thoughts.* No. *They were* her thoughts. It felt akin to dragging herself from a muggy dream. *These are not your thoughts. These are not your thoughts now.* Briefly, she felt as if she were drowning in a northern pond, blood flowing from a deep cut along her wrist.)

She watched the insect scuttle across the concrete in front

of her toes. Its little black body shone for a moment, a flash of reflected starlight. She closed her eyes, felt her eyelids squeeze shut, the fine hair of her eyelashes brush against the top of her cheeks.

She wanted to eat herself alive. She wanted the world to swallow her.

“Well, I think it’s depressing,” a boy was saying across the table from her. For a brief moment, Ophelia panicked at finding herself suddenly cocooned within a dark room, people scattered around the table in a wide circle, their attention focused completely on the boy talking. *His* attention, she realized with a start, was narrowed solely to her. *Answering her*, she realized. “And it’s impractical,” he continued.

“Why is that?” an older woman asked from Ophelia’s left.

“Well, the idea that everything we have ever done and everything we will ever do is not up to us. That, given omnipotence, our entire lives - our entire universe - could be predictable to the exact detail. I think that’s depressing, the thought that we don’t have true autonomy over our own choices.” He shrugged with his last statement, and in that movement, Ophelia felt a sudden and irrevocable pang of familiarity.

Lark.

His name was Lark. This was the first time they had really had a conversation, if one could call it that - a hearty debate in an afternoon philosophy class, the late winter sun streaming in silently through the wall of windows to Ophelia’s right.

Lark Banks.

She remembered making fun of his name to her friends, rolling her eyes when he walked into a room, debating him on every topic, even if she secretly agreed with him. Listening to him just now, she had the most uncomfortable feeling of time collapsing in on itself, of the present and the past and the future twisting together, morphing and merging - a wormhole, a supernova, a black hole, a galaxy colliding with another. She had the distinct tangible feeling of warm blankets underhand, of a summer sun and pigeons in the city, of a hand tangled with hers almost haphazardly, accidentally. Glow-in-the-dark stars, blue tiles and old books.

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Looking at him, tendrils of information snaked themselves involuntarily into her mind - the color of his eyes up close, the shape of his lips, his favorite book, his mother's name. The way he loved her like he had never known how to breathe until she was his air.

"Is it depressing that we're so predictable?" Ophelia murmured aloud. The students all swiveled their heads towards her. She shifted in her seat, uncomfortably, and noticed with a pang of irritation that a slow smirk was spreading across Lark's lips. "I mean, are you sure you're not just feeling depressed about the inevitable progression of time? The idea of the future doesn't really scare us until we imagine it to be something with a script - like what the past is to us now."

"What, so you believe this?" Lark scoffed.

"Determinism? Why not?"

"I think at a certain point, things *are* up to us. I think everyone has a certain amount of free will," Lark said.

"And I think we don't," Ophelia countered. Lark crossed his arms in front of his chest, leaning back slightly. The silence lapsed between them like something physical, something she could reach out and manipulate.

"That's all well and good," the older woman started saying. "But opinion is not a good argument to rely on in a paper. How are you going to prove your position?"

A girl next to Lark opened her mouth to start talking.

She was in a tent, apparently. A big pink one - the kind with the sides so thin you could see the outlines of the trees beyond. She was nestled between two girls in a circle of people in the middle of the tent, sitting with her knees hugged to her chest. Echoes of laughter and the smell of spilled wine permeated the air, cocooning Ophelia in the warmth of known companionship.

The memories were beginning to feel less like memories, and more like instances. The past becoming the present, the present remaining the present for as long as she was here. This was now, and now was all that mattered. (Faintly, she felt the embrace of cold, wild water. Briefly, she felt the tattered edges of a cut along her wrist.)

“Can you believe we’re graduating next month?” the girl to her right whispered in her ear, her breath tickling Ophelia’s earlobes with a warm, drunken intimacy as the rest of the circle talked excitedly amongst themselves. A game was being played, cards laying flat in a pile in the middle of the circle, a flask of something being passed around and shared, a bottle of liquor perched half-empty beside Ophelia.

“Almost done,” Ophelia muttered, and her arm unwrapped itself from her knees to grasp the bottle by its neck. She pulled it to her lips and took a quick drink.

She was younger now, still in high school. *Almost done*. But there was a longing somewhere, a deep wound that had been opened over time. There was a part of her that felt abandoned by the relentlessness of time, the way it dragged her forward when all she wanted was to stagnate.

She picked up a card from the pile.

“I’ll miss you in California,” the same girl was saying. Her fingers tangled with Ophelia’s untied shoelaces absentmindedly, intimately.

“I’ll miss you in New York,” Ophelia said, leaning her head on the girl’s shoulder. *Cora*, she remembered, the girl’s name ringing like a distant bell in her head. *Cora, Cora, Cora*. Spoken aloud in the sheets of the boarding school room they shared. *Cora* - like a chant, like a prayer, like a secret.

“I think loving women is different from loving men.”

“How so?”

“Loving you feels like something secret.”

(She continued before Ophelia could interrupt with a sarcastic comment about how they *were* a secret.)

“If I were to paint it, it would be a sunset. It would be a dove on the eaves in the gray light of morning. Loving you is like loving the moon for the craters, loving the flowers for the petals, the cobblestones in the walls, the cracks in the pavement. It’s like loving every star instead of the whole night sky.”

“You’re wasted as a painter.”

“Words are easy when they’re attached to emotion. They’re kind of like colors, in that way.”

“What’s it like loving a man?”

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“Loving a man is like loving an art gallery, I think. It’s like the feeling we got when we jumped into that river last winter - you know, the one behind the dining hall.”

“Cold and uncomfortable?”

“Like losing your breath and forgetting how to swim.”

“Shocking, then. Panic-inducing.”

“Thrilling.”

“Do you think, maybe, it’s not so much loving a man and loving a woman as much as it is loving *me* and loving *him*?”

“Maybe. Maybe every time we fall in love, it’s something different. Do you think that?”

“I think, no matter where you go, I will always be in love with you. No matter what happens, even if you change, the love I feel for you now will be something I always have, will always know how to feel. I think, maybe, that’s why loving someone new *feels* like something new. It’s a different type of love but it’s falling all the same.”

[...]

“You should be a poet.”

“We would be unbearable together.”

Ophelia’s kitchen was as beautiful as the day she and Lark had renovated it, autumn sun splashed across the pale blue tiles behind the stove, the white faux marble flooring, and the clean black countertops. She stood at the sink, her stomach pressing into the corner edge of the counter, hands braced against the sloping ends of the basin. She stood, head level, hair unbound and falling - knotted and irreparably matted - down her back. She gazed out the window above the sink, the one with a view of the Scottish moor.

The sink was running softly, water splashing into a week’s collection of dirty dishes with painful indifference. Wind buffeted the walls of the house, angry and persistent and coaxing.

Come out come out come out.

Unmoving, she remained at the edge of the sink like a statue cursed into unfeeling permanence. The front of her pale dress grew wet from the splash of the water, and still Ophelia did not move. A bird flew by out in the distance, its fragile silhouette carried carefully by the violent wind.

Come out come out come out.

She heaved a sigh, her fingers flexing and unflexing on the white porcelain surface of the edge of the sink. Her shoulders curved in, her back sloped out and she let her head hang down, her black hair falling down the sides of her face like a waterfall.

Come out come out come out.

It's not like she hadn't thought through things before this moment. It's not like it was a spontaneous decision, reaching out and slipping her long fingers around the handle of the knife. She was not, strictly speaking, an impulsive person, and she was not being impulsive now. Her movements were thoughtful, graceful. She was a ballet dancer as she dragged herself away from the sink and towards the front door. She was an art piece, a winding river, a breeze.

And she left the empty house on purpose. The empty house full of skeletons, of memories, of death and decay, emotional mold upon every surface. It was the empty space beside her, the empty space in front of her, and as she moved through the moor, her bare toes digging into the rich soil, it was the empty space all around her. An emptiness she had dealt with her whole life, an emptiness she had filled with warm intimacy from Lark, from Cora, from her grandma, stolen kisses in clubs and bear hugs from acquaintances, compliments from strangers on the city streets and snapshots of beautiful moments. Craters, petals, cobblestones, cracks. Loving every star. And now here she was, empty. Hands full of nothing but the cold northern air and a knife. And it nearly brought her to her knees, this life. This love, this yearning for something always out of reach, the hand around her throat always and forever.

Time, once again, had abandoned her. Life had run its course, faster than her own mortal feet could carry her. And she was, unremarkably and unsurprisingly, alone.

The wind stung her exposed skin as she waded through the long grass, the stalks whipping against her calves, the skirt of her dress dancing in the air around her legs. Dying, she realized, or *choosing* to die, she amended, was not as final or dramatic of an event as she always thought it would be. Choosing to die was like choosing to write a sentence, choosing to tie your shoe, choosing a blue shirt over a black one. It felt,

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strangely, as though her life was not really ending - that it would continue, that her death was only one picture in a scrapbook of images. It was strange, the lack of finality she felt as she neared the small pond, as she knelt into the soil, as she dipped her fingers into the cold water and swirled them around absently.

Come in come in come in.

Let go.

There was something distinctly religious in the way she went down. Something uniquely divined, unintentionally and infuriatingly ethereal, in the way she slipped into the pond and let go.

And across the moor, the skeleton house lay bare, door flung open and forgotten, water flowing steadily from the tap into a mound of dirty dishes - consistent, immortal, indifferent.

The smell of bleach and hair dye in a small university bathroom, her fingers knuckle deep in a girl's hair - her roommate. Music blaring from a cracked iPhone on the counter, and a girl sipping whiskey from the bottle beside it, her legs kicking to the rhythm of the music.

A monarch butterfly landing on Ophelia's outstretched finger, wings fluttering - open, close, open. The small gasp that Cora made, sitting beside her in the field. The butterfly lifting off from her hand, and her skin being stained forever with the memory of its ticklish little legs.

Trees flying past the window as Ophelia's dad stared straight ahead in the driver's seat, passive, calloused. She turned her head and watched the muscle in his jaw tick. The car was heavy with silence, heavy with solitude, heavy with the weight of the bags in the trunk.

They don't want me.

Her dad kept driving, staring straight ahead.

A funeral, briefly, a swell of black and navy blues. The lilies atop her sister's casket. And maybe she was too young to really know what she was feeling, but she was old enough to know some things. She was old enough to recognize the difference

between 'before' and 'after'. She was old enough to feel an emptiness, a sudden vacancy where before, there was a girl sharing her eyes, her brows, her hair, her family, her memories.

She stood next to her mother in the shade of a tree as they lowered the dark brown coffin. She knew not to touch her mother's dress, not to cling to her father's coat. There was, after that first cruel rejection of affection, that first betrayal from the universe, an irreparable chasm between her and anyone else she dared to try to love.

The first time she saw snow, running down to the front yard and throwing herself naively into a pile of fresh fallen, untouched powder. The feeling of infinity spreading out, surrounding her, drowning her happily.

That week after finals, when she trudged to the park beside her dorm, perched herself on a bench and fed the pigeons til the sun went down.

A sunset over water - orange, red, purple and pink.

A boy laughing across from her as she sipped coffee. The sun hit his hair and lit it like a wildfire.

Cora's lips in the dark.

"Do you remember the first time we met?"

"In class? You were shitting on Determinism."

"No, before that."

"Before that?"

"It was the first week of the semester, and we were discussing Nietzsche. And Warren brought up eternal return, and your eyes lit up like crazy. You wouldn't shut up about all the theories you had about that."

"I guess I used to really like that metaphysical existential shit."

"Yeah, well, that was when I knew I was screwed. There was no way I could live without knowing you."

[...]

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Loving you feels like a secret.

[...]

“Do you still want it to be real?”

“Eternal return?”

“Yeah, I mean... would you want to live your life again and again, knowing nothing would be different? Is the pain worth the pleasure?”

[...]

“I don’t think that’s what makes life worth living.”

“What?”

“Pain versus pleasure. I don’t think it’s something you can simplify into sheer data.”

[...]

“Would you do it all again, though? Constantly?”

“Unendingly?”

“Over and over.”

[...]

Craters, petals, cobblestones, cracks.

[...]

Ophelia tilts her head back, letting her skull thump gently against the wall of Lark’s new apartment. She gazes up at the glow-in-the-dark stars on his ceiling. And she smiles as she answers.

Transpose

ASHLEY WANG

Rice University, 2025

“Look, it’s Haibao!” The girl grabs an oversized plush keychain of a figure that looks like a glob of toothpaste with eyes. It’s 150 yuan, meaning about 12 dollars too much. Her mother considers buying it anyway. They’re here to enjoy themselves, after all. The U.S. is for work, work, work. Shanghai is for spending money, seeing family, and eating to the heart’s content.

Haibao is an easy-to-love mascot for the Shanghai World Expo. He’s a clean Listerine blue and resembles paint vaguely poured into the shape of a human. Whitney (lovingly named after her mother’s favorite pop star in the 80s, of course) adores Haibao, and she runs her finger along the line of his stitched smile, looking towards her mother with pleading eyes. By then, her mother’s already decided to buy the plush for her; she’s too young to learn self-denial anyway.

They leave the gift shop, and Whitney’s mother takes a photo of her with her new Haibao in front of the Swiss Pavilion. From a distance, its red LED lights, circles embedded in tall sheets of wire, resemble goji berries.

Whitney smiles at her mother’s camera with all her teeth showing. As she stands there, unmoving, her mind drifts. She starts wondering what she’ll do once they’re back in the hotel, a haven of air conditioning. She should start journaling this summer before her mom brings it up yet again, scolding her about not writing consistently and needing to “seize your dreams before they float away” — all said with a sense of unrestrained urgency, as though Whitney hadn’t just begun middle school.

In her head, Whitney counts to five — more than enough seconds have passed for photos — and wordlessly

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starts dashing off to the next exhibition. Behind her, the crowds condense and separate in multiple directions like a sea of confused fish.

Shanghai, 7/18

Mom told me I should write more. She said hard work will make me very rich and famous, which I don't believe. I'm practicing anyway to make her happy. We went to the Expo today. It was super fun, even though we took wayyy too many photos. We saw so much, and it was so hot, so it's hard to remember everything. There was a lot of people and music and country flags. Oh, I remember this—I really liked the UK's Seed Something because it looked like a big porcupine.

I also bought a plush Haibao keychain for myself. When we get home I'll put him on the shelf next to Hello Kitty so they can be friends. OK, Mom says it's time for dinner. Farewell!

xoxo Whitney

*

Two years later

“I want to see the jellies,” Whitney pleads as her bangs fly into her face, the winds of the Great Wall in summer uncourteously strong. The dirtied Haibao keychain on her backpack flips over. A man's umbrella ripples, reverses, exposing its metal skeleton. He swears sharply, but the noise is lost in the air.

Her mother says no. They can see plenty of aquariums when they're back home. *Home*, she emphasizes, clearly meaning the U.S.' Northeast: Whitney's mother wears a slightly oversized Yale sweatshirt, while her daughter shivers in an unzipped gray and navy blue North Face fleece.

“Isn't Beijing's aquarium so much bigger than the ones at home? We'll only have one chance to see it before

we fly back!” Whitney crosses her arms. She’s noticed some kids at school cross their arms whenever they get in trouble. Whether it’s to make themselves feel stronger or to intimidate the teacher, she’s not sure.

“Yes, and you only have one chance to see the Great Wall for the first time. Come on. We can have a nice dinner after.” Her mother seizes her wrist, and they push together through the wind.

Whitney’s mother has the passing thought that her daughter doesn’t actually know how to enjoy China, that Whitney thinks there’s nothing there once she looks beyond the good food, museum gift shops, and entertaining variety shows. Maybe she did too much of a good job making Whitney feel American. Oh, well—it’s far better than the alternative.

In front of them, a lone tour guide takes a puff of his cigarette, and the smoke ascends diagonally.

Beijing, 6/23

We were at the Great Wall today. It was impressive, I have to admit, but still I was thinking to myself I had more fun when we went to China a couple years ago. Maybe the World Expo was the best part and nothing I’ll see here will ever be nicer. I don’t know. I don’t really mind learning about history, but I just feel watched in Beijing, and there’s too much smoking. It’s overwhelming.

We’re going to Grandma’s apartment tomorrow. I’m happy about that because she always gives me ice cream, plus I get to sit in her big rocking chair again and look at her ink drawings and watch the sheep cartoon with her. Also it means we can go home soon a couple days after. If I do my summer reading early, Mom promised she’ll take me to the local playhouse. It’ll be amazing. What if we see Little Women?

xx Whitney

*

Two years later

The sun is blistering, and the ponds are jade green with the reflection of drooping leaves. A tree branch almost protrudes into the open window of the bathroom. There's a woman on the phone urgently gossiping to her friend—her coworker had to skip work today because of a “spaghetti-related incident.” She and her friend are, based on historical precedent, trying to decide whether that means a kitchen fire or severe indigestion.

The woman's Cantonese syllables pierce the air, loud but almost pleasant, like pop rocks on the tongue. Whitney, in line behind her, doesn't understand, or else she'd be laughing along.

Instead, she asks a little too loudly, “How come I only see these gross bathrooms in Asia?”

“*Ya*, stop complaining, we're going to be late for the tour.”

“Mom, don't we still have like ten minutes left? You're always in such a hurry, it'll be fine.”

“You never know what could go wrong. You have to be prepared for everything.”

Whitney sighs and pinches her nose as she walks into a wooden stall. It's tiring to be a tourist.

Their tour guide, named Sammy, has a lilting accent when he introduces himself in English. Whitney much prefers hearing him speak in Mandarin during the tour. It's easier on her ears, and she can pick up most of it anyway. When he switches back to English, his thoughts seem limited, clipped in comparison. He calls the gardens “the most beautiful gardens in the world” several times, and she starts mouthing the phrase along with him. She imagines Sammy asking her if his pronunciation is good, to which she'd respond with a lesson on how to preserve the ‘l’ sound in “world.”

Actually, she wouldn't do that. That'd be rude. She'd be like that librarian in elementary school, exasperated by Whitney's strange inability to say "thirteen" right. The librarian made her alternate between saying "three" and "thirteen" so many times, neither felt like words in her mouth anymore, just a jumble of rhythms. It felt like she'd stood there at the desk for ten minutes, after which she still said "three" and, somehow, "firteen," and the librarian just sighed and waved her off to the *Magic Tree House* section she'd asked about.

Whitney, grimacing at this memory, feels a sort of kinship with Sammy and his love for "the most beautiful gardens in the world." He does say it too often, but at least it sounds genuine.

Suzhou, 6/13

We went to the Suzhou Gardens today. I felt a little headache because of how hot it was and then the crusty bathrooms, but overall it was fine. I get pretty tired when we travel, but it's hard to stay annoyed when the atmosphere is so pretty. I took lots of photos on Mom's phone. Our tour guide Sammy was very friendly, and I complimented his English after. He seemed flattered and told me he'd been studying a long time. I can't imagine having to learn English as an adult; I guess I'm lucky. (Mom told me I should be more grateful for things, especially since we might not be able to go on these trips together anymore once I'm in college in a few years.)

For dinner, we saw some of Mom's old school friends and got one of those private rooms in a seafood restaurant. As usual, she and her classmates were explosively loud and fed off each other's energy (and there was also alcohol). I think I understood slightly less of what they said from the last time I was in China, probably because they kept referencing names of schools I've never heard of and people I've never met. Whenever I got lost, I just nodded and laughed along with them. I know at least some of them noticed, or even expected me not

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to understand most of the conversation, but they still seemed happy I'm there. And I love the necklaces they gifted me, they're so sparkly. One of Mom's richer friends even gave me a gold bracelet with a dragon pattern. I told Mom later, and she agreed with me, that there's no way I'll get made fun of at school if I wear pure gold.

-Whitney x

*

One year later

“Why don't you get divorced if you don't love him anymore?”

“Marriage isn't that simple. I'll explain to you more when you're older. You ask too many questions that won't lead to the right answers.”

“I think I'm old enough now. And what does that even mean?”

“See? There's another question. Let's go get some dessert.”

Whitney huffs, but she can't hide her pleasure at the idea of some red bean ice cream. And she knows her mom won't be able to change the topic once they've gotten started; it's not like she has another kid to confide in. Once they're seated in the ice cream shop, the door jingling with each new customer, she starts up again.

“You shouldn't need to fly thirteen hours away just to avoid him.”

“That's not why!” Whitney's mother whispers harshly. “And be quiet, people can understand you here. We're still in Chinatown.”

“I just don't get it. You said you don't love him anymore, so to me that means get a divorce if you're not happy.”

“I never said ‘anymore.’ It's not an issue of ‘anymore.’ The most important thing about marriage is that your

goals align. Our goal was getting to the U.S. and raising a nice, happy family. Clearly, we both got what we wanted.”

“But aren’t you —”

“Insurance benefits for you, traveling with you, what else could I want? I have all the money I need. We can go to Xi’an this summer, right? And have food and see the terracotta warriors like you wanted? Better than going to the Met, right?”

Whitney tilts her head, examines the fading poster on the wall across from her. She says nothing.

“You said you felt guilty for ignoring Chinese culture when you were younger, even though I always say you’re an American first and it shouldn’t really matter. Well, who do you think has been funding that guilt? My marriage is why I get to indulge myself every couple summers, why my time spent with you is sweeter. Some things in life you just have to accept, and then your sacrifices won’t feel like burdens anymore.”

“But if I’d known all those years ago, I wouldn’t have asked you to —”

“It’s okay, it’s okay. America’s the best country in the world, honey. I made no mistakes.”

Flushing, 5/30

Mom let me take a day off from school. At first I told her I felt a little sick, but we both knew I just didn’t feel like going. It’s review week for finals, and I’ve been paying attention most of the year, so it doesn’t really matter if I show up. I wanted to hopefully relax a bit and spend some time with Mom. I feel like she’s been so distant. The election back in November created a rift between us that I still don’t know how to fix. Instead I started asking about Dad, which was a topic I knew she couldn’t avoid being open about, even more so now that she’s realized I’m not too young to hear it. She could rant about him for hours and hours if I just cracked the conversation open.

But this time, instead of confiding in me, she seemed kind

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of snappy and for some reason wanted to convince me it's okay that she married for America instead of love. Maybe she was trying to convince herself more than me, actually. I think she believes she has to love this country because if America's not perfect, then what did she leave China and throw away her happiness for?

I barely said anything the whole time because I felt a weight to her words that she was passing on to me. Eventually, she started talking about her expectations for when I get married, which is where I actually started to feel sick. I knew where it was going. She's said things like that offhandedly before, and now seeing Trump on the news has made language have no meaning so she feels like she can just tell me anything.

According to her, I can marry whoever I want as long as they don't have brown skin. And she wants our children to be pretty, so I should probably pick a white boy. And if I do find a Chinese boy, make sure his family's from a big city because people from the countryside just think different and there's no changing that.

I'm so, so angry at her, but I'm also afraid. I think she has an ability I don't have, to detach herself and twist reality to her liking. And what's stopping her from completely detaching herself from me if it's convenient to the narrative?

Now, every time I think of the differences between us, I think of how she was always able to cook fresh crabs for us without wincing. The crabs' stacked bodies would rattle in a big metal bowl next to the cutting board as they tried to claw their way out. Unlike me, who kept watching because I was afraid they'd escape somehow, she just calmly took the butcher knife and stunned them, and then I had to leave the room or cover my ears as she clobbered their shells. At that point, I always felt a new fear rising, that because she hadn't reached the crabs' insides when she stunned them, they might still be alive when she put them into the steel pot.

*

Five years later

They're making spring rolls in the communal kitchen when it happens. Whitney and her friends' phones all light up with the breaking news notification, and they look at each other with stony eyes. Whitney puts the knife down. She excuses herself to the bathroom, and no one follows.

She uses the silence to breathe. A minute later, her mother calls her, and Whitney picks up without thinking. She wishes she hadn't; there's only a slim chance her mother will say something comforting, especially since even Whitney is entirely wordless. There's nothing she can think of right now that could possibly be said or need to be said.

Her mother starts talking without a greeting. "It's not white supremacy, you know."

"What?"

"I just wanted to tell you. People are going to start a conspiracy — they're already starting it, actually — and they'll say it was white supremacy. I've seen the talking heads on Twitter. But it was just a coincidence."

"Six out of eight victims were Asian, Mom. It's not a fucking coincidence."

Whitney's ears are ringing. There's a pause on the other end of the line, and in her head she hears it filled with her mother's favorite refrain, "You're too young to understand." Or maybe, that pause means the classic "I made no mistakes."

But her mother has a new catchphrase for her: "College is brainwashing you, you know." Whitney's throat closes up.

"Okay," she says. "Okay," she repeats, then hangs up.

Amherst, 3/16

She said things I know will haunt me. I tried not to listen.

T R A N S P O S E

Whether or not it's true, I believe the crabs are still alive as she boils them.

*

April 2nd, 2023

Dear 妈妈,

I know I haven't called or picked up your calls in months. It's not that I don't have anything to say. After all, it was you who first encouraged my love of words, who said with a little bit more passion and motivation I could make it. But even though I'm finally at Oxford for grad school, just like you dreamed, I know you can't be satisfied by this outcome. Because my writing here, just like always, has been a way of confiding in myself—which sadly can't lead me anywhere but further away from you.

About Oxford: there's not much Chinese food here, which you wouldn't appreciate, but there aren't any hordes of Chinese tourists, which you would appreciate. Somehow, you exist within this contradiction of distanced self-loathing, something I took years to disentangle intellectually and still don't understand emotionally. I remember once you told me, "I'm not Chinese, I'm Asian-American," and I laughed before realizing you were serious.

I've been to China countless times now, and I know I still don't understand anything about it. Because I can't think about the country without romanticizing it. The only way I could think of to honor it properly was to reverse your journey: I made a sacrifice, left the broken country I grew up in to live in another broken country, and I built myself a sort of happiness.

By the way, I carry Haibao with me everywhere. Thank you for him. He's my most loyal possession.

I wonder how things with Dad are? Maybe you can come visit here this summer, or we could return to Shanghai together. I wanted to show Grandma an ink wash painting I've been working on.

T R A N S P O S E

*You can look at my dreams with me, pretend they were
always your own. But please, let that be the only thing we talk
about.*

*Let's hope our country (either of them) hasn't collapsed
before then.*

你的女儿
Whitney

Hemingway Can Wait

PABLO LACALLE

University of Edinburgh, 2024

Santiago Caballero sat with his elbows resting on his thighs, staring mutely at the cold, sterile floor of the locker room. Nothing existed save for the pair of boxing shoes that stretched out before him, impossibly big, the boots of a clown done up with black laces and corporate logos. It took him a while to register that they were his feet, that he was there, and that all of this was real.

A few photographs had been taped to the rusted inside of Santiago's locker. Not that he had put them there. That was Edu's doing. The largest photograph showed a young man leaning against the picket-fence-white hull of a boat. His profile was turned against the wind, brown ringlets of hair fluttering messily, muscled forearms ridged in sunlight as he rested his weight against the railing. It had been taken on their trip to Seville, along the banks of the Guadalquivir. From another picture, the same youth, shrunken now and ridged with bony elbows and gangly legs, glowered at no one in particular from behind the confines of a cracked and dusty Andalusian boxing ring.

Faded as the photograph was, the child (a teenager, sure, but a child nonetheless) spat fiery venom from behind his eyes, a boy stripped of his dignity by the brutish paws of the thugs of the classroom. Santiago felt a burst of anger crackle in his chest and dwindle like the blackened edges of a burnt-up newspaper. He tried to tell himself that he was once again on that boat, the river spray beading in his hair in tiny pearls, the sun washing over his face. The days of bloody noses and stinging split lips were over, surely, yet still the phantom echoes of abuse prodded him, tiny, barbed needles whispering "*maricon, puto, pluma.*" The day after he had broken a bully's jaw, leaving him in the hospital to choke mutely on the insults that had only made their way halfway out of his mouth, Santiago had imagined that would be the end of that particular chapter in his life.

To his dismay, he had found out that the snotty, spindly inquisitors of his boyhood had been traded out for enemies who had sharpened their malice upon a grindstone of age and

experience. The promoters who had refused to book fights for him, the waiters with curling lips who served him and Edu at restaurants, the tutting *abuelas* with their quiet contempt whenever the both of them held hands on the street. The contenders and champions who made sure to hiss in his ear just before their blows landed: cocksucker, fag, poof, queer, spic, fairy, fruit, faggot. Shakespeare's English had put the language of Cervantes to shame, instructing Santiago in a bilingual masterclass of loathing.

Who to turn to besides Edu? His father, cold in the ground? His mother, still sheltered in her spiderweb of disappointment and rosary beads?

No, no, that could not be. Try as he might Santiago could not fool himself, for the idiot that he was, he had given his adversary keen eyes and swift reflexes, and now he had the audacity to feign shock when they were used against him. Damn it. Some figure he must cut, huddled up waiting by that thick grey door with its window of cracked glass. Silent and anxious like a schoolboy waiting for the principal's office to swing open as herald to his punishment.

Panting fitfully, memories came to Santiago in flurries of static.

Memories of screaming crowds and boxing rings transformed into marble altars. Of faded books written by an old man in love with Iberian shores who wished to conquer the sea. Those stories had passed on a dream of hard, strong men who won their legacy pound for pound with muscle and force to a young kid with wobbly brown knees and stringy arms reading in the Almeria sun. Santiago had never forgotten Hemingway, had carried him with him across the waters of the Atlantic, into this alien land stitched together with the patchwork quilt of genocide, death, and rebirth.

Yet try as he might he could not reconcile himself with those images of chain-smoking matadors and Republican revolutionaries who kicked back whiskey and drank a salute to death as if it were an old friend waiting at a train station. Santiago the warrior could not live in the same body as the fading soul who only kept on battling because peace would mean having to accept the quiet of living with himself. He was not sure he could deal with the prospect of autumn years spent going to bed with the spectres of his self-loathing and the tattered scraps of rejection, piled at his feet by those who still only saw him as a faggot kid with boxing gloves and broken English. Fitting then, that Santiago should find himself in

this hinterland of unknown, unreliable identities, this melting pot of neither-nor, Indian soil speckled with the fingerprints of Spanish hands: *Los Angeles*, *San Francisco*, *El Paso*, even here, *Las Vegas*. McDonalds facsimiles of conquistador graveyards, mirage reflections of an ersatz home (*Madrid-Iowa*, *Toledo-Ohio*) that split Santiago into disparate chunks in an act of irreversible emotional, cultural mitosis.

On the one hand there was The Spain-That-Was: gritty sand, baking heat, Cola-Cao breakfasts of chocolate powder and boiling water given to a kid so poor his bus to school had been a wheezing donkey: a Juan Ramón Jiménez education. The torturous, secret kisses of boys playing at men behind Arabian ruins and the agony of a closeted mind reenacting civil war with itself, the angular, painful shrieks of a personal Guernica.

Then, as seen in travel agency windows and bad Hollywood movies, The Spain-That-Is, ignorant mess of 'Murican confusion spread so widely and pervasively it had long since become fact. Squashing, mixing, and mistaking Castilian with Mexican, Venezuelan, Ecuadorian, Guatemalan, the whole lot one and the same. A billboard country populated with guitar-strumming Antonio Banderas clones womanizing and siesta-ing, trotted out to the tune of *Toreador* and gaudy, plastic castanets. A recipe for disaster making way for the inevitable horror that resulted when Santiago's fans realized the muscled, Hispanic pugilist had more in common with Lorca than *Don Juan*. The Spain that strong-armed Santiago into nightmarishly faux brand deals for sangria commercials and paella recipes until his entire purpose in life seemed nothing more than to be a sandwich-board advertisement in the skin of a fighter.

Finally, there was The Spain-That-Could-Never-Be, the product of an American mind once again, built like an origami swan by pages riddled with a typewriter's ammunition. It had filled Santiago's head with smoky *tabernas* where men diced and drank aguardiente and the streets were filled with stoic picadors and fiery widows. Where boxers and fighters took their blows in silence and died with dignity. Released, thought Santiago, perhaps for good from this anarchy of self: this limbo of unreal, impossible expectations that had turned him into a blur of performed identities and buried resentments, his centre chipped away by the punches of the ring.

He could feel his conviction waning and could not understand why. He had pictured this moment in his head a thousand times, rewinding the spool of film again and again; he had

traced out every step of his journey so far with the meticulous attention of a cartographer resolutely setting out to the undiscovered country. That old man had ended his life with the roar of a shotgun and splattered his immortal ichor into eternity with a burst of smoke and fire and blood. At times like this, as Santiago ran his eyes over the thin white scars that crossed his features, so alien from the wilful, smiling reflections of his past, he asked himself why he should not envy a fate such as that.

He was acutely aware that his body would fail him eventually; it had held on for too long, a creaking bag of mucus and sinew held together by shards of bone and a muddled brain. It sought for nothing more than freedom from the life of the sacrificial bull of the *corrida* trotted out to bleed hot gore into the arid sands. Revived again and again to be pecked at by eagles without respite and worn away into a slur, or worse, a stereotype. Better to place the agency in the hands of another, pass the burden to a fellow fighter. These violent delights have violent ends, was that not the phrase? It was one thing to kill himself, quite another to *be* killed. Iberian chauvinism and half-remembered Catholic dogma still lingered on his skin and clothes like cigarette smoke, and it could not stomach that damning, cowardly label: suicide. Santiago's homeland was one where men fought giants regardless of the certainty of defeat and where corpses rode out to battle, swords strapped to their hands and heads held high even in death. A fearsome, sickening pride was his bridle and the bit tore at his mouth, leaving him to march on, spitting scarlet froth from between his lips, for Santiago could imagine death was quiet but also that it could be boring, and that scared him most of all.

Wham.

He had struck himself on the side of the face, jerking his head to the side with force. Planting himself firmly in place, his whole body tensed, he fought the wild urge to let loose. To brutalize himself and mash his nose and break his teeth and splinter his jaw and shatter his chin until the noise in his head leaked out of his ears and was still, still. His hackles were raised, eyes blurry and quivering in their sockets. Respite came as the door swung open and Edu walked into the room, his slightly pudgy stomach tight against the crisp white of his shirt. His belt was buckled too firmly, through the fourth hole instead of the third, as it always was.

Edu stopped as he caught sight of Santiago, and Santiago winced at the momentary flash of terror that creased Edu's tanned and friendly features. He lowered his guard, letting his

fists swing at his side.

"They're calling for you," said Edu gently.

"Already?"

"Already."

"Right," grunted Santiago. He was trying not to meet the eyes of the man before him, well aware of the raw flush on his face from where he had struck himself.

Eduardo Lopez was a damned good cornerman, and a damned good lover. Santiago knew all too well that Eduardo was aware that no fighter in the history of his career had more capacity to hurt Santiago than he himself.

"You'll be fine," assured Edu. It was a refrain that Santiago had heard many times and was still not sure who it was addressing.

"He's a tough son of a bitch."

"You're tougher," reminded Edu, gripping him by the shoulders, his fingers touching Santiago's skin with an urgency greater and more terrible than when they made love.

"That's the problem, Edu." Santiago smiled wanly. "It's the tough guys like me who have to keep going."

"Don't be stupid," snapped Edu. "Not now, Santi, not just before a fight. Not ever. So, what if you keep going, I've gotten you this far, no?" he challenged.

"You have," admitted Santiago.

Hay amores que matan. In silence Santiago reserved his greatest curse of all to love, that bastard child of resource and poverty that even now managed to flourish in its ash-heap prison. He could not tell Edu, could never reveal the truth, as real as a spoken secret, that as far as they had come, he could go no further on this road of phonies, fighters, and castaways. Yes, for now, a part of him still resisted, still feared, but he could go no further.

Maybe – maybe dying wasn't that bad a thing, yes, and he would step into that ring and slip quickly away, follow the path of those boyhood novels, across the river and into the trees, where he could be hurt and eroded no more.

" – And it will stay that way," Edu was saying firmly. "I'm still here, Santi, remember? I don't care how far you go, I'm still here."

Santiago reached out towards Edu's face, but his hand was a dull crimson lump, his boxing glove a grotesque paw that could only clumsily brush against the stubble of Edu's cheek. He could not remove it from where they had sown it on, could almost imagine the tendrils of twine slipping beneath his skin

and drawing tight around the bone, flesh and leather one until they would be cut away and he would be allowed to be a man again.

Edu was patting him on the back, carefully but steadily leading him in the direction of the door. Outside, he could hear the hushed, expectant roar of the amphitheatre, imagine the fleshly clusters of the waiting crowd guzzling warm, overpriced beers and tramping their feet on a floor sticky with the congealed syrup of junk, soda and spit.

Santiago began to march his way down the corridor, the rest of his team falling in practiced step behind him. The cowl of his hood had been drawn up over his head, and Edu had quietly tied the belt back securely around Santiago's waist from where it had loosened in the locker room. A slogan in a jagged, lurid black font snaked its way across his broad shoulders, proclaiming the bearer of the robe as "*El Príncipe de las Tinieblas*", a drawing of a demon scowling on his back. Santiago had always hated that ridiculous slogan, and the mascot to boot. He maintained that it was just another indignity meant to transform him into a cartoon Spaniard, but Edu had insisted that his fans loved it, and Edu was always right. Most of the time.

Marked by the devil and with his words still lingering in his mind, Santiago moved forward. The baying of the crowd was a wall now, but he breached it with practiced ease and the throat of the corridor opened to cough him into the arena. From either side pasty faces bore down on him, whooping and cheering, spitting or cursing. The jumbotron was reflecting a stranger in a red robe back at him, and all Santiago could think was how small he looked, how thin and insubstantial that man with his heavy fists and bronze flesh was, refracted and stretched out on plastic screens and lit up with burning pyrotechnics. A puppet devil in a high-school production of Hell.

All that he could focus on was the ring. Before the night was over, he knew that it would mean his death. Perhaps, in a way, it had always had, and all those years of amateur antics slugging away and slinging mud against phonies and green boys had simply been the dress rehearsal for this final tragedy. Santiago's rival was waiting in the other corner of the ring already. His shorts were bright green with gold shamrocks embroidered onto them. Even in his state, half-mad with adrenaline, delirious in his anticipation to finally commit to the task he had been shirking from for far too long, Santiago could not repress an inward groan. He had watched his opponent's fights

back-to-back, he had committed his frame to memory in the fashion of a lover tracing the naked contours of their darling in their mind's eye, but a part of him had almost expected something less farcical.

Declan Byrne: the Irishman, holy terror to every Protestant who ever walked the Emerald Isle. A Devil pitted against the leprechaun. Despite the gloomy pall that clung to him, Santiago began to feel light-headed, as he had before, after the kind of good laugh that made your eyes smart, and your stomach hurt. Standing where he was, a black speck in the hierophant white of the ring, it dawned on him how stupid it all was, how little all of this mattered.

Once, a week before the fight, when the noise in his head had been especially loud and Edu had been out shopping, Santiago had stood at the edge of the kitchen sink at home, knife in hand, and hovered it over his wrist.

He hadn't really meant to do anything, just see if, hypothetically, he could. The silver tip of the blade had wavered as he imagined it carving into the skin, sawing bluntly at stringy muscles and rubbery arteries, thick crimson blood bubbling to the surface. But his hand had not moved, and it had not been easy, as easy as he would have guessed it to be, and he had let the knife fall to the floor and collapsed next to it. Then he had laughed and laughed without being able to stop and never spoke of it again.

It felt something like that now, only different, and Santiago was armed now with the knowledge that when he died, he would simply fall to the floor and break like an action-figure, all decked out in his ruby shorts and corny slogans. Byrne was talking animatedly with his corner-man, once or twice casting fleeting glances at Santiago with watery blue eyes, his left hand already reflexively hovering in place as he chattered. The man was a southpaw, a type of boxer Santiago had been surprised to recall he had barely ever fought against.

The announcer was taking his position with his microphone, the crowd rising to meet him as he did. By his side hovered the referee, a balding, self-serious man who looked like a waiter at a cocktail party in his crisp white shirt and neat little bow tie. Santiago blocked it all out. He knew how it all went, the grandiloquent posturing, the exaggerated mania, even the way the announcer rolled his "R's" like a drill-bit whirring in place on "let's get ready to rumble" and the precise flourishes of his arms as he introduced both fighters in each corner.

Santiago found himself ambling up to the middle of the ring, watching Byrne grow bigger as he approached. The Irishman's rather pronounced jaw was thickly set, and his pale blue eyes were glittering with animation. From his experiences with the man at press conferences and the weigh-in, Santiago had found Byrne to be an unexpectedly professional man, once you saw past the artificial machismo and bluster that he adopted for the benefit of his fans. Still, he steeled himself. Kindness displayed in the open was normal, but it was in the heart of the ring that true colours were quick to show.

Byrne was right on top of him, his flaxen hair a choppy fringe over his brow. One of his front teeth was slightly crooked. Their eyes met. Byrne gave him a curt nod and extended his fist.

The two boxers touched gloves, reaching out to one another like the figures on a Roman ceiling.

Before the bell rang out, Santiago had just enough time to cast one look back at Edu. Edu flashed him a smile of encouragement, which only wavered for an instant with the first tinges of worry. He worried too much; it was one of his quirks that Santiago had always felt ashamed of disliking: he could never quite shake the suspicion that it was a sick prank, an unwarranted exercise in futility. He could not truly fathom that he was someone worth that much care, if any at all.

And then they had begun, and Santiago was moving forward once more, his guard up, tight and compact as he had practiced ever since he was a teenager. Byrne circled him warily, firing off a few tentative jabs which ricocheted dully off Santiago's thick forearms. Another jab cannoned towards his face, but Santiago batted it aside and rewarded Byrne with a short, sharp blow to his side, the Irishman skittering back instinctively. His recovery from the surprise was extraordinary, and for a second Byrne became a flash of green as he stepped in quickly, his glove slipping past Santiago's guard.

Something hammered into Santiago's stomach, his guts jolting sickeningly as a cold, solid lump of lead coagulated inside his chest. The first punch had been a feint, and Byrne had followed up with a ridiculous display of speed.

Christ, the man really was a monster.

A hook scythed into Santiago's field of vision, and he felt the dull impact as his head rocketed to the side, the cables in his neck standing in tortured relief as he tried to stabilize himself. He barely managed to swing out of the way of the next punch, firing back with one of his own that glanced at the tip of Byrne's nose, but the bastard was good, his head bobbing

from side to side like a gyroscope, denying Santiago the chance of a clean hit.

Again, that step-in, and in an instant Byrne was on top of him, his watery eyes hardened to chips of flint. Once more Santiago raised his guard but was it even worth it, did this all even matter, and then Byrne's fist had sunk into his diaphragm and Santiago couldn't breathe, the air had rushed out of his lungs in one great scream.

The follow-up punch felt like it was ripping his head off, and for an instant he was looking upwards at the burning circles of the stadium lights. His mouth guard had clattered to the ground and blood was trickling down his lips.

Oh, right, he was on the ground. Blearily he saw the chubby silhouette of the referee standing between him and the green flicker that was Byrne, the boxer stepping from foot to foot in anticipation. Through the haze of his vision, Santiago could hear the count begin, could hear Edu swearing and calling to him in Spanish, and wished that he could simply fall through the mat and lie there forever, that he could simply cease to be and not have to worry about jagged fists that hurt and bit and thoughts that hit harder still. No, no, it wasn't good enough, not like this, not in the first round. Hating himself for it, he had begun to push himself upwards on his knuckles, tottering to his feet in a creaking, jumbled mess. The crowd was a thunder in the horizon now, and the referee was standing in front of him, asking him if he could go on and somehow, he could, and he was slotting the mouthguard into place and swallowing his own blood and then he was off again.

Byrne flew at him like a dervish, battering away at his guard, pushing him back. The crowd was hissing and booing, and Santiago's shoulders were aflame, his bones rattling with every impact. His elbows knocked painfully into each other as Byrne drilled past Santiago's defences and now all he could do was dodge and crouch and deflect but the ring had shrunk since he fell and now the ropes were at his back.

In a desperate bid to finish things, Santiago lunged at his opponent. He knew what would come next: Byrne had been waiting for him. The counterpunch blew Santiago's head back in a shotgun blast, a flurry of sweat and gore that exploded from his nose and splattered onto the ring. The audience groaned as Santiago lolled from side to side and here came the follow up, slicing into his liver.

Santiago's body froze up, jittering spasmodically for an instant as his nerves crackled with electricity. This time he barely

managed to avoid crashing into the floor by falling back onto the ropes, and Byrne's shadow was on top of him, and he was drawing his fist back and then the bell rang.

Stumbling back into his corner, Santiago collapsed onto the stool. In a second, his team was on him, the cutman ready with the epinephrine that stung and fought back as it was daubed onto his cuts. As a wet towel flicked over his face, Santiago could not help thinking of the mist from the Guadalquivir, the freshness of the summer air. His nose was leaking dark reddish goop, but it wasn't broken, and already the flow was slowing down to a crawl. A water bottle was jammed near his mouth and Santiago sucked on it greedily, spitting out pink phlegm into the waiting bucket. Edu was right in his face, snapping his fingers, begging him to pay attention, he had to concentrate, he was getting slaughtered out there, he wasn't going to last one more round fighting like this. Hands were massaging his muscles, coarse towels were wiping away his sweat, he felt like a race car being pulled apart and screwed back together in the pit. With a jolt, Edu slapped both hands around his face, their foreheads touching.

"It's ok," slurred Santiago. "It's ok, I'm good, I can go."

He felt a shiver as Edu put his lips by his ear, whispering hurriedly now. "He's tearing you to shreds out there, but he's not exactly spry either."

Edu jerked his head in the direction of Byrne in his corner. The Irishman was slick with perspiration, the sweat burning from his muscles, his stomach heaving as he gulped down water.

"He wants to finish this quickly, but if you hold out a little longer, he'll end up burning himself out completely. It'll hurt like the devil but soak it up and when he falters...let him have it. Wait for however long it takes but let him have it."

Santiago nodded groggily, more out of habit than anything.

Edu gave a quick nod to the referee, who motioned for the fighters to prepare to begin once again. Before he stepped out of the ring, Edu gave Santiago's wrist a squeeze. His sharp kiss on the cheek burned like an ice-cube pressed against a bruise.

"I'm still here," he repeated. "Remember? I'm still here."

Then he was gone.

The bell rang, and they started, and one round went by, then it was two, now three had passed and moved into four and somehow, Santiago still stood, but this time he could see it, could see the window of opportunity creak open. A few more minutes and he could finally rest easy, aware that he had become something more than a gladiator dispiritedly chasing a

wooden sword. The gurgling river and whispering trees clustered, warm and safe, waiting to welcome him into eternity, to follow that old man who had traded in the happiness of mortals for the tragedy of icons on terms decided by his own hands.

Byrne was pummelling him again, eyes rolling madly with adrenaline and the first hints of desperation, his breath roaring out like a freight train, but it no longer hurt anymore. All Santiago could focus on was the light, hot, bright and burning and the mat was the frost white of the snows on African mountains he had dreamed of but never seen. This way he would never die, they would drink to him and pour their libations on the cracked Spanish clay and maybe then something he had done would matter more than this farce of gaudy colours. With each blow he could feel his anxieties carved away, leaving only the certainty of oblivion as welcome respite to the nightmare chaos of the mundane and the everyday.

And yet.

And yet, what if it wasn't certain? What if what awaited him beyond the mortal coil was that crushing, boring nothingness, what if there was no peace but instead the hollow emptiness of lying in a darkened room in the early morning, wondering if there was more you could have done?

Santiago felt his chest rising and falling as he began to hyperventilate, and it all came crashing down on his shoulders in shards of glass that cut him and brought back the memories of the thugs, the bullies, the champions that had mashed his face in the dirt and torn his books in half and busted his lip in the courtyard and the playground and the ring. Santiago was not winning anything, deciding anything, he was letting *them* win. Santiago was still there, Edu was still there, and he was yelling and crying. Edu always cried, the big worrier, whenever Santiago was losing.

The worst thing of all was when Santiago realized that, in all this time, he had not thought about whether Edu would miss him. He knew that it would destroy him and though Santiago had honed his fists into hammers he could not hurt another that way, could not bring himself to.

Byrne's fist fell in an arc, but he had moved too eagerly, and for an instant, his feet tripped over one another. With a wild savagery Santiago rammed his knuckles squarely into Byrne's face as the Irishman tried to comprehend the Spaniard's second wind. Byrne tried a dodge, but his earlier exertions had caught up with him. His movements were a sluggish

shadow of their earlier fury, his face pale from dishing out the beating. Santiago would not let him recover; his teeth were fangs as he gritted them and pushed past the pain. His barrage tore into Byrne, and Santiago began to dismantle him piece by piece like he had seen his father do to the family van the week it broke down. His knuckles were barbed hooks, ripping greedy chunks from his rival's stomach and abdomen and cheeks. The announcer was in hysterics of passion, the crowd were on their feet, screaming.

Santiago realized that he was screaming too, a guttural roar of terror and rage known only to an animal fighting to survive, and he realized that just because he did not want to live did not mean he wanted to die, he *did not want to die, he did not want to die*.

The ropes of the ring spat Byrne back at Santiago as he careered against them, and Santiago's fists were waiting. He felt the Irishman's jaw give way like a soda bottle crushed underfoot, paid him back in turn for the nose, then began to work on his chest, tenderizing the flesh, registering nothing but shapes and screams and the man in front of him. They later told him that the referee waited a full thirty seconds before stepping in.

He saw Byrne raise his hand in a gesture that might have been supplication, but the adrenaline was coursing through him now. Santiago snapped Byrne's head back and forth, back and forth, back and forth and then the referee was pushing him back into the corner and Byrne had slammed into the ground and when Santiago looked at him, he had no face left.

The crowd's cheers had died down, replaced now with horrified silence as Byrne was swarmed by his team and the medics rushed the ring. Santiago was heaving and gasping in the corner, his gloves dipped in crimson, hair plastered over his skin with sweat. Edu was staring at him with appalled admiration, one hand clasped tightly over his mouth, but he was alive, alive, and Hemingway could wait.

Slumping back onto his stool, Santiago did not even hear the announcer, did not even stand. As Edu scrambled into the ring, Santiago began to weep softly, head cast downwards, shoulders slopes of stone that shook as he bawled, and laughed and bawled again.

Edu was on him now, kneeling in front of him, grabbing his knee, trying to jolt him out of it.

"What is it, Santi?" he asked. "You won! You've won, what's wrong?"

Santiago stared into the eyes of his lover, still sobbing and

H E M I N G W A Y C A N W A I T

howling maniacally, the tears streaking paths down the gore on his face, bloody stigmata that dripped onto his lap.

“I’m still here,” he cried, burying his face in his hands.

“I’m still here.”

Orquídeas

OLIVIA BOOTH

Brown University, 2024

You are born in a powder pink bathtub in the apartment above your Ito's bodega. La Adelita is one of four on the block, but the only one with a perpetual game of dominoes in the front room: players sit until their cafecito is cold or gone, then are rotated out for neighbors with full mugs and time to waste. It's the twenty fourth of December, 1945, and the street smells like ropa vieja.

It's an early birth, and a quiet one too. Mami doesn't make a sound. Her palms are dotted with tiny purple crescents, her lips stained from biting until she bleeds. From far away, it looks like lipstick. Papi wonders when she had time to put on make-up. Then, you yell.

Your Tía Carmen is a retired nurse. She declares you healthy, for the time being at least. Tiny but loud. Pulmones fuertes. You'll be a singer.

Tía Carmen opens the second-story window and uses her own pulmones fuertes to call across the street. Your abuelas hustle from the courtyard toward the bodega entrance, both trying to outpace the other. But your mother's mother stops and squats to the ground. In the soil in front of the building is a strip of white orquídeas.

For new beginnings, your abuelita says as she sets the cut flowers in a glass measuring cup on the sink. *And a fertile womb*. Mami swats at her arm. You are five minutes old and not yet imbued with child rearing intent. You'll think of this 22 years later when the nurse at Miami Mercy Hospital hands you a baby the size of a butternut squash. A new beginning with no orquídeas to prove it. You'll name her Olivia because it sounds similar and she will grow up to switch the lights on and off four times before leaving a room.

You're nine years old and you spend more time in the bodega than in the apartment. It's where your people are— Ito, Mami, Eva-next-door, the dozen miscellaneous cousins to whom you're not completely sure you're related—but more

O R Q U Í D E A S

importantly, it's where the cat is. The Garcías down the street had more kittens than hands to deal with them, and the bodega regulars aren't picky about pet hair in their pastelitos. You name him Guayaba, after your favorite fruit. One particularly warm summer afternoon, you sneak into the kitchen with Eva-next-door and eat three cans of goiabada each. You throw up in the sink and guayaba is no longer your favorite fruit. You start calling the cat Mango, and later Mamey. He learns to respond to your voice instead of his name.

Mami and Papi sit you down one February evening and tell you they're having another baby. Eva-next-door says it's because they wanted a boy the first time around but got stuck with you, but in your six years of wisdom, you sense that this is perhaps projection. She's the oldest of four girls and her mother is expecting again in the fall. Your parents are luckier, if you interpret it as such. That November, you stand outside the bedroom door holding a fistful of orquídas from out front while Mami screams so purely it's almost beautiful. Your brother Leo is born and Mamey becomes your second favorite thing in the world.

When you're not in school, you split your time between Leo, the cat, and the kitchen. You don't like baking, but you do like the compliments you get on your pasteles. Tía Carmen ate your entire first batch of quesitos, and although you suspect it was an ego-boosting tactic, it was a successful one, and you've been selling them at the bodega since.

When you are in school, you're falling in love with arithmetic and Santiago is falling in love with you. He writes you notes folded up into little boats and slips them onto your desk. You never open them in class, partially because you're trying to pay attention but mostly because you don't want him to see your reactions. You unfold them in the privacy of the bedroom you share with Leo, who can't read and is too young to be as nosy as Mami. Santi compliments you incessantly, or at least he tries to. (*Eres tan hermosa como Colegiada* is less flattering knowing that *Colegiada* is his family's horse.) When you're finished reading, you follow the creases to remake the ships. By the time you're in grade five, you've started doing your homework in the bodega because your desk is overrun with a fleet of over 100 poorly reconstructed paper boats.

You cave when you are 14 years old. Santi courts you for years, walking you home from school every day (a small feat, really, because you live on the same street). Every day, when you reach the bodega, he asks you to be his girlfriend, and every day, you tell him you don't have time for boys. You're a businesswoman, after all. You have a bodega to run.

But even businesswomen can be worn down by such charisma. On the the 24th of December and the 300th time Santi asks you out, he takes an orchid from the ground in front of the shop, kneels, and holds it out to you. It doesn't matter much to you that the flower isn't his to offer. You kneel to meet him on the ground and say: *fine*.

That night, Santi joins your family for Nochebuena (and your birthday dinner, which most of your family likes to forget). Mami is charmed immediately by his top tier manners and his raving over her yuca frita. To the untrained palette, his compliments to the chef may have come off as excessive, but truly, you look forward to it all year. Your blonde-haired granddaughter from the next century will tell you that yuca is gross, and it will be one of many times New Jersey will break your heart.

As is customary, Papi hates him. Leo seems to be largely indifferent, but likes touching his curly hair. Your triplet cousins who travel in a pack and have a nasty penchant for pulling ponytails spend the night sniggering in unison and scooping tres leches straight out of the pan with their grubby five-year-old hands. You don't yell at them because you don't want the family catching onto the fact that you don't actually know which is which, but you say a silent prayer of thanks that Leo functions more like a human than a rodent.

You and Santi start walking back to the same house after school. You study algebra and each other, and you swap poems until you realize that neither of you actually likes poetry—you both just thought the other did. You stop reading Martí and turn to the garden instead. You have a bit of a black thumb, but Santi is a natural. (Bless his patience—he waited for you, after all.) By the time you graduate, the block is teeming with orquídeas.

Your romance is potent, but short-lived—not, of course, of your own volition. On December 24th, 1961, Santi's parents

O R Q U Í D E A S

put him and younger sister on a boat to Miami. They don't come back. (Fret not—you will see him again. But you have a ways to go.) This year, Mami's yuca tastes like dust and you decide not to turn sixteen.

At 19 years old, you run the bodega in all ways but on paper. Your parents are busy breeding canaries (a less than profitable endeavor, but one that makes them happy nonetheless). With your mathematical prowess and inherited charm, you've convinced half the businesses on the block to merge with La Adelita. It's not just the town's domino hotspot, but now a bakery, a post office, and a small liquor store. At least, it is until the summer of 1965.

You feel the soldier coming down the street before you see him. The bodega community is a tight-knit one, and the Garcías a block away warned you weeks ago that their shop was seized. They got on a boat 36 hours later and you haven't heard from them since.

It's early. Mamey is curled up around the cafetera, so no coffee is brewing, and no customers are here to drink it. In the minute you have before the soldier gets to the door, you do what you feel you can, and stuff the contents of the cash register into your bra. Then you grab the cat, go up the stairs, and pack your bags.

The flight to Miami is full, but you and Leo are alone. Your brother holds one bag, yellow like the canaries Mami and Papi stayed behind for, and you carry a suitcase and a ceramic mug of soil with one white orchid. In line for the plane, a woman in a suit reaches for the mug. *One carry-on per person*, she tells you. You hand her the backpack instead.

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Lightning Field

CONAL ABATANGELO

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2023

I watch a girl crack open a glowstick and drink, glass
and all. Her throat glows yellow. Soybeans,
spreading for acres. Black night and fire-
flies. Behind the barn with Ball Jars
and open hands, igniting
and we snap our fingers
shut.
Counting bug bursts
around a bonfire. Beetle-light
lanterns lead the way home. The night sky has
grown darker. Her tongue lights up
each time she sobs.

Will I glow like this forever?

One boy used to take his bugs out of the Ball Jar
each night, crushing them
between his thumb and forefinger to see
if their blood would glow
on its own. He painted them
across his cheeks until they went
dark. The firefly's tail-

light is a mating call. Bottle rockets breaking open
and they scatter toward the light, lost. White
fluorescents, streetlight, polluting light. Last year
s
she turned her jar upside down and took record:
t
two tiger mosquitoes, a blade of grass, small
pebbles. Into the black night, sparse yellow
song hanging in the air.

Kids are catching wind in mason jars. She looks
like a lightning bug I tell her, throat
luminescent. She has never seen
something so bright.

sinai

KEZIAH CHO

University of College London, 2025

on weekdays you come limping home
looking like you've seen the back of god
turned on you. like you come home

bearing stone tablets from the wild,
yes, forty years sunk in dry
hungry languor: oh liquid night
and clouded day.

deliver us you say when the sun beats down.
the salty sea tang on your neck
the railing warm, metallic.
bright red. like your

sandal heels at the bus terminus
amid rain. holy ground.
pacing, striking water out of stone.

no longer expecting the seraphim,
these nights you spiral into caves
of sleep. waiting in a cot on the Nile

listening for the tempest.
or the earthquake. or the north wind whisper.

THE FOUNDATIONALIST

The Acrobat

ROWAN PETER

University of Florida, 2024

Last night I dreamt I was an acrobat;
treading carefully on a tightrope
above a crowd of jeering fans.

Each time I stuttered or slipped,
a whip came cracking down,
tearing at my shoulders and back.

I could only think of you saving me;
pulling me out of this terrible place,
and promising me that I'll be okay.

When I faltered again and the whip came,
it wrapped around my arm and pulled,
making me slip, and dive into oblivion.

And I fell, praying I land in your arms,
I looked up in horror and realized;
you were the one with the whip all along.

THE FOUNDATIONALIST

Rays of Hope in Darkness

NICOLE FALLER

Albert-Ludwigs-University Freiburg, 2024

When all the hopes are shattered, gone astray,
entrancing darkness swallows every way.
Above, below are merged in frosty night;
in blackness veiled we sense no left or right.

Submerged in monstrous waves of infinite gloom,
entrapped in thinking nothing will ever bloom,
so far afloat on seas of strong despair
the somber night my spirits will ensnare.

Dolorous misery encloses us so more
so sinking down we lose the sight of shore.
Yet down below a sudden golden spark
keeps fighting through the bitter, painful dark.

Awakening shimmers slowly show the sign
through shocking darkness we will start to shine.

THE FOUNDATIONALIST

skin-deep you coloured me in

LEA KYVELI CHRYSANTHOPOULOU

Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg, 2024

skin on skin
 skin is skin
 skin-deep you colour me in
 with the smell of your hair
 the fragrance of pepper
 coating your nails

gestures flying wide,
 my hands join yours
 weaving multitudes
 of dream worlds
 σα δύο μικρά ζώα, τα χέρια μας

skin on skin
 skin is skin
 now we lie there
 on a raft of consciousness
 drifting. floating.

effortlessly we slip between the layers
 of honesty
 our limbs melting into sleep
 curled against one another
 planting seeds of home
 in each others' faces

(look, they're blooming)

tendrils of vine caressing your stubborn smile.
 εδώ όμως ήταν πάντοτε χειμώνας,
 and sky after grey sky has starved
 our seedling of sunlight

S K I N - D E E P Y O U C O L O U R E D M E I N

the day gone wrong heavy against your temples
you are seconds away from giving up a little more
for you, I spin lies like gold, like hope
look, how they glisten

but the straw is making my fingers bleed and you
would rather it were real
and I am exhausted

- shedding selves like faces, a trail of petals on a wet black
bough -

snake-like I shed your colours,
refracting betrayals shimmering silver-scaled and cold
skin is skin.
skin touched skin
skin-deep you coloured me in.

THE FOUNDATIONALIST

SILENCE

SHREYA NILANGEKAR

Rutgers University, 2024

Perhaps silence is more than a softened absence. More than a bundled canvas of sound, stars and seas falling into a folded slumber. More than a halted echo of a dead language, dried syllables upon dried mouthfuls of air.

Perhaps silence is also a fleshed pause, like a wet velvety whisper crashing over the roof of a mouth. Splash. A swallowed stillness, delicate like a baby's breath, tangled in budding utterances. Half-eaten ramblings that will never break the surface of a voiceless ocean.

Perhaps silence is a sleeping, colorless garden that roams above and below, before and after. Slicing through the shadows, sweeping across creased white ash. Shh. Don't make a sound.

Bruised Rouge

JONNY EVANS

Cardiff University, 2024

Rouge stained bruises
 reject the mask of squared shoulders
 deep voices strained as conformity smoulders
 charring the spirit
 searing the soul
 forging us bent.

Rouge tabooed to soil the mask
 clung to with shameful fear of its loss
 Bruises testify to emotionally castrated strength
 faltering through charades of chasing the us
 that can never be us, needing to lie
 terrorised by the dread of exposure.

Queer shadows persist emotions resist
 suppressed so tight
 gag-buried from sight
 lest pretence to blight
 lest hooded ignorants cast their spite
 grasp futile hopes they might desist.

See them

Know them

Reject them

Whole men - more than weakness masking fear of fear
 Bruises hold no terror
 Rouge's blush proves we're alive.

THE FOUNDATIONALIST

Gated Community

SADIE GIDDIS

University of Florida, 2024

Her glass fingers threaten to break
 when she switches the TV channel
 to newscasters lamenting a lack
 of school funding, then to a lover's quarrel,

a hamburger glistening in salt;
 her house turns viscous with a thousand
 sodden voices. It was his fault
 the two of them were trapped inland,

his fault they were a bus trip away from
 the fabled lagoon they fled as quickly as a flip
 phone's open and shut. Hidden in
 her bird's nest hair are the years since we fell

in love with her photograph,
 her leathery face swaddled in scarves,
 mouth sealed tight like mausoleum doors.
 The window wasn't a window at all.

Her magazine frame is coated in rust
 but the photographer still chases ponds,
 starved eyes like hers that arrest,

anything that can be crammed in a suitcase.
 Maybe love always implied disgrace,
 shrinking into someone's outstretched palm.

Coyote Takes a Bus

INGRID MARIE JENSEN

Louisiana State University, 2024

he's a good man, full of the holy ghost
with one eye fixed beyond the mists of blissful
earthly ignorance

but I'm a coyote taking a bus to the
Promised Land, I'm looking out
for a one-way ticket, searching
for a straight line, somewhere
on this crazy twisted map, and so

naturally there are some difficulties in communication
between us and one morning at breakfast he
presses his firm golden hand over mine and says,

you'll feel better once you accept that it's over
we're all dead and buried, already

this very room,
Golgotha!

and when I mention the fact
of my physical presence, my legs wrapped around his
under the breakfast table, he says

this? it's only muscle memory
sometimes the nerve endings refuse
to flicker out on time

even after the car has crashed, the blow has landed,
and we've all passed over to the other side

so don't worry, it's all decided
another table is set, and it awaits us

C O Y O T E T A K E S A B U S

stop hanging around, waiting for signs
stop checking the map, thumbing rides
you and that bus, you and that Promised Land

you arrived a long time ago

long, long
long.

Later

MONIQUE COTE

McMaster University, 2026

when the food we consume is the fat in our bodies
and our fingertips touch the surface of hunger,
when hunger becomes familiar and
eras of bruises and cigarette butts of poison
build the roots of our raw bodies,
will we fix it then?

when the water we drink burns from our bleeding eyes,
when the shelter we seek is filched by storming alphabets
quickly approaching the letter Z,
when the love we long for is long gone;
buried beneath the soil we litter,
taken from our dirty palms by scorching defeat,
stolen by the pillow who wishes for our head to sleep?
will we fix it then?

or will we wait for the day named Later,
when tomorrow turns into yesterday and 20 turns into dying,
when mother says goodnight and her grandchildren
weep under broken willows
who once served as shade for poets and painters
and the pleasure of humankind. Pleasure;
a synonym for greed,
a synonym for the restraint we lacked when
answering the serpents prayers.

so when the end creeps past infinity
and restoration is nothing but a silent daydream,
will we fix it then?

THE FOUNDATIONALIST

Ego Crusher

LEXISS MORGAN

Loyola Marymount University, 2023

There is an ego knocking at my teeth. So desperate to be set free, and I'm trying my hardest to keep it in. But I've had six teeth pulled and there's a chip in my lower right incisor, so it's only a matter of time before it spills in between the gaps of my words and muddles my thoughts and

floods the whole room.

It only took a threat, a slam of the door, to loosen the molar dam that held that ego.

And when you returned, you just stood there, not knowing what to do. Heels on the herringbone parquetry, hands gripped onto the carvings on my forearms, hushed panic in your eyes. You tell me that it will be all right, to never speak a word of it to anyone — *but it's time you take me seriously*. So embrace me, and let us be cemented in our spots so we can

drown in the ego that you broke.

..

Burn Marks

BRIGID MCCARTHY

Davidson College, 2025

Comet NEOWISE was first discovered by astronomers in March 2020 using a telescope of the same name. In July 2020, it reached its closest distance to the sun, allowing it to be visible by the naked eye from the Northern Hemisphere throughout the month. It's the brightest comet in twenty-three years, and it's estimated that it won't be this close and visible for another 6,800 years.

What do you call a celestial body
that comes only once

every seven thousand years? I call it a teenage girl. Each
June, hydrangeas bloom quietly along the shore,

those steady flowers like galaxies of summer
hope. Once, my dad pissed

in our garden trying to make those flowers turn
fuschia-pink. Once, I grew up

in a small town where boys took me
on drives in their used cars, peeled

petals from my body to see if I loved them.
If they seduce me hard, I'll turn

that same shade of shy magenta. I would like to ask
Icarus: did it hurt

when you burned, or did you
finally feel seen?

No, I know the answer. Once, I stayed
out with a man four years

B U R N M A R K S

my senior, and I told him about my favorite constellations. He
opened me, breathed down

my neck, and I felt NEOWISE up
my spine as I briefly blossomed, a burning beam

of glimmering girlhood before disappearing
in the dark.

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THE FOUNDATIONALIST

Death of an EMT

SARAH CHEUNG

Stony Brook University, 2024

When the ambulance doors closed, they hid everything I had ever known. It was as if my senses were numb and hypersensitive at the same time. Through the back windows, the flashing red lights of the ambulance were hazy in the rain, and I could hear the muted voice of the chief urgently talking to the cops outside. The lights inside the ambulance were bright yellow, illuminating the dark gray storage bench and sliding compartments of stuffed medical equipment. The only unfamiliar presence in the ambulance was the unconscious man on the stretcher in front of me. I remembered that it was protocol to remain calm in situations like these. That's when you can hear time rushing past you, like scarlet blood pulsing through a network of veins.

Looking down, I noted the lines of my patient's face, the tufts of ashy brown hair on the head that jolted violently against the AutoPulse board with every compression. His expression looked peaceful, as though he were sleeping, experiencing death's counterfeit. Every five seconds, I squeezed the bag valve mask that was secured around his mouth, ventilating air into his lungs. The paramedic adjacent to me periodically nestled her fingers into the crevice formed by where the left side of his neck and the base of his skull met, monitoring for a carotid pulse. My own breaths got caught in my throat as I focused on breathing for him. The heat blasted from the vents above, but my hands were still clammy. It was as if the failure of his system was slowly affecting mine too.

I had never seen death up close. I knew that all lives were bound to end, but I had never dealt with the loss of a family member, a pet, a friend. I lived a life of privacy, unaware of the reality of death. It was foreign to me, something I had only heard about on the news and read about in books. It wasn't that I didn't take it seriously, but loss is something that required experience to better grasp its magnitude. And as I

absorbed the sight of my patient's heart squeezing rhythmically under the thumping band of the AutoPulse, my own heart tightened. In the few months that I had been an Emergency Medical Technician, this was my first cardiac arrest call.

The wheels of the ambulance started rolling, rolling like the rain down the back windows. I tensed my legs to keep my balance during the sudden movement. I only noticed the wail of the sirens after they had been on for a while. Counting and squeezing, I couldn't bear to look down anymore. It was my undoing - this susceptibility. I watched the droplets of water on the windows slide down, picking up speed as they merged with other droplets. The yellow reflective speed advisory sign on the side of the road momentarily flashed red before we sped past. The ambulance jerked sharply to the left. The purple and white canister of Super Sani-Cloth wipes that was on the side shelf landed on the floor with a thud and rolled until it clanged into the spare oxygen tanks. No one picked it up.

The paramedic exclaimed, thinking she felt the patient's pulse return. After a few seconds of waiting in expectation with her fingers to his neck, she realized that she was unable to determine the difference between his pulse and her own. We resumed treatment. My movements became empty with the knowledge of futility. A thought kept circling to the forefront of my mind: *Most successful cardiac arrest calls have patients resuscitated within ten minutes on scene.* I wondered if his death was caused by improper bagging. Maybe if I had run faster to grab the AutoPulse, he would be alive. Something stirred in my chest and I thought of those I love.

I always found it impressive that a single yelp from the ambulance could raise the automatic barrier of a gated community, that the vehicle would be permitted to invade the private. Every time I crossed the threshold of a residential home, I was walking into the lives of strangers. And yet, as onlookers notice and yield to us, there is a privacy within the ambulance. One could cry if they wanted to.

Something came out from my heart into my throat and then into my eyes. The wailing of the sirens reverberated around the walls of the ambulance and inside my head. The

D E A T H O F A N E M T

hand gripping the valve in front of me became blurry, but I looked up at the blinding lights for a few seconds and everything was clear again. The rain pounded against the windows, pounded like my throbbing heart, pounded like the band of the AutoPulse. It was an unbearable cacophony.

What comes after a death for an EMT? Time passes and we move on. Our duty is to die in order to serve the community. We are ambulances driven by purpose, but we don't stop even when the traffic light at the intersection is red, when the intersection of the left side of a neck and the base of a skull is pulseless. Does that make us strong, heartless, or just desensitized?

I was told that death is part of healthcare. I was aware of that risk, and I knew that becoming an EMT was not for the faint of heart. But it didn't make this death any less real. I wondered what my patient's occupation was. Did he have any children? What were his hobbies, his food preferences, his beliefs? I suddenly was afraid that by staying too long in this line of work I would eventually become unbothered by the ceasing of a life, that it would somehow strip me of my humanity.

Until that moment, I had understood death as independent of life. We are either dead or living, and the hand of death leaves us alone until it inevitably takes us. But on the cold, rainy night of the cardiac arrest, I found it impossible to separate the two. I realized that death is not the antithesis of life, but that it was already here, and it had always been there, gradually taking me too.

Time passes.

And my awareness of this passing time - this permanent slowing, this decay within my being - multiplied, expanded, became my very life.

Everything I had ever known was hidden when the ambulance doors closed. I was surrounded by the same smells, colors, and feelings. But the way I sensed everything was different. It was a change in what made me sad, frightened, and happy. It was the acceptance of pain, allowing it to shape how I viewed my environment and how I lived. Could it be that I dared to believe that time passed for everyone except me? Perhaps I pretended that death was not real, that it was not inside

of me, that I did not look pale as death itself.

It was eerily peaceful, and the glow from the headlights of the car behind us casted oscillating shadows in the shape of the branches we passed. I heard the wet gravel crunch under the wheels and the beeping of the ambulance in reverse as we slowly pulled into the hospital ambulance bay. I had never thought about the impact a death can have, not just on those close to them, but also on those present to witness it. I was suddenly aware of the pressure of the blood pumping from the right chambers of my heart to my lungs to the left chambers to the rest of my body, the valves opening and closing, the contraction and relaxation of the muscle. The hearts inside each of us, ticking the time we have left in one big suffocating contradiction.

“You’ve done well,” the paramedic murmured from a distance. I couldn’t hear her over the rush of time.

Time passes.

Life has value because it ends. Death has value because it makes clear how inadequately I appreciated the living.

Fragment(s)

MELISSA FRENCH-SLOAN

Nebraska-Lincoln, 2025

I imagine your broken teeth in a sieve.

I imagine crushing shards of glass between my hands until they turn into an orb of ice with red suspended inside, the color melting and dripping back into me.

Hey mom, can you hear me?

Today, I watched eight minutes of *Sunshine Cleaning*. That scene where the less responsible sister talks to her dead mom in space through a radio transmitter in her dad's shitty truck. I say "in space" because I'm pretty cynical about most things.

I might be wrong about the details...the part I remember best is the image of a bloody mattress being navigated down the street towards a dumpster. And really, I just searched the truck scene on YouTube while I was peeing and found out this random guy named Nick D. uploaded the entire movie in eight-minute chunks. For some reason I was thinking about it.

There's this film trope I've always found so unrealistic, where someone is in a crowded setting and mistakes a stranger for the antagonist. The music shifts, the camera pans back dramatically, they switch the actor out for some extra. It's just so played out and tiresome, I used to groan when I'd see it.

But then three weeks after I watched you die with your mouth wide open, we sat catty-corner from each other on Portland public transit. A plastic barrier that was cloudy from age and covered in scratches kept me from seeing your whole face; plus, your lips were shut tight, and you refused to look in my direction.

These are jagged moments I remember even though I don't want them. What I want is to undo things, to rid myself of this story. What I want is for you to say you are sorry. I want to say sorry.

F R A G M E N T (S)

Hey mom, can you hear me?

Do you recall the winter I drove you through a haze of morphine to get your watch resized at JC Penny's? Your skinny wrist, your red mouth. Red atomic fireball candies.

When I was six, I dressed up as a tiger for Halloween. I remember walking through brightly lit astringent corridors with a bare face, orange pajamas decorated with stripes and the word TIGER printed all across them.

I carried an empty pillowcase covered in blue spirals drawn with a fabric marker and smiled at the nurses when they gave me candy. You painted whiskers on my face from a hospital bed.

My sister was a sunflower, sobbing and blooming. Her mottled cheeks surrounded by a wreath of yellow foam petals.

Do you remember that?

I had a dream last night that you wore a dress made of shiny red sequins and instead of my voice, a stream of glycerin flowed out of my chapped lips when I tried to speak.

I was sitting on the floor under a grand piano in someone else's drug-den-basement, there was crimson light drifting from paper lanterns and a wet shag carpet. A red hue fell over everything. Your legs dangled above me from the edge of the piano, and I heard you laughing like I can only hear you laugh now when I watch really, really old home videos. The ones where I am barely old enough to be called a kid, and I'm making up my own choreography to Celine Dion songs.

My eyes burned like they were full of cigarette smoke, and the air smelled bloody.

When I woke up, I felt like I had been punched in the face.

Hey mom, are you listening?

My jaw breaks when I think of you.

I remember your gold caps,

I feel them like bullets wedged between my teeth when I chew.

THE FOUNDATIONALIST

On Guatemala, La Tierra De Evelyn: Evelyn's Land

NATALIA SERRANO-CHAVEZ

University of Chicago, 2025

I've always hated my hair. Throughout my childhood, Los Angeles air made it unruly, frizzy, and uncontrollable. My mom said it was my best feature, that my indigenous roots made my hair lusciously thick and that I should be in love with it. Scenes of me fighting with my hair in the bathroom made her summon a time when her hair resembled mine in her youth; she misses tugging at her own. I stopped trying to do hairstyles in the morning and arrived to AP Spanish however my purple comb would leave me.

"I love your hair Nat, it's so thick," Evelyn would comment in fascination, "can I braid it?"

Evelyn loved braiding my hair identical to hers. She came to school in two braids, a hand embroidered headband, and her huipil, a shirt made by the hands of her tribe in the mountains of Guatemala. She wore long beaded earrings and light brown flats. Most mornings, she smelled like lavender incense because she lit an altar before the sun could arise. Her mom would make me breakfast: tortillas con frijol y queso and my tongue watered at them. My mom said she dressed and lived like she was from el pueblo; una niña directamente del barrio.

I envied it.

Guatemala had been kind to Evelyn, unlike my mother country. El Salvador brought memories of terror and abuse to my Mother. A moment in time where her breath stopped and her eyes rolled back. A moment that brought upon approximate death. A place that demanded escape.

I let her braid my hair every time and she'd shower me in

compliments and sing the songs of her land. Where the mountains graze her bare feet and the air whistles a hidden, dulcet melody that she wishes she could transcribe; a tribal language that she's still trying to comprehend. Where she curses the Spaniards for wiping out most of her tribe and traumatizing her elders. Where she asks the Sun and Moon and Earth and Wind for forgiveness. Her hands were delicate and felt like a southern cattail on the lake; a feeling I could revel in forever. Evelyn made me look in the mirror of morals multiple times and every time, I'd question the reflection. She basked in her indigenous tribe along with the ancient leaders on the Earth and under it.

What about me? I basked on the surface of my culture.

I'm starting to doubt my native tongue.

My skin resembles Abuelitas hot chocolate and I'm growing disdain for it. I wear my huge silver hoop earrings and feel the weight of a thousand, bitter eyes on my shoulder. I decorate my fingers in gold jewelry when I want to command a room and take them off when the Virgin Mary ring becomes too apparent because it dictates my Latinidad. I change my name to please those who refuse to say it and feel disgusted when it comes out their mouth. I coat my lips in South Central LA's glossiest lip gloss but wipe it off when I feel too Latina.

Too brown.

“¿Y que? And what about it?” My mom said, when I told her that I stopped wearing my hoops after a woman stared at me distastefully on my second day in Chicago, at orientation. Clouds of identity loss consumed and consume me.

I wonder what Evelyn would say.

So I told her.

“Girl, wear what you want! I wear my huipiles everyday here and people look at me weird. Who gives a fuck.”

Me.

Sometimes I feel too brown, too Latina, too ghetto or not enough of all of these, when I go back home. Code switching in lecture halls, dining halls, residential halls, therapy, coffee shops, and even in my writing. I bite my tongue when I'm angry, afraid of being taxonomized into the crazy Hispanic woman stereotype and instead give into complacency. A complacenc-

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cy that drives me insane. I want to peel back my skin when I'm reminded of it- an internal battle that I am consistently raising a white flag to.

I pray to Evelyn's tribal gods and ask for serenity, love, and tenderness and reminisce of my braided hair days, when Evelyn's hands wove a story through my hair. When my hoops didn't alter my presence—I miss their weight. When I adored the sun because my skin glowed underneath it—I miss its warmth. How do I conjure my self-portrait when I'm not in the picture? I'm becoming an ephemera.

Chicago air has softened and flattened my hair. I haven't thought of it since September.

On the Lip of The Pool

MALIA LEE

New York University, 2025

We were a mass of girls, bodies tanned shades of bronze and skinny with muscles sharply protruding, waiting. Maddie's eyes settled on the lifeguard sitting at the end of the pool. We laughed at Maddie as she whispered that she had "just seen him looking over here." She always seemed to find a man wherever we went — at the taqueria a couple minutes walk from school, at the Thrifty's on 48th and J. She would stare, smile to herself, then look down to her shoes. They were strange men, usually older by at least a decade. Once, it was the director of the B Street Theater production that came to our school for a month. Another time, it was the new P.E. teacher with bloodshot eyes and a hollowness to his cheeks.

We knew the lifeguard by association. He was the older brother of a girl a grade above us and went to Jesuit, the all-boys Catholic highschool. We sat on a circle of wet towels. We made laps of the pool, splashing and yelling in the shallow. We didn't dare cross the eight foot mark but kept our eyes on the deep-end. There, shadowed by trees with red spiked leaves and untouched diving boards, was the boy in a foldout chair. We whispered about whether he would take off his white shirt. One of the girls added to our hope, saying she once saw a lifeguard swim at the end of their shift.

We went single file as we passed him, a clearance of at least seven feet was necessary when we went to buy ice cream pops from the clubhouse. We pranced on our toes on the scorching cement. Maddie moved her eyes back and forth as she readjusted her blonde hair, flipping chlorine knotted strands in front of her shoulder. She raised her voice, asking us for the sunscreen in her bag. She stood in the sun's blaze, extending each arm, then leg, then other leg, then chest, and sprayed them all generously with banana smelling liquid. We stayed till the day turned to dusk. The lifeguard never looked

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at us, at least not in the way that any of us wanted. My mother came to pick me up. She hunched down on the lip of the pool to tell me to get my things together. As we walked out by the tennis courts, she looked back before saying, “Maddie’s quite the little flirt.”

...

I met a man at the party of a friend who I never really knew. I was introduced to him after squeezing myself onto a small leather-bound couch at a self described art bar in the West Village. To my left was my friend Ella, who told me that the art there really “isn’t any good.” The walls were covered with caricatures of people, in some sort of ‘80s city. One was of an old man in a gray suit smoking across the table from a woman with a disgusted glare and harsh lips.

The room was filled with people haphazardly tied together. A girl in the corner booth stood up on a table and shook her ass. Her tiny white skirt and faux fur hand warmers made me laugh. She was like one of the reproducible figures in the paint, a type of girl that men would like because of her indecipherable mixed race and the darkness of her overlined eyes. And I was the caricature who had drunkenly knocked over a glass with my boots and sipped the Modelos of the friend I didn’t know. All the while, my eyes scanned the room for a returned glance. Opposite us, there was the man. He was tall with dark hair and had an accent I couldn’t place. He wore a jacket embedded with pins, one of which looked like Chinese symbols. I asked him what it meant and he told me to read it. I looked again: “Fuck off.”

...

As we grew up, Maddie became a symbol of beauty. We envied her quickly developing body and her lack of fear in showing her collarbone. She was romantically linked to the majority of boys deemed agreeable enough in our neighborhood. She was the trailblazer for our society, most of whom were stifled by Mass every Wednesday and slow dances where teachers would shine a flashlight between bodies in order to “keep space for Jesus.” She was the first to hold hands with Adien outside East Portal Park and the first to have a kiss in the garage behind Gregory’s house. At a festival held every Oc-

tober by our school, she was groped by a drunk parent while he hugged her goodbye and wished her luck in highschool. He slapped her on the ass as she tried to untangle herself.

She talked about it often. The mention of Parker's dad would produce shudders by the rest of the girls. I told my mom what happened. I pestered her, saying, "Isn't that crazy," but she didn't seem as surprised. She nodded her head, remarking how she had heard 'some parents got in trouble for peeing in the bushes this year as well. "Drunks," she called them. A few months later, my mom took Maddie, a few other girls, and myself to the yogurt shop called Heavenly's. The inevitable topic of Parker's dad being prohibited from graduation in May came up. "He's literally disgusting," one of the girls said. I waited for my mother to say something.

...

I slept with the man soon after I met him. He was the first person I had slept with, the first person I had kissed. He didn't know the latter. I stopped seeing him after a week of late night meetings. He never called me again and I was told that I shouldn't either. After that, I started to become despondent every sunset. Once, when going to a diner with Ella weeks afterwards, she asked me if I was alright. I had gotten past the need to question what had happened, but the loneliness that he had filled for a brief time returned. Or maybe, it was that he had unveiled a different emptiness to which I was previously numbed. I wasn't sure. I looked outside the diner's window to the building across the street, alight with the setting sun. I wished someone there would ask me to stay with them for the night.

It was only when I came back home for the holidays that my mother asked me about the guy I had mentioned a couple months before. It was an offhand comment I made during one of our phone calls as I walked the West Side highway, a spontaneous addition after she asked me what was happening with my friend Carley's budding relationship.

"Whatever happened with that? Can I ask that?" I said, "Of course, but there's really not much to tell." I looked at the fire across the room from us, taking off my green sweater to reveal an ill fitting tank top underneath. She looked at me. I

asked her how much she wanted to know.

...

Maddie was the first to sleep with someone. It was a boy who she had been going out with for a few weeks during the first semester of highschool. We only saw pictures of him. He lived on a farm a good distance away and wasn't intertwined with the school system we had all grown up in. One day during choir practice, she told us that they "did it on the couch" while his parents were at dinner. I was shocked. People asked her what it was like. She smiled, flushing, saying she didn't know. They didn't take off all their clothes like she thought they would. I went home and told my mother to promise me she wouldn't tell anyone what I was about to tell her. The next day, it had gotten back to Maddie's mother that she was having sex. "I had to, Malia. She's so young. What if she ends up pregnant, what then?"

...

A few days later during the break, my mother told me that she felt like she didn't know me anymore. "I feel a million miles away from you," she said as she wiped away the crumbs on the kitchen counter. I looked at her with a righteous tilt of my head, like I was better and I knew it, like I didn't know exactly what she was referring to, like I hadn't felt echoes of the same sentiment before. I tried to hold onto the belief. "You can't just sleep with a stranger because you're curious." "Are you just so lonely?" "I wish you felt terrible, I wish you regretted what you've done." "So if sex means nothing, does that mean that I can just go fuck anyone I want too?" "I can say 'fuck' too, Malia." "What happens if you get AIDS?" "Don't you feel ashamed?" "I thought we agreed on this... I thought... whenever we saw the women in those movies and I said that wasn't good, I thought we agreed?" She looked at me across the counter, sponge still clasped in her right hand. I saw her face start to crinkle, her lips curving together as her eyes began to close. Her nose went red and tears began to flow down her cheeks, dropping onto the marble bellow. She said it again, "A million miles away from you."

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Infected Bodies, Infected Minds: Contagion in Isabella Whitney's Poetry

REUBEN MICU

University College London, 2023

Many breathed their last in the open street, whilst other many, for all they died in their houses, made it known to the neighbours that they were dead rather by the stench of their rotting bodies than otherwise; and of these and others who died all about the whole city was full.¹

Giovanni Bocaccio's *Decameron*, 1353, opens with a harrowing description of the state of the city after the 1358 epidemic of the plague that had ravished the city of Florence. In the wake of all this death is left a uniquely sensorial experience which invades their daily life everywhere in the city. One can see people die 'in the open street', can smell the 'stench', leaving the inhabitants trapped in a claustrophobic city which had become 'full'. These conditions push a group of aristocrats to flee to the countryside to listen to 'small birds sing', to enjoy the beauty of 'hills and plains', but most importantly a place where 'there is air far fresher'. This bucolic escapade could only be afforded by a very restraint socio-economic group. Unlike Bocaccio's nobility, Isabella Whitney was a working-class woman who did not come from an affluent family and did not have a husband who could protect her. She had to stay in London even as the anxiety of another plague epidemic was at an all-time high throughout her career and life. Thus, Whitney turns to poetry as a way of protecting her body and mind from being infected by the pestilent air. Not being afforded the protective attributes of the

1 Giovanni Bocaccio, *Decameron*, trans. by John Payne, Standard eBook ebook, p. 20.

countryside, she imbues her poems with natural imagery as she explores how literature and her environment can be tools for healing in a time of every growing anxiety of contagion.

Widespread infectious diseases, a threat to Europeans since the 14th century, were an ever-growing danger at the heart of cities. In the years preceding Whitney's birth, this danger materialises when Elizabeth I catches smallpox in 1562², putting a whole nation on high alert. These emotions reached an apotheosis when London experience its first great plague between 1563-4³. While Whitney never experiences a great epidemic during her career as a writer, both her and her contemporaries live with the constant anxiety surrounding the eruption of a new one. Thus, infectious disease become an absent presence in her work. She does not use the word 'plague' or other contemporary neologisms such as 'pox' anywhere. Her poems are however littered with words such as 'infection', 'sicke' and 'diseases'⁴ showing an acute awareness of the potential danger of living in London in proximity to thousands of other people. This antithetical present absence also arises through the image of the 'infection of the ayre' (23). What is supposed to be healing in term becomes a source of disease, but most importantly it is the invisibility of this infectious presence which exacerbates the fear in Whitney's poetry.

Before considering the mechanisms of infection of body and mind, the urban setting arises as a central theme in Whitney's works. The poem that frames London as a constant source of fear of infection is *A communication which the Auctor had to London, before she made her Wyll*. Using the Ovidian trope of the wronged woman addressing her lover, the poem is built around her apostrophe to London. The city itself is described as a 'vale so vile' (27), a reference to Psalm 23, written in the same ballad form, where the world itself is likened to a 'vale of death'⁵. When look-

2 Rebecca Totaro, *The Plague in Print: Essential Elizabethan sources* (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2010), p. 11.

3 *Ibid.*, p 12.

4 Isabella Whitney, 'A Sweet Nosgay' in *Renaissance Women Poets*, ed. by Danielle Clarke (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), p. 4. All further references will be made to this edition.

5 Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins, et al., *The whole booke*

ing at *The Agas Map of Early London*⁶ it is clear why Londoners were worried about the possibility of infection. Within central London, between Tower of London and Temple Inn, there are no parks and the residential buildings are all crowded together. Two out of three hospitals were placed north of the city walls, reducing ease of access to them. On roads such as the important Cheapside Street the buildings were ‘four and even five stories tall’⁷ not allowing much sunlight to pass through. Whitney mentions the unpleasant nature of walking around London as she mentions the ‘stynking streets or loathsome lanes which els might mee infect’ (6). Thus, it is her environment which infects her senses with repugnant smells and thus creates an avenue for infection through the senses themselves.

While the mechanisms leading to a diseased body are complex, they all centre around sensorial experiences and the relation entertained by a person with their environment. Whitney highlights this in her poem ‘The Auctor to the reader’ when, in an almost autobiographical moment, she describes her own condition. The poet says she is ‘subject unto sickness’ (2). The OED defines the use of ‘subject’ during the 16th century as ‘a person who experiences something or is the locus of something’⁸. Therefore, Whitney begins to locate the vector of disease within the physical body, rather than exterior to it, this being reinforced by the advice she then receives from a friend while on her walk. He cautions her ‘out of this lane you get/ And shift you to some better aire’ (5). The enjambement of ‘get’ is mimetic of the physical space needed to avoid bodily

of Psalmes collected into Englysh metre (London, 1562), in *Early English Books Online*, University of California Libraries, 13 Feb 2007. <http://eebo.chadwyck.com>.

6 Jenstad, Janelle, and Kim Mclean-Fiander, editors. *Civitas Londinum. The Map of Early Modern London*, Edition 6.6, edited by Janelle Jenstad, U. of Victoria, 30 Jun. 2021, <http://mapoflondon.uvic.ca/agas.htm>.

7 Ben Weinreb and Cristopher Hibbert, *The London Encyclopedia* (New York: St. Martin Press, 1983), p. 148.

8 ‘subject, n.’ in *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, November 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/192686. Accessed 5 November 2022.

infections. The verb ‘shift’ presupposes a physical transposition taking place, but also a mental transfer ‘from oneself upon another’⁹. Whitney is thus advised to not only withdraw physically, but also to mentally shun infectious air for ‘better aire’. He then advises her to leave ‘for feare to be infect / with noisome smell and savours yll’. This line echoes Roger Fenton’s sermon ‘A Perfume Against the Noysome Pestilence’ where he says it ‘can be in our nature to be infect[ed]’¹⁰ by the air around us. As Margaret Healy reminds us that in the Renaissance the ‘protective corporeal carapace’ could be penetrated by ‘fascination and without tactile contact’¹¹. Living in a postlapsarian world, the imperfect bodies and perception enter a cycle where they are the loci of infection but also become a vehicle for infection itself. They take on this role because, in early modern England, there is no set language to define infection. Therefore, by enclosing within the framework of the senses, by naming the ‘noysome smell’ and ‘savours yll’ it is almost a process of exacerbation, one which wishes it into existence.

Whitney and her contemporaries were not only worried about the infection of the physical body, but also of the spirit and the mind. Francesco Petrarch, hugely influential during the Renaissance, wrote in his *De Vita Solitaria* that people should be wearier of contagions of the spirit as ‘they penetrate more deeply, they diffuse themselves more stealthily’¹². This pervasiveness, coupled with the invisibility and lack of defining language makes those infections even scarier. Levinus Lemnius, Dutch physican and author, wrote in 1576 to make people aware of the ‘evill Spirites [that] exhale & breath out a pestiferous poison, &

9 ‘shift, v.’ in *OED Online*, Oxford Univeristy Press, November 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/178085. Accessed 5 November 2022.

10 Roger Fenton, *A Perfume Against Noysom Pestilence* (London: R. Read William Aspley, 1603), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo2/A00667.0001.001?view=toc>, Accessed 5 November 2022.

11 Margaret Healy, ‘Anxious and fatal contacts’ in *Sensible Flesh* (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2003), ed. Elizabeth D. Harvey, p. 23.

12 Francesco Petrarch, *The Life of Solitude*, trans. Jacob Zeitlin (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2023), p. 123.

to the minds of men bring mischefe'¹³. It is through this oscillation from the air, something that can be sensed, to the mind and spirit, something invisible, that renders the infections of the mind much harder to understand or cure.

The infection of the mind is introduced in 'A Sweet Nosegay' where she writes to her friend George Mainwaring, praising his character and offering him a metaphorical nosegay, where the flowers are adages which should keep his mind safe. There is a constant association between the healthy mind and pleasant sensorial experience. Whitney talks about the 'garden of [his] godly mind' (4) that are 'yielding fruit hereafter'. His mind is healthy and it becomes this Edenic landscape. The labour of his thoughts is 'godly' and thus it is thus literally fruitful. He at once is Eden and Adam, garden and gardener, whereby pruning his thoughts he keeps a healthy environment conducive to more healthy fruitful thoughts. However, not long after she describes 'a pestilent aire that might infect [his] minde' (4). It is at this point in the narrative poem where there is an eruption of sibilance, which coupled with the prelapsarian garden imagery, introduces the anxiety of a satanic influence. The Devil's tool during his trickery of Eve was his words and thus air that he breathed into her ear. Therefore, the 'pestilent aire' in Whitney's poem takes on a double entendre of both a physically contagious environment, but also mentally infectious ideas which could penetrate her friend's mind and disturb the carefully curated harmony.

Having identified the anxiety of the contagion of mind and body, Whitney explores different ways in which they could be cured. In both 'A sweet Nosgay' and in 'The Auctor to the reader' she uses the metaphor of philosophical and spiritual adages as flowers, collected by the author, to be smelt and distract the senses, turning them away from infections. This association has a long history, with works being produced in Medieval Europe that were titled *Lilium Medicinae*, 1303, or *Rosa Medicinae*, 1314¹⁴. This metaphor becomes more explicit in the early 15th

13 Levinus Lemnius, *The Touchstone of Complexions* (London, 1576), trans. Thomas Newton, cited in Healy, p. 25.

14 Carole Rawcliffe, 'Gardens and Health in Late Medieval and

century in the *Florarium Bartholomei* where a clerk talks about having ‘chosen the flowers from the flower-bearing field of sacred writings and of spiritual teachers’¹⁵. However, it is to Hugh Plat, who wrote *Floures of Philosophie*, 1572, that Whitney owes her use of this image. Plat’s work consists of 883 translated aphorisms from Seneca. Thus, Plat works within a very masculine framework, built on classical knowledge, which Whitney acknowledges as useful but ultimately too rigid to accommodate the feminine and the domestic.

It is clear throughout her work is that Whitney uses the floral metaphors as her predecessors to refer to the study of literature. However, unlike Plat for example, she is much more aware of the limitations and inadequacy of this classical learning. After reading ‘VIRGILL, OVID, MANTUAN’ she is left with a ‘brused brayne’. These literatures are far removed from the domestic sphere, usually depicting male mythological and heroic characters within epic poems. Thus, she is physically left in a worse state than before she started. She describes herself as ‘Harverstlesse’, thus the image of the fruitful Edenic garden becomes barren when juxtaposed with this type of learning. The male bravado of classical literature becomes incompatible with the healing provided by the domestic garden.

Therefore, what is much more fruitful is a reading of Whitney’s work where an interpretation which is much more literal is used to analyse the floral metaphors – a reading where the flowers and gardens remain as such, entrenched in the female domestic sphere of healing in the Early Modern period. The importance of female healers in Renaissance London cannot be contested, some of them even gaining the protection of Queen Elizabeth I, such as Margaret Kennix¹⁶. Martin Marafioti reminds us that early modern doctors used ‘recreation and psychological distracting [as] a significant component¹⁷ during Early Modern England’ in *The Garden Trust* vol. 36, No. 1 (Spring, 2008), p 10.

15 Ibid., p.14.

16 Mary E. Fissell, ‘Women, Health and Healing in Early Modern Europe’ in *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, Vol. 82, No. 1 (Spring 2008), p 10.

17 Katharina N. Piechocki, ‘Fracastoro’s Cure and the Creation

the convalescence period. They defined this recreation as two-fold – both physical, through the senses, but also psychological, through literature. Giralomo Fracastoro's poem *Syphilis*, 1530, was a defining moment in what Katharina Piechocki calls immunopoetics lending its name to the disease itself¹⁸. It thus showed how literature, an avenue of diversion, can be used to define and to a certain extent contain the disease at hand. Thus, through the distraction through the senses and the boundaries imposed by language on the disease, one could effectively try and shut down the mechanism of infection.

Whitney insists on the restorative nature of the smell of the poems, the flowers, which evokes their nature as tools of healing. Cora Fox reminds us that 'nosegays were used to mask bad smells and were thought to offer protection from the diseases carried in those smells'. After being cautioned by her friend, the poet goes 'amongst those Beds so bravely deckt, with every goodly/ Flower' (5) she 'reposed one/ howre' (5). The garden becomes conflated with the domestic space, as although in open space, the enjambment of 'flower' signals to the author that this is a space where she can find safety. The adjective 'goodly' which would be able to easily mutate into 'godly', also introduces this Edenic safety into the garden which allows the author to lose track of time and her senses. This is important when considering the burning of myrrh during religious celebrations would often mark important moments such as birth or death. Once she leaves this secure space, she takes a bundle of flowers 'to smell unto, which might be [her] defence'. Thus, unlike in Fracastoro's poem where the relationship between the word itself and the disease is a simple signified/ signifier relation, here the smell is interposed between the two. The smell itself almost becomes the metonymic signifier for all the attributes exposed earlier; the safety of the 'Beds' and the safety of 'goodly', which protect her from infection. The poet continues to state that 'for thy health, not for thy eye, did I this Posye frame' (6). When using sight, there is nothing interposed between the person and the viewed object, thus no form of protection. Smell is thus defined as a

of Immunopoetics' in *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 68, No. 1 (March 2016), p. 5.

18 Ibid., p. 7

defensive barrier against the possibility of infection.

However, Whitney is acutely aware of her position as a mock female healer offering a cure that will probably not heal anybody. When she realises this, she immediately turns the reader to ‘Sir *Medicus* with stronger Earbes, thy maliadye must quayle’. The cure for the infection is still rooted in the natural world as she mentions ‘Earbes’. It is however entrenched in a much more masculine network of symbols. The latin word *Medicus*, itself a masculine noun, refers to a doctor, which at the time could have only been a man. The tools for healing are no longer the feminine symbol of flowers, but are ‘Earbes’, devoid of smell and beauty, only used for their medicinal purposes. Towards the end of the poem, in a candid moment, she resolves that her ‘Nosegay wyll increase no payne, though sicknes none it/ cure’. The double negation in the line cancels out any previously stated effect that the nosegay might have. Negating all active element from her medicinal tool takes away any blame she might carry if the cure would not work and transposes it onto the reader, and their own ‘complexion’. This is particularly important as it almost becomes comic when looking at the last three words which are enjambed in the poem: ‘cure’, ‘worse’ and ‘sequell know’. It is almost a warning against using the poem and flowers as a cure as it will lead to the person feeling ‘worse’ and most likely death, as shown through the amusing euphemism of ‘sequell know’, a story very familiar to Whitney and her contemporaries.

A priori, Whitney’s exploration of the effect of infectious air on bodies and minds is thus twofold: she is interested in how both literature but also the natural world can have healing effects. However, unlike her predecessors her floral metaphors become much more literal, their smell pervading the poem, distracting the senses and preventing the body from becoming diseased. Thus, Whitney acknowledges the importance of gardening as a tool to be used by poets, she is distinctly aware of the importance of this typically domestic female sphere in the network of curative exchanges happening in the Renaissance. Air which carries both the beautiful smell and infections becomes extremely important in the Renaissance. Almost two decades after Whitney stopped writing Sir Philip Sidney’s *A De-*

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fence of Poesy, 1595, is published after his death. Here, air used in a much more masculine way as the Sidney says that ‘with a force of a divine breath’¹⁹ poets could change the world for the better. Breath and air extend even beyond a passive force becoming a restorative force, becoming almost impregnated with this male bravado ready to engender new worlds.

19 Sir Philip Sidney, *A Defence of Poesy* (London: Cassel & Company, 1891), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1962/1962-h/1962-h.htm>, Accessed 5 November 2022.

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Canada Outside of Imperialism in Marian Engel's *Bear*

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Legitimising Canadian literature as a genre to be read and, more importantly, domestically published, was a monumental undertaking for 20th-century Canadian authors. In order to portray Canadian literature as a distinct genre—and not as second-rate American or British writing—many authors sought to identify common themes in Canadian literature and culture. In 1972, Margaret Atwood made one of the most notable of these attempts through her demi-memoir *Survivor*. With the criticism of Northrop Frye as a guiding principle, Atwood defined Canadian literature based on several essential categories, including a victim mentality resulting from colonialism and “distrust” in nature (Atwood 32-39, 45). However, as Susan Glickman notes in her novel *The Picturesque and the Sublime* (1998), many critics condemned these categorizations of Canadian literature for being “non-evaluative,” and therefore inadequate in defining Canadian literature (Glickman 54). Four years after the publication of *Survivor*, Marian Engel consolidated the rhetoric on Canadian literature in her short novel *Bear* which tracks the experience of an Ontario native, Lou, during her research on a remote island in northern Ontario. In *Bear*, Marian Engel portrays the rural Canadian experience as uncategorizable through an imperialist framework: for British or American authors and Canadian theorists alike. Engel renders colonialist sentiment ineffective through the dynamic between the Institute, Lou, and the setting; she also questions the validity of Canadian literary tropes propounded by Frye and Atwood through Lou’s interactions with the bear as well as the inclusion of the perspectives of local inhabitants. By rejecting these methods of categorization, Engel creates a space for Canada to exist as a wild, indeterminate space.

Engel begins the novel by establishing a quasi-Colonialist dynamic between the historical Institute, Lou, and the Cary

estate, which ultimately fails. Readers learn in the novel's first few pages that Colonel Jocelyn Cary, a descendant of a 19th century settler of northern Ontario, left her remote estate to a historical institute (3, 5). The narrator introduces the historical establishment as merely "the Institute" and continually refers to it as such, except for one instance on the novel's first page (Engel 1). This abstraction signifies the establishment's pervading role of the British Institute in Canada and points to the Institute's purported role as a coloniser in the novel. Despite its intentions, the Institute fails to exploit the novel's setting via the Cary estate. Cary's "fine" collection provides no insight into the local "township between the period of Jesuit visitation and the resurvey of 1878"; therefore, the Institute gains no valuable resources (29, 39). Further, the absence of "local history" involved in the Cary property nullifies any reason for using the island as a "summer Institute" (33). Colonialism relies on "a place from which a profit is made ... in the centre of the empire" (Atwood 31). The island's remote setting thwarts colonialist ambition by offering no profit or informational gain to the Institute.

As a representative of the Institute, Lou is initially positioned as an explorer within a colonialist framework. Readers learn that Lou works for the Institute before it is specified as historical (Engel 1). Lou's association with the abstract Institute demonstrates her loyalty to the British legal and empirical system. The location of Lou's office in the "basement" reinforces her entrenchment in the Institutional structure (1). When the Institution sends Lou on a "job" to evaluate the Cary property, it is sending a representative of the establishment who would "catalogue" the Cary library in an "orderly" way (2, 66). However, within a colonialist framework, the success of exploration depends on the explorer's maintained commitment to the coloniser's cause. Initially, Lou applies the methods of the Institution to her research on Cary island. She "scans" the books in the library to "comprehend [their] scope and order" and works diligently to impose numerical "structure" on the collection (25, 28-29). However, as Lou acclimates to the isolated setting, she undermines the colonialist urge to control. Because she desires to stay on the island, Lou "cheats" in order to

make “the job” of cataloguing the books “last the summer” (66). She abandons the presupposition of timely, proactive work in favour of “berrying” and fishing (77, 98). Instead of providing a pointed report of her progress to the Director at the Institute, Lou calls the Cary collection “better than we could have hoped,” yet proceeds to qualify it as “orthodox”; she confounds authority to accommodate her own will (76). Ultimately, Lou abandons the colonialist structure by resolving to “change” her job (115). Colonialism not only fails to benefit the Institute — its imposing structure drives the explorer away.

Engel satisfies the parts of a colonialist system by introducing the colonised land. The plot of *Bear* initiates when the Institute wins a legal battle for the “Cary estate,” which is “left to the institute” by the late Colonel Jocelyn Cary (2-3). Though the property is no longer an “isolated outpost,” it is still located far “up north” (5). While the Institute is domestic, its legal ownership over a remote island erects a coloniser-colonised relationship between the Institute and its property. Further implying the Cary estate’s status as colonised is the premise that it contains “a large library of materials relevant to early settlement in the area” (3). However, the English lineage of the Carys prevents the property from adopting a colonised status; before travelling to the property, Lou learns that Colonel John William Cary, the first to inhabit the island, “obtained the charter ... to settle Cary Island, having promised to build a lumbermill and provide a sailing ship for trade in the region” (5). Colonel Cary’s promise to bring revenue to the English government through trade in exchange for a land grant places the Carys instead of the Institution as the original acting colonisers of the territory. Since the Carys were only glorified “tourists” in a land rich with natural history and Indigenous culture, they are unable to grant the Institute access to “buried treasure” (113). As their vast library of British literature demonstrates, the Carys embody the Historical Institution — not the remote regions of Canada. The Cary property is a vestige of imported culture when the Institute inherits it. Therefore, it lacks the resources that the Institute seeks to exploit, including evidence of local history. The estate’s failure to serve as an authentic product of the region is the final step in invalidating colonial-

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ism as a means to access a regional space. Through the ineffectiveness of colonialism, Engel suggests that one approach the remote setting of *Bear* through a different means.

In place of the library on the Cary estate, the bear serves as a medium for Lou to engage with nature — as long as she diverges from the Carys' treatment of him. The narration provides that the first Colonel “kept a bear” in admiration of “Lord Byron,” who also kept one (15). Since Byron is a celebrated English poet, this unusual practice seems to be another attempt of Cary's to import British culture to remote Canada; indeed, Lou finds the Colonel's decision to keep a bear “joyfully Elizabethan” (17). The Colonel attempts to access tradition (e.g. the remote landscape) beyond England's borders by confining the bear. While cataloguing the Cary library, Lou notices that the first Colonel left notes inside his books. All of the notes feature bears as their subject. Some are biological observations about bears, but, more interestingly, many notes contain mythology and lore surrounding bears. Lou discovers a note documenting the bear's status as “Dog of God” in the Laplander tradition (40). The Laplanders, now referred to as Sami people, are “the Indigenous people of northern Scandinavia” (Government of Canada). Lou also discovers notes on “Ruthenian legend” and “old Finnish legend,” the contents of which both attest to the bear's divine status (Engel 56, 79). The bear inspires Colonel Cary to explore Indigenous lore, myth, and tradition; however, the Colonel confines his interests in native culture to the early inhabitants of Europe. The confinement of Cary's interest in nature and history is symbolised through his containment of a wild animal. Still, many years after the Colonel's death, the bear is kept in “a shed” and treated “like a dog” (15-16). Cary can only approach nature and history through a civilised perspective. Though the bear evokes interest in nature and origins in the Colonel, he refuses to engage with remote Canada nor with Indigenous cultures and mythologies on whose land he resides.

Alternatively, for Lou, the bear acts as an agent of wildness and nature grounded in a Canadian perspective which evokes an important trope of Canadian literature. In *Survivor*, Atwood devotes a chapter to exploring the Canadian tendency to

characterise “Nature as Monster” (Atwood 41). More precisely, Atwood claims that in Canadian literature, “Nature ... is often dead and unanswering or actively hostile to man” (Atwood 45). In *Bear*, nature is not so easily categorised. At times, the bear inspires fear in Lou, such as when he enters the cabin for the first time and when he swims over her in the lake (Engel 41, 49). This fear derives from her inability to discover his “secrets” and thereby predict and understand his behaviour (55). Though nature is “made without reference to [humanity’s] need to see order in it,” Lou does not view nature as only hostile (Glickman 55). She often views the bear with “love” and “amusement” (Engel 54-55). Even after the bear rips the skin on Lou’s back “from shoulder to buttock,” the next day, she finds him to be a “lover, God or friend” (109-110). According to Glickman, Atwood views “nature’s otherness as an insult” and therefore portrays nature’s violence or indifference as hostile (Glickman 55). Though the bear, and by extension nature, acts violently towards Lou, she still feels “tenderness” towards the bear and “serene” on the island (Engel 111, 114). Thus, Engel complicates Atwood’s negative characterization of nature. Instead, Lou’s relationship with the bear and the island suggest that one cannot contain nature through human methods of rationalisation. Nature is simply “other” without positive or negative connotations.

Through the inhabitants of the region surrounding Cary island, Engel also nuances Atwood’s theory of the victim complex in Canadian literature. Atwood writes that the “central symbol” for Canadian literature is “survival”; and, more specifically, “bare survival,” in which one “made it back from [an] awful experience” that “killed everyone else” (Atwood 27-28). This circumstance creates a perpetrator-victim dynamic between the “hostile outside world” and the Canadian settler (30). In some ways, Homer Campbell, Lou’s primary human contact through *Bear*, exhibits this mentality. Due to his “marina[’s]” proximity to Cary island, Homer assists Lou in getting settled in (Engel 6). Homer quickly demonstrates a distaste for “tourists” whose infiltration of the area requires locals to “lock up” property for security (11-12). Through Homer’s hostility towards outsiders, namely “Americans,” Engel validates Atwood’s

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theory of victimhood in Canadian literature (24). However, it is through local resilience that Engel both supports and rejects elements of Atwood's argument about victimhood and survival in Canadian literature.

By retelling harrowing stories of survival, Homer demonstrates Atwood's primary claim about survival in Canadian literature. Especially during winter, the region poses a threat to survival. While transporting Lou across the river, Homer recounts the story of how "Mrs. Bird" and her "eleven children...survived the winter on turnips" after her husband failed to return from a trip "across the ice...in January" (26). Though the family was rendered nearly resourceless, they defied the odds and survived. The Bird family embodies Atwood's portrayal of "bare survival" through an "awful experience" (Atwood 27-28). Engel only begins to divert from Atwood's theory when Atwood claims that "Canadian authors spend a disproportionate amount of time making sure that their heroes die or fail" (Atwood 31). Though Lou serves as the novel's protagonist, Engel points to "the hardiest," who avoided death from "strange fevers, scurvy, depression, or neglect" as the heroes of the novel (Engel 69). After all, it is Homer and an Indigenous inhabitant of the region, Joe, who will resume as caretakers of Cary island in Lou's stead, as Joe and his aunt Mrs. Leroy become protectors and keepers of the bear (105, 112). These residents of the land sustain themselves on "turnip and potato" and "[keep] the country up [north] going" (52, 61). They do not die or fail; they persevere.

Engel further complicates Atwood's victim theory by creating characters outside of Atwood's model of "basic victim positions" (Atwood 31). Atwood claims victims fall within one of the following categories:

1. To deny the fact that you are a victim.
2. To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of Fate, the Will of God, the dictates of Biology, the necessity decreed by History, or Economics, or the Unconscious, or any other large general powerful idea.
3. To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim

but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable.

4. To be a creative non-victim. (Atwood 32-35)

Homer does not deny the region's victimisation by "tourists" and "government bigwigs," which nullifies the first position (Engel 11, 105). Further, at no point does Homer or any other character provide a "general powerful idea" to explain victimhood in the novel; Engel does not invoke this position (Atwood 33). In contradiction with position three, Homer predicts that outsiders will continue to come to the area, such as the "government bigwigs," and acknowledges that nature continues to be a mortal threat, especially "in winter" (Engel 27, 105). Therefore, Homer views his victimhood as more or less inevitable. Finally, Lou states that the demands of living up north would leave 'no time to concoct a bottle of ink or find a quill to use it with' (69). This statement implies that the "hardest" settlers do not prioritise creativity (69). Engel thereby creates a Canadian identity that deviates from Atwood's "sweeping generalisations" (Atwood 26). By refusing to conform to even a localised framework for Canadian literature, Engel suggests that no structure fully encompasses literature and identity.

In *Bear*, Engel demonstrates that Canada cannot be accessed through colonial or imperialist methods. The hierarchical system Britain used to colonise Canada cannot dissect Canadian sentiment or perspective. Though it is formed for and by Canadians, theoretical approaches to Canadian literature and the Canadian lived experience exclude many voices and perspectives; Indigenous experiences are either absent or misrepresented in early Canadian writing. Atwood and Frye created theories meant to help Canada penetrate a domain dominated by the United Kingdom and the United States; however, they relied on established colonial methods to distinguish Canada, which are, as I have argued through an analysis of *Bear*, ineffective. Alternatively, Engel refuses to make any assertions about what Canadian literature is. Engel refuses to draw any definite conclusions about what *Canada* is, nor what warrants a Canadian identity. Her novel simply embraces Canada and its literature and perspectives as inexpressible, mysterious, and wild.

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Iron Hooks: Hell in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*

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Hell is a landscape animated in our imagination by a long tradition of its portrayal. The abandonment of all hope is advised at the entrance of a grotesque place of torture in *The Divine Comedy*. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton tells of a tempestuous and singed world that reeks of sulfur. Boschian hellscapes render scenes of chaos and tortured souls, William Blake's paintings show Satan and his legions emerging from darkness and raging flames. By the 19th century however, this image is complicated with the questioning of *why* such a place may be conceived of.

Tracing the lineage of our moral values in *The Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche contends that ideals we deem 'good' originate from the resentment of the downtrodden who clothe their powerlessness "in the finery of self-denying, quiet, patient virtue, as though the weakness of the weak were itself... a voluntary achievement" (Nietzsche 27). This "sublime self-deception" is *also* employed to justify their suffering as a sign they are "God's chosen and select" (Nietzsche 28, 29). Those trampled underfoot by the evil (who are not evil, he argues, so much as they are stronger) envisage a place which punishes immoral behavior, where God triumphs over the Godless. He asserts Hell is a lie propagated as consolation for the suffering the meek endure in life, a lie that keeps them from retaliating against their powerlessness. To elucidate his point, Nietzsche brings Tertullian to task, vehemently lambasting the "enraptured visionary" for his imagination of the wicked being tortured:

And when I see those governors, persecutors of the
Lord's name, melting in flames more savage than those
with which they insolently raged against Christians!
When I see those wise philosophers who persuaded

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their disciples that nothing was of any concern to God and who affirmed to them either that we have no souls or that our souls will not return to their original bodies! Now they are ashamed before those disciples, as they are burned together with them. (Nietzsche 31-32)

Aquinas, too, trusts in the coming of this torment, explaining that the sight of it by “the blessed in the heavenly kingdom” will permit them to “even more enjoy their blessedness” (Nietzsche 30). Though these “weaklings” *do* crave retribution against the powerful, they take no action to reject their own lack of power (Nietzsche 27). Instead, they defer to the orders of God in hopes their righteousness will ensure the balancing of the scales in kingdom come. Nietzsche sees Hell as existing to cement in a people certain moral principles. His polemic against the origins of good generates an exhaustive conception of eternal punishment, but it may be generally summarized as such: For Nietzsche, Hell is a fantasy of the just. For Dostoevsky, on the other hand, Hell is a fantasy of the condemned.

Vignettes portraying characters seeking repentance and absolution in *Brothers Karamazov* bring this impression of Hell into relief. In conversation with his son the monastic novice Alexei, Fyodor Pavlovich wonders about the hooks he imagines the devils will use to drag him to Hell: “Hooks? Where do they get them? What are they made of? Iron? Where do they forge them? Have they got some kind of factory down there?” and continues, wondering whether a difference would be made were there a ceiling in Hell, asks Alyosha his thoughts, and even references a description of Hell from Charles Perrault’s parody of the *Aeneid*’s sixth book (Dostoevsky 25). His effort to conjure as vivid an image of Hell as he can reads as though he is trying to convince himself of some eventual physical punishment for his sins.

The highest religious authority portrayed in the book is the elder Zosima, who places the burden of freedom upon those who seek forgiveness. Instead of allowing them to defer to the *possibility* they may suffer for their sins in a supposed afterlife, he demands their active repentance in this life.

Early in the text, a young, widowed peasant wracked with

grief seeks to speak with Zosima. She begins explaining details of her married life; that her husband badly abused her until one day, when he was bedridden by illness, she murdered him. That she did so, however, is not explicitly stated in the passage. Realizing what she is about to admit, Zosima draws nearer to her, out of earshot of those around them, but also excluding readers from their exchange. Not afforded the typical clandestine setting for confession amongst the crowd of “about twenty” women of faith waiting to speak with the elder, a makeshift intimacy is created between himself and the woman (Dostoevsky 49). Overlooking this establishing of secrecy might lead a reader to interpret this passage as simply showcasing Zosima’s holy forgiveness. Their secrecy, however, establishes a trust that readers are not privy to, which opens the door to an interpretation of their subsequent exchange that extends far beyond charitable forgiveness.

The young woman goes on to explain she has *already* confessed and both times was still allowed to receive communion. She traveled 300 miles to Zosima not for absolution; she has already been forgiven insofar as religious jurisdiction might go. Her “grief has caught hold” of her, and with it a fear of anticipated punishment, which grows and cannot be extinguished without chastisement: What she actually seeks of Zosima is his *punishment* which he denies in his reply (Dostoevsky 54). This woman acted to free herself of suffering in life and must therefore bear the terror of not knowing what will become of her soul; murdering her abusive husband has left her with an even more onerous burden. Zosima instructs “do not be afraid,” implying that God forgives, but not freely; in the same breath he warns her to “let repentance not slacken” in her (Dostoevsky 55). Yes, God forgives, but it is now this woman’s responsibility to hold taut her repentance, lifelong work to which she must commit. In this light, Zosima’s response no longer seems so charitable. It places squarely on this woman the onus of her action.

Readers encounter a similar situation as Zosima recalls a mysterious visitor he once began receiving, with whom he became friends. At one of their meetings, the man suddenly confesses killing his first love out of jealousy that “she had

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already given her heart to another man” and explains he has decided to admit his guilt publicly (Dostoevsky 323). Resolved about the public confession, he demands Zosima advise him how to part with his family, tormented by the fear that they will reject him, that his deed may sully their lives. Zosima replies “Go... tell them. All will pass” (Dostoevsky 327).

The man stalls his confession, returning for two weeks, demanding of Zosima “decide my fate!” (Dostoevsky 328). Zosima does not allow him to let go of his resolve to confess, ensuring him “everyone will understand” when his resolve falters (Dostoevsky 326). But this response is not an attempt to comfort the man. By confessing and inviting Zosima to take part in deciding his fate, the visitor seeks to externalize his conscience. In Zosima’s refusal to take ownership beyond advising him to stay true to his resolution, the man is made to bring *himself* to reckoning. Before finally confessing his crime, the visitor comes to Zosima one last time and admits he had planned to kill him, but stopped himself, quelled perhaps after remembering the “Hell” of unbearable torment and brooding he fell to after the last murder (Dostoevsky 327).

In Alyosha’s manuscript of his homilies, there is a section devoted to Zosima’s discourse exploring the tangibility of Hell:

People speak of the material flames of hell. I do not explore this mystery, and I fear it, but I think that if there were material flames, truly people would be glad to have them, for, as I fancy, in material torment they might forget, at least for a moment, their far more terrible spiritual torment. And yet it is impossible to take this spiritual torment from them, for this torment is not external, but is within them. (Dostoevsky 342)

Through Zosima in *Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky explores the contention that Hell *cannot* be a physical place because its existence would be a relief for sinners. He introduces readers to characters who are forced to come to terms with the gravity of their actions by taking ownership of their pursuit of absolution. Dostoevsky urges readers to consider that even more fearful than being punished is being made to face the rigorous moral consequences of one’s most wicked deeds. Hell

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for Dostoevsky is not a dark underworld place with iron hooks and flames. It is the excruciating experience of living with guilt and of the confrontation of conscience necessary in alleviating it.

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Defiance of Tradition Through Form and Fiction: Mona Caird’s “The Yellow Drawing Room” and George Egerton’s “Virgin Soil”

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During the Victorian Era, the traditional triple-decker novel dominated the British literary scene; however, many *Fin de Siècle* writers considered the triple-decker economically and aesthetically limiting. The three-volume format was expensive and thematically reserved for “mid-Victorian values of conventionality, regularity, propriety and dubious pretensions of endurance and monumentality” (Menke). This format was also typically reserved for male authors. Consequently, New Women writers of the *Fin de Siècle* often gravitated towards the underappreciated genre of the short story to explore, question, and redefine women’s place in the fictional and contemporary world. Prominent New Woman writers like Sarah Grand, Mona Caird, and George Egerton further defied tradition by examining the taboo subjects of female experience, such as female agency and sexuality in the public and domestic spheres. In her short story “The Yellow Drawing Room” (1892) Mona Caird boldly speaks out against Victorian gendered conventions of marriage through the character of Vanora Haydon. After her mother’s death, Vanora decides to paint her family’s drawing-room yellow—a color associated with decadence and emancipation—to the horror and bewilderment of the archetypal Victorian narrator, Mr. St Vincent. Similarly, George Egerton speaks out against the constraints of marriage in her short story “Virgin Soil” (1894). Seventeen-year-old Flo leaves home to take up married life with her much older husband, Philip. Five years later, she returns home by train to confront her mother about the horrors of her marriage. Through their short stories

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titled “The Yellow Drawing Room” and “Virgin Soil,” Caird and Egerton reimagine the Victorian marriage-plot to illustrate the oppression of women’s intellectual and sexual agency, respectively, in the realm of marriage.

The Fin de Siecle featured intense debate concerning the appropriate form and content of fiction. As the traditional triple-decker novel decreased in popularity, many authors began experimenting with and redefining fiction. The New Woman author of the 1890s played a significant role during this period of experimentation, as her writing directly involved the negotiation of language, form, and genre (Pykett 194). In order to break with the traditional three-volume novel, the New Woman author turned to the underappreciated genre of the short story, which “many Victorian authors regarded with suspicion as a diversion from more profitable novels and plays” (Chan 118). The New Woman author fragmented the novel and made it episodic by “adopt[ing] a proto-modernist form, using a proliferation of voices and perspective to challenge fixed views” (Pykett 195). The New Woman’s efforts to stray from the traditional novel led her to abandon the tradition of nineteenth century English realism, which privileged the masculine imagination, in favor of developing a specifically feminine voice and form for her fiction. The New Women novel led to the rise of feminine New Realism, which critic Brimley Johnson describes as writers who sought “with passionate determination, for that reality which is behind the material, the things that matter, spiritual things, ultimate Truth” (Pykett 196). This “ultimate Truth” primarily concerned “the truth about [female] human sexuality” (Ardis 37). Feminine New Realism prioritized subjective female experiences in the public and domestic spheres. The “marriage-problem plot” was popular among New Woman novelists and short story writers alike; however, *The Yellow Book*, which provided a significant platform for women’s writing, “made a convention of [the marriage-plot] in shorter forms”. According to critic Winnie Chan: “the marriage-problem plot radically challenged the convention of the Victorian novel that ends in a wedding, simply by depicting what happens after the happily-ever-after ending” (128). By redefining the traditional marriage plot, the New Woman author “reje[ct]ed both the familiar

patterning of the marriage plot and the cultural endorsement of marriage as a means by which “patterns of passion and patterns of property’ are always ‘br[ought] into harmonious alignment” (Ardis 61). As well, the heroines of these new marriage plots opposed the Ruskinian model of a “true wife”; rather, the New Woman’s heroine’s “behavior cannot be codified within the marital system of the bourgeois social order” (Ardis 93). By adopting the short story genre, feminine New Realism, and a reimagining of the Victorian marriage-plot, the New Woman author created a powerful vehicle for subjective female experience.

The New Woman author Mona Caird shocked her contemporaries with the publication of her article “The Morality of Marriage” (1888) in *The Westminster Review*, in which she declared marriage “a vexatious failure” (Caird). According to Caird, marriage is a business transaction women entered into both unwillingly and ignorantly, as a means of economic and social survival. Caird also disputes a Ruskinian view of marriage, in which a “true wife” uses her intellect not “for invention of creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision... Her great function is Praise [of the husband]” (Hickman, slides). Mona Caird illustrates her view of marriage through her short story “The Yellow Drawing Room,” in which the narrator, the archetypical Victorian gentleman Mr. St Vincent, becomes infatuated with the defiant New Woman, Vanora Haydon. Through the use of a conservative male narrator, Caird is able to effortlessly illustrate the oppressive aspects of a traditional marriage. Mr. St Vincent is prejudiced against Vanora before meeting her, especially after learning that she “had unworthily employed her liberty by producing a room of brilliant yellow” (Caird 21). During the *Fin de Siecle*, the color yellow had a very significant meaning, most often associated with decay, audacity, and bold transgression. Vanora choice to paint the room yellow makes the room her own, something denied to so many women at that time. Mr. Vincent cannot cope with the color scheme as it represents Vanora’s unpredictability and her refusal to submit to male domination; this contradicts his ideas of a “true woman,” who is “retiring, unobtrusive, indistinguishable even until you come to know her well” (22).

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Despite his hatred for a woman of Vanora's type, St. Vincent finds himself utterly infatuated with her; as a consequence, his conservative ideas of a "true woman" are turned on their head. Vanora becomes a "necessity" to the narrator and he cannot stand to be away from her, despite her sister Clara being a much more suitable match. When Mr. St. Vincent expresses his desires to Vanora, she rejects his ideas of marriage:

'I offer you no prison but a home,' [he] cried excitedly.

'You would turn all homes into prisons,' she returned

'Prisons whose bars are the golden bars of love and duty.'

'Yes, you take a woman's love and duty, and fashion out of them her prison bars...But I don't like even *golden* bars, Mr. St Vincent' (29)

Mr. St Vincent believes that through "womanly submission", Vanora would "realize where her true power lay" (27; 26). However, Vanora believes that such a marriage is intellectually repressive, as she would only be appreciated under the condition that she remains a dutiful wife and mother. Despite their vast differences, Vanora and Mr. St Vincent are both attracted to each other; however, they do not end up married as they most likely would have in a traditional Victorian novel. Instead, after Vanora's sister Clara discovers their feelings for one another, she is devastated, leaving Vanora to choose between her sister and Mr. St Vincent. Vanora chooses her sister; they leave the country together and Mr. St Vincent never sees her again. Vanora reclaims her intellectual agency that Mr. St Vincent attempted to diminish by choosing her sister and a life free of "golden bars" (29). As a result, Vanora remains in [Mr. St Vincent]'s mind as "a haunting, incomprehensible dream," as the New Woman did for many conservative Victorian men of the time (30).

To continue, George Egerton transformed New Woman fiction by touching upon the dark underbelly of the unchecked patriarchy; she discusses rape, harassment, and sexual agency, among other topics, never before touched by writers. She advocates for women's potential and control, in and outside of the realm of marriage. Egerton refuses to accept less than "the most complete life, the most complete freedom, the most complete soul for her women" (Vicinus 187). For Egerton, a

complete life could mean a traditional marriage, a free liaison, or simply independence; however, whatever Egerton chooses to describe, she never denies her heroines sexual agency and fulfillment. In her short story titled "Virgin Soil", Egerton investigates the sexual dynamics of a seventeen-year-old bride named Flo and an older man. She illustrates the dichotomy between young and old through physical descriptors; while the bridegroom is described with "slightly gray" hair, Flo is described as "scarcely fully developed in her fresh youth" (Egerton 145; 146). Egerton utilizes time shifts, from past to present, to illustrate the dire consequences of Flo's marriage to her husband and to illustrate all that she has learned in the process. On the day of her departure, Flo sobs in her mother's lap. Her mother does not comfort her and provides her with little to no information about marriage besides to "obey" her husband (146). It is also important to note the sexual undertones of Flo's question to her mother—"What is it that I do not know mother?" (146). It appears that due to her young age, and hence, her sexual naivety, Flo is unaware of the sexual obligation she has to her husband as his wife. When Flo returns to her childhood home to visit her mother, she is physically and mentally diminished: "Her skin is sallow... the look of fawn-like shyness has vanished from her eyes, they burn sombrefully and resentfully in their sunken orbits" (150). Flo reveals to her mother that her husband has "gone to Paris with a girl from the Alhambra!" (153). Egerton then switches the point of view to Flo's mother, who discerns Flo's husband's infidelity to be the reason for Flo's ill appearance. This narrative switch is vital as it demonstrates the change in thinking from the traditional woman to the New Woman. Flo is grateful for her husband's infidelity and states: "These little trips have been my one solace. I assure you, I have always hailed them as lovely oases in the desert of matrimony, resting-places on the journey. My sole regret is their infrequency" (153). Egerton's heroine also speaks to the aversion of intimacy with her husband, stemming from a lack of sexual experience and most likely, a lack of sexual attraction to her husband. Addressing her mother, Flo states: "Do you think that if I had realized how fearfully close the intimacy with him would have been that my whole soul would

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not have stood up in revolt, the whole woman in me cried out against such a degradation of myself?" (158). As well, Flo does not blame men for their ways, but rather, blames her mother who "sent [Flo] out to fight the biggest battle of a woman's life...with a white gauze of maiden purity as a shield," which evidently was not enough to spare Flo from the troubles of her marriage (157). Moreover, Flo reclaims her sexual agency as she declares that "[she] is not going back" to her husband (154). She refuses to abide by the rules and customs of a traditional marriage until she finds a man who "[will] satisfy [her], body and soul... for whom the white fire of love or call in [her] heart would have burned clearly and saved [her] from the feeling of loathing horror that has made [her] married life a nightmare to [her]" (159). Moreover, as in Caird's short story, Egerton's "Virgin Soil" does not follow the traditional marriage plot. Rather, Flo decides to leave her unfaithful husband and pursue her own life. In order to pursue a "complete life", Egerton positions Flo in the "world of nature" (162). The symbolic ending of Flo "tak[ing] the train in the opposite direction" further illustrates Flo's journey to a "complete life" as physically and mentally in opposition to a traditional marriage.

In conclusion, Caird and Egerton reimagine the Victorian marriage plot through their short stories titled "The Yellow Drawing Room" and "Virgin Soil". Through their heroines Vanora and Flo, Caird and Egerton illustrate the oppression of women's intellectual and sexual agency, respectively, in the realm of marriage, and the reclamation of agency in the face of tradition. Caird highlights women's intellectual agency in contrast with the Ruskinian view of a "true woman" from the narrator, Mr. St Vincent. In contrast, Egerton touches upon the more taboo subject of women's sexual agency by investigating the sexual dynamics of Flo's relationship with her older husband. Just as New Women authors defied the traditional Victorian novel in form and subject matter, the heroines of new women authors defied tradition within the fictional world. Vanora and Flo reclaim intellectual and sexual agency, respectively, by pursuing an untraditional path in life for a Victorian woman at the time. While many critics praised the New Woman for her leap in formal and fictional conventions, other critics

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“attempted to isolate New Woman literature, to quarantine it at a safe distance from the cultural mainstream” (Ardis 47). Despite attempts to diminish the New Woman author, the cultural and literary impact of the New Woman short story cannot be denied.

DEFIANCE OF TRADITION

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The Villainization of the Large Female Body in Stephen King's *Misery*

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Since the advent of western media, fat women have been the consistent subjects of mockery and denigration. From Disney movies to highbrow literature, the overweight female body is a commonly villainized trope, one which is typically contrasted with the thin female heroine. Such stereotypes are ingrained in the public from childhood: in the *The Little Mermaid*, waifish protagonist Ariel must face the cumbersome figure of Ursula, and *Mulan* depicts a thin woman who is antagonized by a fat female matchmaker, who is also the butt of several jokes. Marvel comics' Pink Pearl is another representation of the fat female villain; she eats copious amounts of food between panels in which she crushes heroes to death with her enormous body. This depiction, however, is by no means limited to children's media nor the television screen. As early as the 1920s, novels like *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* depict the stocky figure of Lady Beekman harassing the book's willowy heroines, and the 1950s' *Stella Dallas* describes an overweight mother whose peers constantly mock and belittle her for her failure to conform to their beauty standards. The fat female villain permeates western culture and media, a trope so pervasive that many fail to notice its prevalence.

The antagonism forced upon the large female body in western media is nowhere more evident than in Stephen King's *Misery*. The horror novel, which recounts injured author Paul Sheldon's captivity at the hands of the hefty and sadistic Annie Wilkes, exemplifies the societal detestation of large women. Annie's characterization as overweight is a deliberate narrative choice, meant to reveal her nonconformity to traditional gender roles, to establish her as able to overpower Paul, and to emphasize her lack of self-control; through Annie's character, King contributes to the societal villainization of the large female body.

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Annie's weight and its connection to villainy are established through her characterization as contrasting to Paul's preconceived notions about the ideal female body. From the first time Paul sees Annie, he describes her as possessing "no feminine curves at all," save the "large but unwelcoming swell of her bosom" (King 7). Paul further defines Annie as "big but not generous," as consisting of solid matter rather than "welcoming orifices" (King 8). Although these conclusions do provide information about Annie, they are more enlightening when interpreted in relation to Paul's perception of women in general; Paul views women as womanly only when they have curves that are "generous" instead of "unwelcoming," when they possess "orifices" rather than Annie's characteristic solidity. Because Paul, and arguably King himself, does not perceive Annie as being feminine or welcoming, he views her as unable to provide him with any sexual gratification; therefore, he is disgusted with her far before he realizes she is mentally disturbed. In the case of *Misery*, this presumptive judgement is eventually justified; however, it reveals immediately the stigma with which Annie's body is regarded throughout the novel, specifically because of its large and socially unacceptable size rather than its nature as dangerous. In the words of Andrew Schopp, "King initially establishes Annie as monster, not for her violent acts, but for her deviation from a prescribed role for women" (31).

Annie is further contrasted with thin women when compared to the title character of Paul's *Misery* series. Misery Chastain, the object of several men's attraction throughout Paul's writing, is coded as undeniably thin. In one scene, she "distract[s] one of the viscount's guards... by slipping one gorgeously unclad leg out... and waving it delicately" (King 132). In another, she is "tied to a post in a jungle clearing" with a pair of handcuffs, where she awaits rescue by her male companions (King 233). A mere page later, even as she remains in mortal peril, Paul takes care to describe "the swell of her breasts and hips" (King 234). Thus, Paul, through his role as author and creator of *Misery*, reveals his subconscious expectations of women: he presumes they should be slim, feminine, and in need of rescuing, possessing no agency over their own

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bodies but depending entirely on the intervention of a man to save the day. Such images contrast starkly with Annie, both physically and narratively. Her distinct lack of feminine curves and her stocky build are nothing like Misery's; while Misery is fragile and feminine, Annie is "solid and impervious" (King 207). She stands "like a logger," wears a "man's tee-shirt," and is often covered in "big sweatstains" after doing yard work (King 222, 264, 266). Annie, furthermore, exercises agency and control throughout the novel while Misery never does. In fact, while Misery's frailty is accentuated by her inability to escape the handcuffs she is trapped in, Annie is the one who holds Paul captive by handcuffing him. Annie subverts Paul's expectations of women, as represented by her size and its contrast to Misery, and she therefore disgusts and terrifies him.

Annie's large body, now established as repulsive specifically because of its size and its contrast to his perception of women, further establishes her as a villain by illuminating Paul's anxiety surrounding Annie's nonconformity to gender roles. Natalie Schroeder claims that King's initial characterization of Annie's distinctly overweight form is one that "establishes her as androgynous—a phallic woman" (Schroeder 138). Schroeder's argument in conjunction with King's description of Annie's large size convalesce to characterize Annie as subversive of gender roles that dictate the thin and submissive woman. This subversion contributes to her efficacy as a villain because it makes Paul, and therefore the readers who perceive her through Paul's eyes, fear her. Paul harbors this fear of Annie because she emasculates him through her possession of distinctly masculine traits, traits which King conveys by establishing her as a "sexless," large, and distinctly unfeminine woman (Pharr 24). Annie's lack of womanly qualities, due largely to her weight, intimidate Paul because they contradict his understanding of womanhood. Annie is not the "gorgeous" damsel in distress he creates in his novel, *Misery Returns*; rather, she exhibits traits, such as large stature, that Paul attributes primarily to men (King 132). Annie upsets the gendered dichotomy through which Paul understands the world, which leaves him feeling terrified and vulnerable. Paul's reaction to Annie's size, which he deems masculine, characterizes Annie as

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worthy of fear, which contributes to her efficacy as a disturbing villain.

King further cultivates fear surrounding Annie by using her large size to remind readers that she can easily overpower, harm, and control Paul. Because Annie is bigger than Paul, she is able to physically dominate him, which further reinforces the masculine agency she possesses over him. King continually makes use of her considerable stature to harness this masculine agency, subverting gender norms by characterizing “Annie-as-rapist” and Paul as victim (Schopp 31). Annie violates Paul constantly throughout *Misery*, whether she is “rap[ing] him full of her air” through mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, “exercising editorial authority over his body” by cutting off his foot and thumb, or injecting him with unknown drugs (King 5, 287). These despicable actions all mirror violations more often forced upon women by men, such as sexual assault or secretly administering date-rape drugs. Annie abuses Paul much in the same way, as King himself puts it, that “a man forces... himself [on] an unwilling woman” (King 5). Annie is able to violate Paul’s bodily autonomy because, just as typically larger men can overpower smaller women, Annie’s large physical size enables her to overpower and control Paul. Because he must endure the abuse of a woman who is physically stronger than and sexually unappealing to him, Paul is forced to endure a reality many women face: the constant fear of being violated and overpowered by a larger figure.

Annie’s overweight body grants her the ability to rival Paul’s strength and control his body, which Schroeder claims produces an “ultra-violent sexual battle” as Paul experiences immense terror regarding Annie’s power over him (Schroeder 137). Douglas Keeseey claims Paul’s general fear of Annie’s ability to physically control him is fueled by “the fear of anal rape—being given an enema with a knife, having a needle stuck up his ass or buckshot up his bumhole” (Keeseey 60). However, most compelling arguments, and King’s work itself, focus on Paul’s constant castration anxiety. Paul fears that Annie, with her “solid body,” “thick legs,” and “heavy face,” will remove the last trace of his manhood from him, therefore solidifying herself as dominant over him and his body (King 54,

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75, 122). Paul's anxieties about Annie's power illuminate societal fears, perhaps King's own, about the large woman's ability to physically rival men and to metaphorically emasculate them. In Annie's case, such fears are justified; her manic-depressive tendencies and violent destruction of Paul's body are linked integrally with her size. Annie's significant weight, therefore, is established as an indicator that cruelty and sadism result from the physical power possessed by large women, and thus that inherent villainy accompanies the heavy female body.

Annie exerts another type of power over Paul, one that is far different than sexual power: maternal power. It is arguably her enormous size that causes Paul to perceive her as wielding maternal control; like a child would next to an adult, he feels small next to Annie because she is larger than him. In a haze of pain, Paul recognizes the strange maternal relationship Annie seems to share with him, perceiving her as "Annie the mom" between sleeping and waking (King 254). He also consistently notices a "disconcerting expression of motherly love and tenderness" upon her face as she feeds and cares for him, much in the way a mother would a small child (King 159). Keesey interprets this maternal quality in conjunction with Annie's masculinity, also a product of her characterization as overweight, referencing her as the "phallic mother" who not only dominates and disciplines Paul as would a mother, but also emasculates him by doing so (59). Paul receives Annie's domineering agency with confusion and turmoil, interpreting her as simultaneously sexually dominating due to her physical power over him, sexually repulsive due to her overweight body, and motherly due to her large stature which makes him feel childlike. Therefore, Paul can only imagine one way to rationalize Annie's control over his life: he refers to her not as a rapist, nor a mother, nor a monster, but as a "goddess" (King 254). Only through this phrase is he able to capture the complete control she exercises over his body and his life as a whole, and to convey the powerlessness he feels in the face of her oppression.

The control that the "goddess" Annie exerts over Paul is "repressive and complete;" however, any control exerted over her own body is largely absent (Jaber 175). This lack of

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self-control is what most establishes her as a truly terrifying villain. Annie may have immense power over Paul due to her physical size, but her fatness is also an indicator of limited impulse control. As Christine A. Smith explains, society perceives women who are fat as “out of control,” and Annie fits this societal conception of the overweight woman fully (Smith 629). Annie’s lack of control is marked most obviously by her gluttonous consumption of food. She constantly smells like food: “vanilla cookies and chocolate ice cream... and peanut-butter fudge” when Paul first meets her, later “gravy” and “dead fish” (King 5, 172, 159). Furthermore, Annie’s gluttonous habits are often observed directly by Paul; when depressed, she “scoop[s] ice cream into her mouth, or maybe handfuls of half-congealed chicken gravy with a Pepsi chaser, simply eating and drinking in a deep depressed daze” (King 178).

However, Annie’s lack of self-control extends beyond her gluttonous intake of food; she also metaphorically and voraciously consumes violence. When Paul cautiously explores her house, which is covered in “drying drips and splashes... mostly of ice-cream,” he imagines her “licking the [rat’s] blood from her fingers, doing it as absently as she must have eaten the ice-cream and Jell-O and soft black jellyroll cake” (King 178). Keesey argues that Paul also “imagines Annie as an over-eater” who, given the chance would gladly “eat [him] up” (61, 62).

Annie’s lacking impulse control is not only evident in such descriptions; it also rears its head when she commits violent acts. In addition to murdering hospital patients, Annie killed her father, her roommate, children, her lover, and countless other victims. Some interpretations of *Misery* may find Annie’s strange array of murder victims inconsistent with the rest of her character; however, when taken in conjunction with her complete lack of emotional control, King’s narrative choice can be more fully understood by looking at Annie’s body.

Annie murders without discrimination because her appetite for violence, just like her appetite for food, cannot be satiated. When she kills, she “transform[s] into something not completely human in the eyes of Paul,” losing all discipline or self-regulation skills until she is a madwoman hellbent on

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destruction alone (Jaber 174). She exhibits this same crazed lack of control when she cuts off Paul's foot and thumb, and when she runs down a young police officer with a lawn mower. As Jaber argues, King's choice to make Annie come unglued when killing "emphasizes her insanity," characterizing her as "an alien of unknown entity that is pure and unexplained evil" (176). Therefore, Annie's murders, her consumption of food, and her dominating agency over Paul are marked by behaviors no self-disciplined or controlled person would perform. This lack of control presenting in "aggressive behaviors" and "levels of violence" is explicitly linked to her weight and uncontrolled need to consume; as Smith affirms, "fat signifies a lack of control" in the eyes of society, and most definitely in the character of Annie (Smith 629).

In Stephen King's *Misery*, Annie Wilkes is an effective villain largely because she is fat. Her large body allows her to disrupt gender roles meant to establish Paul as superior to her, to exercise complete control and dominance over her captive, and to lose all control regarding her voracious appetites for both food and violence. King's choice to characterize Annie as overweight, therefore, has faced little to no criticism because it is an effective strategy. Annie is indeed a more frightening villain because she is fat, and she is able to exert feasible control over a man because she is larger than him. Had King written Annie as a thin woman, she would have likely been far less intimidating and far less believable.

However, the singular fact that assigning Annie a heavy weight is an effective strategy to establish her as a villain does not mean it is a societally beneficial one. Fat women are villainized in media from paperback to television screen, and real overweight women face similar struggles with assigned antagonism. For example, famous hip-hop artist Lizzo has been strongly criticized for the "perceived unruliness" of her body and told to lose weight, while her thin counterparts face no comments on their body and are praised for their talent instead (Mason 272). Similarly, body-positive model Tess Holliday was accused of "promot[ing] an unhealthy lifestyle" when she was featured on the cover of *People* magazine, while models who are unhealthily thin face little backlash (Otis 157). An-

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nie Wilkes may be a fictional character, but she exemplifies the perception of the large female body as ill-intentioned by society at large, and she contributes to the stigma women like Lizzo and Tess Holliday face for merely existing. Annie was truly a villain in every sense of the word, but the vast majority of real fat women do not remotely fit within the trope to which Annie belongs. The image perpetuated by western media of the villainized large female body may be an effective narrative strategy, but it supports harmful stereotypes, stereotypes not just confined to stories but damaging real people. Unless the character of the fat female villain is countered with representations of fat women as heroines, as protagonists, and as role models, the trope will continue to have real consequences that extend far beyond the pages of books.

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Emma's Perception: The Riddle of Unconscious Thought in Jane Austen's *Emma*

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Introduction

Jane Austen's *Emma* is known for its ambiguity—an attribute further strengthened by the constant recourse to puzzles and riddles. The story invites its readers to join in on the effort of trying to piece together the hints strewn across the pages, both conventional and otherwise. A wealth of literal puzzles exists for our interpretation (Mr. Elton's charade and the clever things of Box Hill, for example), yet the story directs us to a different kind of puzzle: interpreting the minds of others. The thrust of *Emma's* narrative relies on this continued speculation of what the characters are really thinking and how Emma utilizes that perception to achieve her desires.

There exists much scholarship on the relationship between Emma and the narrator through Austen's use of free indirect discourse as a means of calling attention to Emma's mishappen perceptions.¹ This paper does not seek to continue in that vein when approaching Emma's perceptions in the novel and instead focuses on the process of misreading itself and the subjectivity that comes with a perception free of narratorial omniscience. Through this lens, the puzzle of Emma's reasoning falls before us and, in examining it, we realize the ways Emma imprints her ideals onto the world around her as traceable aspects of her own consciousness. Emma's readings not only inform the reader of her mishappen world view, they also allow the reader insight into the novel's most protected mind.

I spend much of the paper focused on the interaction between Frank Churchill and Emma Woodhouse as they specu-

1 See Helen Dry's "Syntax and Point of View in Jane Austen's *Emma*" for a comprehensive analysis of this relationship and how the reader can differentiate which narrations belong to Emma and her biases and which belong to the narrator.

late on the relationship between Jane Fairfax and the Dixons, paying particular attention to the hierarchical imbalance presented by Jane's reserve towards Emma and the methods our heroine utilizes in her attempts to attach evidentiary meaning to Jane's actions. Indeed, Jane's unreadability in relation to Emma's perception forces Emma to attribute her subjective experiences onto her object, therefore allowing the reader insight into her unconscious desires.

Existing Scholarship

As Jeanne Britton states, "through puzzles and riddles, characters [in *Emma*] encode their undeclared affections and give rise to misunderstandings that propel the novel's plot" (651). These indirect mediums "conspicuously display characters' struggles to inhabit other minds and they rely on an interpretive logic that essentially takes as its goal the answer to a riddler's implicit question — 'what am I thinking?'" (651–52). Austen, Britton argues, draws parallels between free indirect discourse's tracing of the narrator's movement in and out of character's minds and the "cognitive efforts" of placing ourselves, the readers, in the minds of others (657). Working as an indicative tool, free indirect discourse thus revolves around the difficulty apparent in entering minds not belonging to ourselves. However, while Britton's analysis provides astute commentary on the use of free indirect discourse in correcting the puzzles of character's minds, it fails to sufficiently turn the focus onto Emma herself, largely due to Emma's positional relation to the narrator.

In regard to this relationship between Emma and the narrator, Rachel Provenzano Oberman has noted that readers must pay careful attention to the actual speaker, and points out the difficulty in distinguishing the two who, despite frequently opposing each other, share the same vocabulary and style (5). Without this diligence, "it is easy to misconstrue a character's subjective thoughts as a narrator's objective statement, or vice-versa" (2). A key distinction Oberman makes in differentiating the two is that "while Emma tells the story of her perceptions as they occur to her at the time, the narrator is telling the story of the gradual growth of Emma's consciousness" (6). Further, as the novel progresses, Emma's voice grows

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continually more aligned with that of the narrator, displaying an intentional development in the novel meant to illuminate Emma's ability to learn how to "mix other's voices into her own... Emma's ability to learn narrative 'skills' such as the fusing of other voices into her own represents the true mark of her maturity" (6). In other words, Emma learns of herself as a puzzle and, with that knowledge finally possesses the capability of learning what *she* actually desires.

Oberman draws out the elusive character of Emma, treating her as unsolvable until the moment that Emma herself grows mature enough to recognize herself as an individual capable of (self)-interpretation. I believe that, for as much as Austen intentionally lures Emma into that revelation, she simultaneously hints at Emma's unconscious desires, opening the character to the reader's investigation before Emma herself is even aware of her capability as an object of observation.

David Davies builds on that relation by drawing attention to the discrepancy between "the evidence available to Emma—reported actions of other characters and lengthy passages entirely in the form of dialogue—and the conclusions that Emma draws from his evidence" (184). Emma's development into someone capable of apprehending multiple consciousnesses and through that, perceiving herself from the outside, comes as a revelation to her; for the reader, we can see Emma's inner thoughts as they reflect in her judgements of others.

Emma is not a creator, strengthening the parallel between her and the narrator. She is privileged enough to avoid the necessity of offering a representation to the public for their interpretation. The absence makes her akin to an observer of Highbury.² The lack of materialized consciousness hides her self-centered model of perception and contributes significantly to the ambiguity so apparent in the novel. Indeed, the only objects the reader may glean to interpret Emma's inner self are her paintings—creations that continually fail to align with

2 Mr. Woodhouse likewise displays this hierarchical position. Not only is he similarly absent from any creations, Mr. Woodhouse displays an even more individualistic form of perception than Emma to the point that the narrator tells us that "he would never believe other people to be different from himself" (Austen 20).

reality.

Emma's lack of indicative puzzles stymies interpretation of her consciousness, yet she is not so abstracted from the novel as to become an observer in full. The contributions Emma makes to the novel, through her misshapen perceptions, serve as evidence for the attentive reader to deduce her inner thoughts. In such instances, it accomplishes nothing to attempt a portrayal of Emma herself; her perception has already reconciled the reality of the situation to her consciousness and the established hierarchy remains intact.³ We must therefore approach Emma in the moment of speculation as she struggles to interpret her object. I point to Jane Fairfax, who consistently avoids both Emma's and the reader's easy classification due to her reserved manners.

In a similar vein, Marcia McClintock Folsom makes the claim that "Emma repeatedly attempts to impose her ideals on the surprisingly unmalleable world, but her thoughts frequently reveal that she has to argue with herself inwardly" (45). This is not quite accurate. Emma does not impose herself onto the world so much as she jumbles the signs relayed to her by the world. Emma's role is almost always purely speculative. To impose herself, as it were, she would have to actively attempt to fix the reality to match her imaginings in a manner similar Mr. Woodhouse's tyrannical use of his invalidity. At best, Emma claims victory retroactively, as seen with Mrs. Weston's marriage. This, as Mr. Knightley notes, does not require any endeavor or merit (Austen 14). Thus, Emma refuses to let the world impose its objectivity onto *her*, resulting in a confidence in her deductive abilities that continually summons the narrator for correction.

In such instances, it accomplishes nothing to attempt a portrayal of Emma. Her perception has already reconciled the reality of the situation to her consciousness and the established hierarchy remains intact.⁴ Mr. Knightley can air his

3 See Britton for a deeper analysis of how Emma's hierarchical power relations inflect the "cognitive patterns of social interpretation" absorbed into her narration (660).

4 See Britton for a deeper analysis of how Emma's hierarchical power relations inflect the "cognitive patterns of social

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disagreement, but it is too late to force an acknowledgement from Emma herself. She has solved the riddle, as it were, and now can bandy her accomplishment to anyone interested in listening. We must therefore approach Emma in the moment of speculation as she struggles to interpret her object. I point to Jane Fairfax as the ideal subject due to her similarities to Emma in accomplishment and practical potential while simultaneously holding a social position that marks her as Emma's inferior. The discrepancy in their respective social positions would in most cases place Jane as a comprehensible target of Emma's perception. However, Jane avoids easy classification due to her reserve and, through that, she denies the social hierarchy of perception.

Further, as Emma begins to create a narrative based around Jane's intimacy with her close friend, Miss Campbell, Emma has "more than a little need to denigrate that friendship" (Deresiewicz 116). Intimacy is a method of upward interpretation. It opens the effected individual's feelings to each other and, in Emma's case, allows for the possibility of others to glimpse at her own thoughts. Due to her position at the top of the social hierarchy, intimacy is something which Emma necessarily avoids lest it displace the foundational superiority that she bases her social power around. As such, Emma, more than any other character in the novel, emphasizes individual social standing, often realizing it in terms of establishment—a connection that ties social position to accumulated wealth.

She tells Harriet that "few married women are half as much mistress of their husband's house as I am of Hartfield," making her the holder of Highbury's most prestigious property (82). Likewise, she says of Frank Churchill that "Enscombe could not make him happy, and that whenever he were attached, he would willingly give up much of wealth to be allowed an early establishment" (191). Nor can we forget her immediate recourse to the fate of her niece should Mr. Knightley ever marry and close him out from inheriting Donwell (212). Emma twines societal and physical establishment together. Of particular interest, however, is the passivity in describing Frank's situation. Phrases such as "whenever he were attached," "give interpretation" absorbed into her narration (660).

up,” and “*be* allowed” all point to a superior force dictating his actions. The peculiarity of the phrasing suggests that Emma is not completely thinking of Frank’s situation. There is certainly no reason for him to give up his wealth or for him to require an allowance to achieve an early establishment—it is the wife who leaves her father’s house and familial comforts; the woman traditionally stands on the more passive end of a proposal.

In attempting to characterize Emma, William Deresiewicz suggests that Emma finds Jane’s friendship with Miss Campbell “threatening” and “incomprehensible” because “she [Emma] knows that the two women share something she has never experienced, and she also knows that her inability to understand it, or experience it, reflects the weakness of her own character” (117). This is only half right. The intimacy is indeed threatening, but Emma does not find it incomprehensible. Rather, she understands too well the penetrative ability of intimacy in disrupting social hierarchy. Her closest friend, Mrs. Weston, is of the same standing as Jane Fairfax. The need to denigrate the friendship between Jane and Miss Campbell indicates Emma’s personal investment in her speculations.

Emma’s Reflected Perception

To view this investment, one needs only to look at the conversation between Emma and Frank that introduces the idea of Jane’s secret pining for Mr. Dixon:

“You know Miss Fairfax’s situation in life, I conclude; what she is destined to be.”

“Yes—(rather hesitantly)—I believe I do.”

“You get upon delicate subjects, Emma,” said Mrs.

Weston smiling, “remember that I am here.—Mr. Frank Churchill hardly knows what to say when you speak of Miss Fairfax’s situation in life. I will move a little farther off.”

“I Certainly do forget to think of *her*,” said Emma, “as having ever been anything but my friend and my dearest friend.”

He looked as if he fully understood and honoured such a sentiment (188, emphasis original).

Emma immediately recurses to destiny when describing

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Jane's social position, reestablishing it in front of Frank as a validation for her frustration at not being able to perceive Jane's inner thoughts. However, Emma fails to realize that, instead of strengthening her position, the presence of Mrs. Weston introduces a method of circumvention—one that only Frank perceives—that casts their subsequent discussion into a misreading of Jane's feelings.

In the face of Jane's reserve, Emma's attempts to decipher Jane's inner thoughts instead become reflections of Emma's own thoughts. Her immediate falling into ideas of secret love say more about her than they do Jane. In this, Mrs. Weston's interjection, "remember that I am here," is integral due to the connection it forms between her and Jane due to their similarities in social station. The hesitance attributed to Frank by the narrator therefore conveys itself as him attempting to maneuver around a situation that calls attention to his mother-in-law's inferior social position, an understandably awkward inversion of family dynamics. Mrs. Weston's reminder, and pardoning, induces Frank to misread the situation simply because Emma fails to notice the reminder for what it is. She waves away any class distinction without a second thought; Mrs. Weston is only ever her "dearest friend."

I for One

A further indication is Emma's distancing of herself from her following judgment; her following statement substitutes the "I" of her previous judgment with the indefinite pronoun, "one," as in "one would rather have a stranger preferred than one's very particular friend" (189). Yet, this abstraction only covers the investigation of one's emotions in that specific situation; Emma ends her speech with "Poor Mrs. Dixon! Well, *I* am glad she is gone to settle in Ireland" (189, emphasis mine). The change, as well as its suddenness, indicates a vital cue for understanding Emma's hidden consciousness due to the brief insight it allows into her own experiences. The anonymity of "one," as opposed to "I," is meant to separate Emma from the situation; however, in a dynamic so similar to her own, the distance only serves to highlight Emma's real thoughts as they pertain to her.

She attempts to justify that position by making the remarkably convoluted statement that she does not “expect an account of Miss Fairfax’s sensation from you, or from any body else. They are known to no human being, I guess, but herself. But if she continued to play whenever she was asked by Mr. Dixon, one may guess what one chuses” (190). At once, she prohibits other’s accounts of Jane’s sensations while simultaneously asserting her own perception of those very sensations. Emma also exchanges the personal “I” for the indefinite version in an ostensible attempt at removing herself from any personal interest or similarity. Anyone is qualified to make a guess; everyone can infer something from Jane’s actions. Of further importance is the logic itself. “They are known to no human being, I guess, but herself” decenters Jane from the equation. Emma “guesses” that the sensations are known only to Jane. Thus, when she begins the following sentence with “but,” there is an opportunity stemming from the prior uncertainty that serves to place Emma in the role of a detective.

Additionally, her hypothetical, “if she continued to play whenever she was asked by Mr. Dixon, one may guess what one chuses” attributes agency to Jane as to create a retroactive opening for Emma’s judgment—an opening that we must remember is forestalled in the present time due to Jane’s stalwart reserve. Emma takes Jane’s playing as consent, both to the affection of Mr. Dixon and for Emma to speculate on her inner thoughts. Jane’s actions become a puzzle under which Emma hopes to solve. At the second order, Emma’s perception of this puzzle and her use of hypotheticals serves to the reader as a puzzle of itself in which we can similarly attempt to solve in search for comprehension of Emma’s own thoughts.

Frank, we can notice, remains in the first person. He begins with a recourse to their “perfectly good understanding among them all” but quickly changes his tone at the realization that the basis of their conversation, the one that *began* with Emma’s acknowledgement of her perfect understanding with Mrs. Weston, is clearly absent from Emma’s perspective. He instead bows out in deference to Emma’s familiarity with Jane—a familiarity that everyone except Frank knows is lacking (190). Emma admits as such in her quantification that it is “natural to

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suppose that we *should be* intimate, — that we *should have* taken to each other whenever she visited her friends. But we never did” (190, emphasis mine). Emma’s reason for the break from natural assumptions stems from a “wickedness” and “disgust” on her side due to the idolization of Jane as well as Jane’s reserve (190). The two factors serve to portray Jane as a mirror to Emma’s perception. In reverse order, the reserve inhibits a notion of intimacy that assumes an attempt by Emma towards friendship. It also, however, leaves Jane as a blank slate in which Emma must impute values of her own. Hence, she draws disgust at the sight of someone for their being idolized despite her own idolization by the entirety of Highbury.

The construction of Frank’s response, however, serves as the critical evidence that Emma draws on her own consciousness when ascribing values onto Jane’s form. He states that reserve is “a most repulsive quality, indeed... oftentimes very convenient, no doubt, but never pleasing. There is safety in reserve, but no attraction. *One* cannot love a reserved person” (190, emphasis mine). Here we have three consecutive disavowals of Jane’s reserve, which is first repulsive, then never pleasing despite its convenience, and finally (moved to a general attribute) a characteristic that makes one incapable of receiving love. Even the unknowing reader can detect the overcompensation in Frank’s stance. Moreover, his statement is twofold. It serves a personal judgement (anyone — Jane Fairfax — reserved is repulsive to Frank), while also abstracting him from the situation itself (“one cannot love a reserved person”). Taken with his slight considerations of the convenience and safety of reserve, Frank does everything in his power to ensure Emma does not find any reason to turn her speculations onto his relationship with Jane without outright stating that he could never love her. As with Emma, the appearance of the indefinite pronoun signals its irony in the fact that the characters only ever use it when talking about matters that affect them personally.

With similar irony, Emma responds in a manner that unconsciously aligns with the later revelation of her love for Mr. Knightley. She appends Frank’s statement with the qualification that one cannot love a reserved person “till the reserve ceases towards oneself; and then the attraction may be the

greater" (190). On the surface, this statement seems innocuous. However, when considering that she calls George Knightley by his formal name (and refuses to drop the formality barring a single, untold occasion), we see how Emma wields her intimacy as a tool that obfuscates her own unconscious desires (433). Emma claims that she only once previously called Mr. Knightley by his Christian name, on the grounds that she "thought it would offend," and reverted to formality when he did not object (433). Emma continually erects barriers of reserve between herself and Mr. Knightley—who himself is one of the few characters consistently capable of calling Emma by her first name—because, as she tells Frank, the attraction will be greater once those barriers fall.

Emma and Reserve

This barrier is at its most apparent when others—Mrs. Elton—take the liberty of eschewing reserve. Her "insufferable" informality of "Knightley" prompts a rage that sees Emma repeat the name three times in exclamation: "Absolutely insufferable! Knightley!—I could not have believed it. Knightley!—never seen him in her life before, and call him Knightley!" (259). The word revolves around her mind in disbelief, and significantly, flusters her thoughts to the point that she temporarily forgets the rest of Mrs. Elton's slights. Mr. Knightley's station takes precedence; the prior slights against Mrs. Weston and her own familiarity come in as afterthoughts: "*And* to propose that she and I should unite to form a musical club! *And* Mrs. Weston!—Astonished that the person who had brought me up should be a gentlewoman!" (259, emphasis mine).

Only after her diatribe calms down does she reassert herself in her conscious thoughts. When her cognition returns, Emma refuses to recognize her previous reaction as a collection of thoughts, conveniently replacing her unconscious inclination towards Mr. Knightley with Frank Churchill: "Oh! what would Frank Churchill say to her, if he were here? How angry and how diverted he would be! Ah! there I am—thinking of him directly. *Always the first person to be thought of!* How I catch myself out! Frank Churchill comes as regularly into my mind!" (259, emphasis mine). These thoughts lack genuine feeling.

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Notice Emma's sudden insertion of "oh" and "ah." The exclamations are indications of recognition that parody her initial reaction rather than genuine outbursts. Frank is obviously not the first person to be thought of, but Emma's incendiary reaction to the dropped reserve Mrs. Elton shows to Mr. Knightley is so effacing that Emma herself is incapable of deciphering her own thoughts.

Conclusion

Throughout the novel, Emma demonstrates a unique perception that consistently runs counter to the rest of the characters—and the narrator. In investigating her discourse, we can locate indications of her peculiar rationale that hint at her own unconscious thought. Her abstraction from the novel acts as deliberate attempts to shroud her inner thoughts while paradoxically drawing attention to them. Emma's denial of a personal connection to Jane Fairfax's situation, as well as her hostility at Mrs. Elton's familiar use of Knightley, set in motion the foundations that will become her climactic interpretation of her unconscious thoughts. While Emma herself must wait until she's matured enough to recognize her own consciousness, the reader suffers no such barrier; nor are they dependent on a future knowledge of events to recognize the hints Austen lays throughout the novel. Once the reader becomes aware of Emma's prejudice, they can begin compiling evidence while still in the process of discovery. In other words, Austen does not intend to confuse the reader or make the mystery of Emma's feelings incomprehensible until the moment Emma realizes her culpability. Rather, what readers have perceived as Austen's deliberate ambiguity is instead a conscious design on Austen's part that is meant to display the irony of Emma's actions to both pioneering and returning consumers of *Emma*.

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