Wide Angle

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Mission Statement

Literature and film continually reimagine an ever-changing world, and through our research we discover our relationships to those art forms and the cultures they manifest. Publishing one issue each semester, *Wide Angle* serves as a conduit for the expression and critique of that imagination. A joint publication between English majors and faculty, the journal embodies the interdisciplinary nature of the Department of English at Samford University. It provides a venue for undergraduate research, an opportunity for English majors to gain experience in the business of editing and publishing, and a forum for all students, faculty, and staff to publish their best work. As a wide-angle lens captures a broad field of vision, this journal expands its focus to include critical and creative works, namely academic essays, book and film reviews, and commentaries, as well as original poetry, short fiction and non-fiction, and screenplays.

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Contributors

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Dr. Jennifer Ellis West serves as faculty sponsor for *Wide Angle*. She specializes in Rhetoric and Writing Studies and directs the Core Writing program at Samford, where she is also Associate Professor of English. Her first writing job was for *The Clinton News* when she was in 7th grade, and she became the editor of *Mississippi Magazine* right after college. Despite 20 years of teaching first-year writing, she has yet to tire of giving feedback to aspiring writers.

Ana Wright is a senior English major with minors in Music and Biblical Studies. She is afflicted with insatiable wanderlust, but in the tragic reality of human finitude, she finds that literature and music allow her to connect with cultures and places she may never experience in person. In the fall, she will move to Uzbekistan to teach English as a Second Language.

Critical Essay

Maddie Benton

"Re-storying":

The Role of Circular Narration Techniques in the *Beloved* Trilogy to Restore the Black Presence to American History

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Because Toni Morrison's *Beloved* trilogy does not tell a linear narrative, there is debate about the connection between the novels, and they are often taught and studied in isolation. However, when readers engage with the novels separately, they cannot fully appreciate how they work as a unit to expose and complicate traditional narratives of what Morrison calls the "black presence" ("Black Matters" 140). Only when *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise* are studied as a trilogy can readers understand how their uses of circular narration techniques unite to diagnose American history with the sanitization of the black presence and invite readers to join Morrison in the renarration of that history.

The *Beloved* trilogy is rich and complex and is therefore studied from a variety of scholarly positions. For example, the texts are often examined through the lens of narratology. Some scholars, such as Stefan Brandt, focus on the novels' complex chronology. Brandt argues that the trilogy's constant jumps between timelines make it feel immediate and present despite being a work of historical fiction (395). Philip Page describes this timeline-jumping in terms of circular narration, arguing that "the principal narrative strategy of [*Beloved*] is to drop an unexplained fact on the reader, veer away into other matters, then circle back with more information about the initial fact" (35). Other scholars focus on the overlapping genres of the

trilogy, such as Caroline Rody, who argues that to understand *Beloved*'s role as a historical narrative, readers must not ignore its role as a ghost story (93). Finally, a few scholars do examine the links between the novels, exploring how the reading of one text informs the reading of another, as in Martha Cutter's article about the intertextuality of *Beloved* and *Jazz* (62).

Despite the different approaches to the *Beloved* trilogy these scholars take, they often come to similar conclusions about the trilogy's relationship to readers and history. For example, several scholars note that the *Beloved* trilogy invites reader participation, making the reader what Page terms "the co-creator of Morrison's novel" (38). Scholars also note that the trilogy "challeng[es] linear narratives of history" (Brandt 407) and is a means of rewriting history (Rody 102-103). Although these scholars do not always explain how Morrison accomplishes these things, I think most of them are gesturing toward the circularity of the *Beloved* trilogy. The narration style of each novel is circular since they circle back to events in the past (Page 35) yet leave conspicuous holes and "resis[t] closure" (Rody 101; Cutter 67-68). The relationship between the novels is also circular since they do not tell one linear narrative and are dependent on one another to provide a full picture of Morrison's historical project. I will argue that the *Beloved* trilogy's circularity, both in each novel's narration and in their intertextuality, illustrates how the black presence is often ignored and caricatured in American history and invites readers to participate in writing the plot of the trilogy and, by extension, rewriting American history.

Each novel employs slightly different circular narration techniques, but when viewed as a trilogy, readers can understand how the techniques work together to challenge traditional narratives of American history and give readers a role in rewriting that history. *Beloved* has noticeable gaps in the story, a move that undermines the idea that American history is a complete and factual narrative of the past by mimicking the absence of the black presence in American

history and indicating that parts of the African American experience will always be unknowable outside of imaginative reconstruction (Rody 100). The unreliable narrator of *Jazz* extends this critique of American history by warning that while history may present itself as universal, it only offers one, limited perspective, and so, like *Jazz*'s narrator, will likely end up recounting at least part of the past incorrectly. Finally, *Paradise* subverts reader expectations with its setting and organization, destabilizing narratives of American history that erase the black presence or make its history appear like a linear and simplistic path to freedom. When readers analyze the novels as a trilogy, their project of correcting traditional stories of the black presence becomes clear.

In *Beloved*, Morrison leaves gaps in the plot but offers potential suggestions, thereby inviting readers to shape the text by choosing which narrative options seem most plausible. One such gap is the fate of Sethe's husband, Halle. As Page asserts, *Beloved* employs circular narration, dropping hints of information that are only fully explained in flashbacks (35). The description of Halle's fate is one of these circling-back moments, yet it also represents what Rody describes as a hole in the text (101). Just like the characters in the story, readers never learn what happens to Halle. The narrator slips into Paul D's mind and offers several suggestions: "Maybe when he got to the gate and asked to see Sethe, Schoolteacher heard a tint of anxiety in his voice–the tint that would make him pick up his ever-ready shotgun. Maybe Halle made the mistake of saying 'my wife' in some way that would put a light in schoolteacher's eyes…Maybe anything" (*Beloved* 265). When Sethe describes Halle's disappearance, it is in the same language of "maybe" as Paul D: "Maybe Halle was trying to get to me…Maybe what sounded like shots really was...Maybe" (*Beloved* 238). In this moment of ambiguity, readers are invited to be co-creators in the plot of *Beloved* because Morrison does not specify what happens to Halle but only

offers possibilities. Though readers cannot erase the tension caused by the gaps in the novel, these gaps invite them to interact with the text and determine the ending they think fits best.

Jazz builds on the project of *Beloved* by giving readers a greater role in creating the novel through its unreliable narrator. *Jazz* engages in the same circular narration as *Beloved* but instead of utilizing a third person narrator, the voice slides between first and third person narration, often speaking directly to readers. In an example of third person narration, the narrator predicts that Joe, Violet, and Felice will shoot each other (*Jazz* 6), but in a later moment of first person narration, the narrator admits it was incorrect and "predictable…confused in my solitude into arrogance, thinking my space, my view was the only one that was or that mattered…dismiss[ing] what went on in heart-pockets close to me" (221). The narrator's prediction is proven false, demonstrating that it is unreliable and raising questions about the trustworthiness of the rest of *Jazz*. Now, the entire novel is called into question since the narrator admits it was confused and only offered one view of the events in *Jazz*. Instead of only questioning the obviously marked "maybe" moments as in *Beloved,* in *Jazz,* readers have even greater agency, not just to choose between possible plot suggestions in obviously ambiguous moments but to look for moments that may seem unambiguous but where the unreliable narrator has gotten it wrong. As Cutter asserts, Morrison "encourages us to remake [*Jazz*] through its…unusual narrative design" (71). The revelation of the narrator's unreliability is yet another example of the trilogy's circularity, since it urges readers to reread the novel for the tenuous moments of narration they may have missed, refusing closure and inviting reader interpretation.

Paradise, the final book of the *Beloved* trilogy, both extends and subverts Morrison's project of imagining the black presence in American history. *Paradise* builds on the *Beloved* trilogy by using circular narration to invite readers to co-create the novel. All of *Paradise* invites

readers' to understand what made the men of Ruby "shoot the white girl first" (1). Similarly to *Beloved*, Morrison provides possible explanations. Pat Best gives "two editions of the official story" (*Paradise* 297). The first one contains the fantastical disappearance of the Convent women; the second is "the Fleetwood-Jury version" and paints its authors as heroes. The narrator then notes, Pat had her own version in which the men committed murder "because the women were impure…because the women were unholy…[and] because they *could*" (*Paradise* 297). Just like in *Beloved*, it is up to readers to choose which account they believe. Just like in *Jazz*, Morrison undermines the reliability of the narratives offered; the disappearance of the women is unrealistic, the "Fleetwood-Jury version" is obviously biased, and while Pat's version explains the why, she does not explain the how of the murders. By generating ambiguity and inviting readers to participate in the co-writing of the plot, *Paradise* continues Morrison's trilogy project.

However, some of *Paradise*'s narrative techniques resist forward motion, unlike *Beloved* and *Jazz*, complicating the idea of a historical trilogy. While *Beloved* takes place during the Reconstruction and *Jazz* during the Harlem Renaissance, *Paradise* lacks the same obvious historical background, set instead in 1976. Morrison subverts reader expectations by not aligning *Paradise* with a moment of black progress but instead America's bicentennial, necessitating a looking-back on American history instead of moving forward in its narration. This concept of looking back is further enhanced by *Paradise*'s unique structure. Though it still engages in circular narration, *Paradise* does not follow the same timeline patterns as the previous novels. While *Beloved* and *Jazz* alternate between the timeline established in the first chapter and what Brandt calls "subjective timelines in the form of the protagonist's memories" (401), *Paradise* only returns to the present (the Ruby men's violence against the Convent women) in the penultimate chapter. *Paradise* again resists forward motion because most of it is set in the

novel's past. Perhaps most notably, unlike *Beloved* and *Jazz*, *Paradise* is divided into chapters named after nine women. This organization seems to indicate linearity, clearly demarcating who each chapter will be about. But Morrison again subverts reader expectations since each chapter circles through the perspective of multiple characters, and the titular character does not appear or is not named or recognized until each chapter's final pages. Rather than unravel the work of the trilogy, however, *Paradise* adds nuance to Morrison's project by refusing closure, demonstrating the complexity and non-linearity of the *Beloved* trilogy.

Beloved, *Jazz*, and *Paradise* all contain moments of narrative ambiguity and circularity that invite readers to participate in writing both the novels and American history by exposing the absence and oversimplification of the black presence in that history. In one of the final lines of *Paradise*, the narrator notes that without the versions of just a few members of the Ruby community "the whole thing [the violence against the Convent women] might have been sanitized out of existence" (298). This is what the *Beloved* trilogy works to counteract. It exposes the ways the black presence has been sanitized and simplified and grants readers the agency to reimagine the black presence in American history through the circularity in each individual novel and in their connections. Though this act remains imaginative, engaging with the *Beloved* trilogy as one project enables readers to come closer to a true narrative of American history.

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Critical Essay

Lauren Hammontree

"This is not a story to pass on":

Historical Identity and Cycles of Exclusion in Morrison's *Beloved* and *Paradise*

In her speech entitled "The Source of Self-Regard," Toni Morrison describes her process of grappling with history while writing the just-published *Beloved* and the soon-to-be-published *Jazz*. She characterizes this as an "effort to disentangle the grip of history while remaining in its palm" (Source 307). This struggle is central to her process of crafting the *Beloved* trilogy as well as the individual novels themselves. *Beloved* and *Paradise* in particular seek to examine some of the same questions about history that Morrison did during their creation, most notably, "how do you inhabit it without surrendering to it?" ("Source" 309). Deciphering the ways that the novels answer these questions is not only crucial for our understanding of their central messages, but also for our ability to fully comprehend the themes of history, identity, and the cyclical nature of violence that appear in so many of Morrison's other works. By examining *Paradise* as a direct response to *Beloved*, I hope to glean a more thorough understanding of Morrison's thoughts on both the real and aspired relationship between history and community.

In exploring the topic of history and community in Morrison's works, many authors have highlighted the issue of cyclical exclusion within marginalized communities. One of these is D. Scot Hinson, who argues that "*Beloved* labors to return to the more immediate origins of violence in the community, a system of slavery that pits members of the same community against each other, creating conflicts that must be reckoned with before the community can find peace in the present" (Hinson 148). This argument invokes René Girard's theories of mimetic desire and

reciprocal violence, wherein oppressed groups fall into patterns of vengeance in their attempts to reclaim the power of their oppressors through mimicry. Geta LeSeur builds on this exploration of oppression-based dynamics and the relationship between communal identity and ostracization by applying Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity to Morrison's *Sula* and *Paradise*. Bhaba theorizes that oppressed groups grow so accustomed to binary oppositions such as "self/other" that they determine a new group to classify as "other" if removed from the "other" in their initial binary. These groups' communal identities are strongly rooted in, and often inextricable from, their past oppression. LeSeur uses this theory to argue that the division found in *Paradise*'s central town of Ruby "can be attributed to the policies of exclusion and its concomitant failure to accept the members of its own community" (LeSeur 15). These sources help to explain the historical factors that contribute to the ostracizing mindsets of the communities in these novels, and help to explain how and why these mindsets are passed on through the generations.

Building on these readings' points about the role of historical identity in perpetuating violent cycles, I will argue that the ostracization seen in *Beloved* and *Paradise* demonstrates the degree to which historically-rooted communal identity limits a community's ability to break free of the cycle of exclusion. The story of *Beloved* depicts the potential for the cycle to be broken through renewed community bonds and a desire to move on from a traumatic past, but the community's power is ultimately still limited by their historically-necessitated insular mindset. The story of *Paradise*, on the other hand, warns of the deadly consequences of holding onto a traumatic history and allowing it to perpetuate an outdated exclusionary mindset. Ultimately, I will argue that Morrison intentionally places these novels in conversation with one another in order to convey a message about the importance of moving forward from communal histories of trauma instead of allowing it to consume the present.

My analysis begins with the first and titular novel in the trilogy: *Beloved*. The novel follows Sethe, a formerly enslaved woman, and the other inhabitants of 124 Bluestone Road as they wrestle with their traumatic pasts while being haunted by Beloved, the embodied ghost of Sethe's murdered infant daughter. The central portion of the novel occurs nearly a decade after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, but the reality of slavery seems almost as present and threatening as it does in Sethe's flashbacks of the Sweet Home plantation. The town's community is tight-knit and insular by necessity of the world around them. This is illustrated well by Paul D, Sethe's lover with his own trauma from enslavement, in his moral dilemma concerning whether or not to evict Beloved from 124. He desperately wants her gone, but he is hesitant "to throw a helpless colored girl out in territory infected by the Klan. Desperately thirsty for black blood, without which it could not live, the dragon swam the Ohio at will" (Beloved 79). The Black community bands together because they have been excluded from the larger White society on threat of death, and this exclusion becomes central to their identity.

As a result, the community eventually begins to perpetuate a cycle of exclusion against members of their own. Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, goes from being an esteemed religious leader to a social outcast after she throws a party that her neighbors perceive as arrogantly extravagant. Their disparaging thoughts about the way she took care of the community "like it was her job and hers alone" show that it is her self-sufficiency, her lack of reliance on the community, that causes them to resent her (Beloved 161). This demonstrates how a community's reasonable desire to protect itself through rejecting those who would reject it can be magnified to such a degree that even foundational members can be classified as "other" if they do not completely align with the often-insular communal identity.

This cycle of exclusion continues to facilitate violence throughout the novel. When the

owner of Sweet Home comes to reclaim Sethe and her children, the community's resentment towards Baby Suggs keeps them from warning her of his approach. With limited options, Sethe resorts to filicide in an event referred to as the Misery. The ostracization of 124's inhabitants is cemented through a volley of passive-aggression at Baby Suggs' funeral and is not undone until Sethe's living daughter, Denver, implicitly apologizes to the community for the offending self-sufficiency. The community only renews their support because "the personal pride, the arrogant claim staked out at 124 seemed to them to have run its course," meaning that they no longer have reason to view them as a threat (Beloved 294). The novel ends in a situation that mirrors the Misery in all but its ending. Sethe's processing of her trauma allows her to attack the offender instead of her child, and the presence of the community physically stops her from reaching him. This represents what Hinson describes as "the need for the individual, and indeed the entire community, to work through the personal past consciously in order to identify the source of violence in their midst, and thus to move forward" (Hinson 162). The cycle of violence was stopped because the community re-accepted the inhabitants of 124, but it is important to acknowledge that their exclusionary mindset did not change.

The final chapter of *Beloved* contains the phrase: "This is not a story to pass on" (Beloved 324). Based on my analysis of *Beloved* and *Paradise* as described in this paper, I propose that this phrase does not mean that the events of *Beloved* should not be remembered, but instead that this narrative should not be "passed on" to future generations. In this context, a narrative is "passed on" when it is perpetuated without evaluation through the generations, regardless of the degree to which it is justified by their present. Hinson agrees with this interpretation, specifically proposing that these novels warn against the passing on of "the story of the violence within the community and the community's tendency to repeat their oppressors'

violence in their own communities" (Hinson 162). This story is brought to an end in *Beloved*, but the driving force of it—the historically-based exclusionary mindset—is left largely unchanged. As a result, it is passed on to the characters of *Paradise*, the final book of the trilogy and the second novel that I will be discussing in this paper.

In order for the community in *Paradise* to heal, they need to break from this mindset inherited from *Beloved* and move forward from their traumatic past. This is, of course, not what happens in the novel, and it is this staunch refusal to move forward that creates the central tragedy. *Paradise* follows the all-Black town of Ruby, Oklahoma and explores the factors contributing to a culture of ostracization that, directly or indirectly, kills several members of the community before the novel's end. The defining event in Ruby's past is the Disallowing, where the founding families were not permitted to join other all-Black towns because of their "8-rock" skin, forcing them to band together. The formation of an insular community was very prudent, albeit not as necessary as it was in the time of *Beloved*. "The irony of Ruby, however, is that this sense of history and community wholeness is itself based on exclusion" (LeSeur 14). Essentially, this community was formed out of exclusion and seeks to remain strong by assuming a position of exclusion towards others.

Ruby is a town engrossed in its own history and especially fixated on the instances of exclusion that sparked their own insular behavior. Even the name of the town speaks to this fixation, as it comes from Ruby Morgan, a daughter of one of the esteemed founding families that died when several hospitals refused her medical care during her miscarriage. This history of rejection manifests in an exclusionary mindset that only intensifies as it is passed on through the generations. LeSeur explains that "because they knew firsthand the consequences of being denied, they find strength in accepting each other. However, they repeat the same pattern of

exclusion by reconstructing the self/other model in their own community" (LeSeur 14). One example of this is the fact that the Disallowing, rather than the birth of Christ, is the subject of the yearly Christmas play. The play notably features the children invoking Godly vengeance against those who excluded them, promising that "God will crumble you" as the older generations voice their agreement with phrases such as "finer than flour He'll grind you" and "strike you in the moment of His choosing" (*Paradise* 211). This not only displays a long-held grudge but also Ruby's own exclusionary behavior, as two of the founding families have been written out over the years. Town historian Pat Best reflects on all of this, saying that "all that nonsense she had grown up with seemed to her like an excuse to be hateful" (*Paradise* 214). She does not justify Ruby's patterns of exclusion but instead frames these patterns as an attempt to reclaim some of the power that had been wielded against them in the past. Even though decades have passed since the Disallowing and the death of Ruby, the townspeople refuse to adjust their identity to reflect their new reality, and they refuse to try to move on from this insular mindset that was passed on to them.

The people of Ruby had an opportunity to break the cycle of exclusion when a situation arose mirroring that of the town's namesake. Delia Best, related by marriage to a descendant of the founding families, began to miscarry and required a greater degree of medical assistance than was available in town. Instead of breaking the cycle, the men—the only ones in Ruby with the capacity to drive—allowed mother and child to die rather than attempt to seek help outside of their community. Pat Best, Delia's surviving daughter, believes that the men refused to help her mother because "those 8-rock men didn't want to go and bring a white into town; or else didn't want to drive out to a white's house begging for help; or else they just despised [Delia's] pale skin so much they thought of reasons why they could not go" (*Paradise* 198). The true reason is

never specified, but it is important that all three of those proposed rely on the town's history of being excluded for their 8-rock skin. LeSeur describes how "by looking to the past for identity, the colonized create a fixity, or stasis of identity that is just as entrenched as the oppressive tendencies of those who refuse to give up fear or desire induced stereotypes" (LeSeur 4). Their past exclusion has formed an inflexible communal identity that will not allow them to consider that their reality might have changed since the time of Ruby's death. The passing on of this prejudice allows a mother and child to die in the same way that the prejudice of the White hospitals did in years prior. They similarly discriminate against the light-skinned Best women because they are unable to move on from the way in which other light-skinned people refused them entry into their towns during the Disallowing. This inability to evolve beyond their rigid communal identity is also demonstrated by the way in which people continue to uphold the mantra that "nobody dies in Ruby" despite the deaths of Delia and her infant (*Paradise* 217).

Although they shared a very similar mindset to the community in *Beloved*, the people of Ruby differ in the degree to which their mindset reflected reality and the degree to which they tried to make progress. In *Beloved*, the characters work very hard to process their traumatic history and stop allowing it to define their present, even though their immediate circumstances did not permit them to completely abolish their insular mindset. *Paradise*, by contrast, is about the consequences of failing to do any of those things. The exclusionary mindset of Ruby was initially justified by their reality, especially during the time of the Disallowing, but grew unfitting by the time of Delia's death. The citizens of Ruby also actively resist any efforts to challenge or move forward from their past history of being excluded, having their children act out the Disallowing every year and revising their oral history to erase non-8-rock founding families and deaths that they thought insignificant. By allowing their initial mindset to be passed

on throughout the generations, they are actively contributing to the destruction of their community, the very thing that this mindset was initially formed to prevent.

This is why it is crucial that the Ruby storyline of *Paradise* ends with a funeral for Save-Marie, a baby from one of the town's founding families who was born "broken" as an implicit result of inbreeding. As the Reverend Misner presides over the service, he receives a vision. As he "gazed at the coffin lid he saw the window in the garden, felt it beckon toward another place–neither life nor death–but there, just yonder, shaping thoughts he did not know he had" (*Paradise* 307). Misner interprets this vision as a sign of salvation. This notion of tangible salvation found in "neither life nor death–but there, just yonder" connects with the concluding words of his sermon, where he assures the dead girl that "there never was a time when you were not saved" (*Paradise* 307). Author Katrine Dalsgård argues that this vision of Save-Marie's salvation "is a way for Morrison to suggest that the community has been given another chance" (Dalsgård 245). Reading this passage through that lens, it seems as though salvation has always been in reach for the people of Ruby, even if it has yet to be actualized. Dalsgård argues that Morrison "does not affirm the Ruby leaders' dream of a superior community. Rather, she makes her covenant with the Ruby people, with all their flaws and imperfections" (Dalsgård 246). In order for the people of Ruby to have a second chance at salvation and at breaking the cycle of exclusion, they must reject the flawed communal identity that was passed on to them and proceed as individuals.

The death of Save-Marie serves as a catalyst for this rejection because it forces the townspeople to discard a central part of their communal identity: the idea that nobody ever dies in Ruby. By acknowledging and accepting this fact, they can begin to cast off their old ideas and move forward. This dismantling of their outdated historical identity is corroborated by Billie

Delia, the youngest of the excluded Best women, who ends the chapter longing for someone to "rip up and stomp down this prison calling itself a town" (*Paradise* 308). The constructed identity of the town must be thoroughly, tangibly torn away in order for the townspeople to be free from the "prison" that this passed-down mindset has created. The death of Save-Marie has begun that process, and there is hope that the cycle of exclusion will be broken in years to come.

In this paper, I argued that the novels *Beloved* and *Paradise* work together to demonstrate the ways in which historically-rooted mindsets can introduce cycles of exclusion and the ways in which these mindsets can have deadly consequences if passed on without evaluation. This understanding of the relationship between the two novels helps us to better understand each one individually. The resolution of *Beloved* and the cryptic words in its final chapter take on different meaning when the novel is re-contextualized as a depiction of a flawed but necessary communal mindset that must be left in the past. If *Paradise* is similarly re-contextualized as a depiction of what happens when the final warnings of *Beloved* are not heeded and history is allowed to dominate the present day, then the nuanced and sprawling web of exclusion can be understood on a deeper level. Ultimately, it is clear that these novels convey a warning from Morrison about the relationship between history and communal identity. In her novels, history is vital and tangible, but ultimately must be allowed to remain in the past. It cannot be allowed to consume our identity or consume our present moment. It is a story to wrestle with and a story to remember, but it is not a story to pass on.

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Commentary

Emilia Horton

Before the music:

The Necessary Violence of Becoming

Gwendolyn Brooks's sonnet, "First Fight. Then Fiddle." initially seems to be a response to art being used as a means to recover from war. However, after deeper analysis, it is revealed that the sonnet is not merely about art and war. Brooks uses powerful imagery, diction, and structure to nudge the reader towards the understanding that the sonnet is instead about the process of growing up, learning to fight through life's challenges, establishing a sense of self, and carving out one's own place in the community.

The first quatrain sets the theme of contrast: music and beauty against war and violence. The sonnet begins with a command: "First fight. Then fiddle." (Brooks 1). At first, this seems to suggest that music and beauty must come after combat as a reward for enduring harsh violence, turning the common understanding that beauty is a means to prevent war on its head. However, the command "First fight. Then fiddle" is not reflecting literal war; instead, it is demanding that one must struggle and retaliate in their early life so that later they may create art. In the remaining portion of the quatrain, the speaker says, "Ply the slipping string / With feathery sorcery" (Brooks 1-2). This further emphasizes the statement encapsulated by the opening. While "ply" is often used in the context of fabric or other fiber arts, in this sonnet it is used in the musical sense. A violinist or string instrumentalist will recognize this word as meaning to work diligently, to run the bow carefully over the string to create a sound that is gentle but resonant. Plying the string represents discipline, taking care to find yourself within your own context, not the one created for you by authority figures.

The quatrain continues to push this idea of finding yourself despite the expectations that have been previously set. The speaker instructs to “muzzle the note / With hurting love; the music that they wrote / Bewitch, bewilder” (Brooks 2-4). Although it may be painful or difficult, one must “muzzle” or stifle the voices that have dictated their life in favor of making one’s own path. The command to “qualify to sing / Threadwise” (Brooks 4-5) emphasizes that asserting identity and voice is not spontaneous but crafted, threaded together carefully like fabric. When the speaker continues, “Devise no salt, no hempen thing / For the dear instrument to bear. Devote / The bow to silks and honey” (Brooks 6-8), she rejects coarse, utilitarian materials (salt, hemp) and elevates softness and sweetness (silks, honey). The “dear instrument” is more than a violin; it symbolizes the self, which must be refined with care rather than roughened by the world. In the context of growth, the speaker is insisting that one cultivate an intentional, delicate inner life despite the harsher expectations imposed from outside.

At line 9, the volta, the speaker sharply shifts the sonnet’s tone: “But first to arms, to armor. Carry hate / In front of you and harmony behind” (Brooks 9-10). This interruption transforms the previous devotion to art into a command to survive first. The juxtaposition is stark. The cultivation of harmony is not abandoned but postponed until after the necessary fight. To “carry hate in front” means to hold a defensive shield, a protective fire that guards the self, while “harmony behind” indicates that beauty must temporarily take a secondary place. The speaker intensifies this idea with the lines, “Be deaf to music and to beauty blind. / Win war. Rise bloody, maybe not too late” (Brooks 11-12). The harshness of this imperative highlights the reality that survival, struggle, and resilience are prerequisites to the flourishing of art and identity.

The couplet concludes with the image of creating a safe environment for beauty: “For having first to civilize a space / Wherein to play your violin with grace” (Brooks 13-14). To “civilize a space” is to prepare an environment where art, identity, and community can thrive. The speaker acknowledges that the violin, or the self, cannot produce beauty until there is room for it to sound. Therefore, growing up is not only about personal discovery but also about securing a place in the broader social fabric. The battles one fights, literal or metaphorical, become the groundwork for community and culture.

Ultimately, “First Fight. Then Fiddle.” asks the reader to accept a difficult truth: there are seasons for defense and seasons for delight. The speaker’s imperative tone, textile and musical imagery, and structural turn all emphasize that growth is not passive. Rather, it is an active sequence of fighting, forming, and finally flourishing. Far from merely being a war poem or a reflection on art, Brooks’s sonnet is a guide to the process of maturing, facing struggle, finding identity, and carving out a community where beauty and harmony can at last be sustained.

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Critical Essay

Ana Wright

"You know nothing about whereness":

The Liminality of "Home" in MacDonald's *Lilith*

According to his son, Greville, George MacDonald was convinced that writing *Lilith* was "a mandate direct from God, for which he himself was to find form and clothing" (Greville MacDonald 548). Between the years 1890 and 1895, he feverishly composed the novel and then revised it eight times. After it was finally published, he "was quite exhausted and did nothing for several months afterward" (Hein 385). Indeed, MacDonald poured all his energy into *Lilith,* and it is a momentous conclusion to his prolific literary career.

It will be helpful to set the stage with a summary of the winding, dream-like plot. At the beginning of the novel, we are introduced to Mr. Vane, a recent Oxford graduate who has recently taken over his ancestral estate, an ancient mansion with an extensive library. One day, in the garret above the library, he discovers an ornate mirror that is also a portal to "the region of the seven dimensions" (*Lilith* 18). Here, he meets a talking raven who claims to be Mr. Raven, the Vane family's mysterious librarian, and becomes Mr. Vane's mentor and guide. We later learn that the raven is also Adam from Genesis, but for the purposes of this paper, "Mr. Raven" will suffice. Mr. Raven urges Mr. Vane to go to sleep in the "House of Death," a vast chamber full of other sleepers, who seem to be dead. He explains that these sleepers have actually "just begun to come alive and die" (*Lilith* 34), but Mr. Vane is confused and frightened by this paradoxical proposition and runs away. As he then wanders the region of the seven dimensions, alone, he has several significant encounters that transform his values and perspective. After a few nights of wandering, he finds a

mysterious woman who is nearly dead and nurses her back to life, only to discover that she is the evil queen "Lilith," Adam's first wife, who (in accordance with Jewish legend), left Adam in favor of Satan. He also comes across a community of children, known as the "Little Ones," who Lilith wants to destroy. Lona, the oldest of these children, serves as their leader and mother-figure, and Mr. Vane falls deeply in love with her, eventually learning that she is the child of Adam and Lilith. Near the end of the novel, in a dramatic climax, Mr. Vane leads Lona and the Little Ones to battle against Lilith, but they are quickly overpowered and forced to retreat. They do not escape unscathed, however; Lilith kills Lona. After Mr. Vane recovers from the initial shock of this, he takes Lona's body to the House of Death and, at long last, lays down next to her to go to sleep. After several nights of surreal dreams, they wake up and find that the whole world has been reborn with them.

This leads to the novel's controversial conclusion. As Mr. Vane and Lona explore the new creation, gradually approaching the throne of God, a hand suddenly appears out of the sky and pushes Mr. Vane through a "little door with a golden lock" (*Lilith* 260). Mr. Vane finds himself alone in his library, right back where he began, and like him, readers are left to wonder what it all means. Indeed, one review published in the same year as *Lilith* comments, "that some high purpose pervades this strange mystical farrago we are willing to believe, but its method of presentment seems to be neither lucid nor edifying" (Woods 20). The scholarly conversation around *Lilith* since its publication has focused primarily on the ending, and this thesis will join that conversation, seeking to discern the "high purpose" pervading *Lilith* by considering MacDonald's personal encounters with grief and his understanding of death as a return "home" to God.

Following in the footsteps of older MacDonald scholars such as Richard Reis, Roderick McGillis, and Colin Manlove, who all argue that writing *Lilith* was an act of personal catharsis

and revelation for MacDonald, this thesis will incorporate the more recent work of John Pridmore and Gisela Kreglinger, who both consider the philosophical and creative influence of the German Romantic Novalis, and the work of Michael Wilhelm, who explores the connections between *Lilith* and MacDonald's personal experiences.

It will also use the concept of "liminality," as described by Robert Collins, as an interpretive frame. Collins explains that the word is "derived from the Latin word *limen,* a threshold, portal, or door, through which a protagonist passes from one context to another" (Collins 8). The "confusion and insecurity felt by Mr. Vane...after he first blunders through the magical mirror/portal into Mr. Raven's world," he says, is due to his state of *liminality*, in which he is no longer fully comfortable either in his own world or in Mr. Raven's (8). While Collins focuses on Vane's experience of liminality between worlds, this thesis will expand the concept to describe the liminality of the mortal human experience, suspended between life, death, and eternity. When MacDonald writes about going "home" to God, it is not a static destination for him, but a state of contentment with God even when his understanding is incomplete.

Indeed, records of MacDonald's life suggest that the composition of *Lilith* was strongly influenced by MacDonald's personal encounters with death. In the biography that William Raeper published in 1987, he notes that while *Lilith* was MacDonald's "masterpiece," it was also his "dark night of the soul," and "expos[ed] the terrible struggle between light and shade that had battled in his consciousness since his earliest days" (364). Although all of MacDonald's writing carries an air of death, *Lilith* represents his most earnest wrestling with the grief of his childhood. He lost his mother when he was very young, and although they spent little time together, he seems to have felt her absence throughout his life, which was augmented by the loss of seven of his siblings, his beloved father, and five of his own children. In Greville's biography, he

describes MacDonald as having an "atmosphere of sadness" about him (343), ever intertwined with his childlike joy and imperturbable faith in God. "It is impossible," he says, "to give any whole idea of the son without picturing the father and brothers, the mother and little sisters...when one by one they were taken by death, just as years afterwards, one by one his own children were taken, each occasion was a shattered hope" (Greville MacDonald 130). MacDonald loved wholeheartedly, and he grieved deeply.

But perhaps the most shattering loss MacDonald faced was the death of his beloved daughter Lilia, whom he memorialized in *Lilith* though the character of Lona. Referring to this loss, Greville notes that for MacDonald, *Lilith* captures a "portion also of the suffering that, mercifully near the end, led him up to his long and last vigil" (555). Lilia contracted a fatal case of tuberculosis in 1871 when she put herself in direct risk to take care of a friend (Greville MacDonald 518). Although MacDonald did not begin drafting *Lilith* until nineteen years later in 1890, Lona seems to represent Lilia's motherly, nurturing nature in her role as the caretaker of the "Little Ones." Further, during the battle at the novel's climax, Lona is reunited with her mother, the evil queen, Lilith, and embraces her in an act of innocent affection, hoping that her love will be stronger than her mother's hate. However, she acknowledges the risk in this, exclaiming that "I'd willingly give my life for my mother –she could even kill me!" (*Lilith* 184). This is exactly what Lilith does, lifting Lona high into the air and fatally throwing her down onto the marble floor of her palace (192). In the end then, both Lilia and Lona willingly lose their lives in selfless acts of love, making their deaths feel both tragic and redemptive.

MacDonald ultimately found consolation for this loss in his faith. As he wrote to his wife, Louisa, during Lilia's illness, "we must remember that we are only in a sort of passing vision here, and that the real life lies beyond us. If Lily goes now, how much the sooner you and I may

find her again!" (Greville MacDonald 524). When Lilia died in MacDonald's arms, he mourned deeply, but he did not despair, confident that he would one day see her again. As he writes in *Unspoken Sermons*, God will "have us all safe home with him by and by" (252). It is significant, then, that after Lona dies in Mr. Vane's arms, he too is consoled by his confidence that he will see her again one day, when they both go "home to the father" (*Lilith* 254). Indeed, Vane's experience of loss in *Lilith* closely mirrors MacDonald's personal loss, and considering this connection enhances the emotional significance of the novel's ending. When Mr. Vane returns to the library without Lona, he experiences precisely what MacDonald experienced: being forced to continue with life after death has separated him from someone he loves. In other words, both MacDonald and Mr. Vane make themselves "at home" in the liminal space of grief, emotionally suspended between this life and those they love in the next.

This perspective likely was also influenced by Novalis, who portrays a similar acceptance of death in *Hymns to the Night.* The protagonist of this work learns to embrace "night" as a liminal place of reconciliation with the death of his "beloved." Kreglinger goes so far as to claim that to fully understand *Lilith,* we *must* consider the influence of *Hymns to the Night* (25). MacDonald included the *Hymns* in *Rampolli,* a collection of German poetry he translated and published in 1897, just two years after publishing the first edition of *Lilith,* which means that he was likely working with the *Hymns* at the same time as he was writing *Lilith*. In both texts, the protagonists venture into a mystical, alternate world where they confront their grief, and in the end, both protagonists come to terms with their loss when they realize that death is not an end to life but simply an altered state of being. Novalis feels close to this state at "night"—for him, a time of spiritual liminality, when he feels suspended between time and eternity, life and death. It is also the time when he feels closest to God. As he writes in the final Hymn, "Blest be the

everlasting Night, / And blest the endless Slumber! / We are heated with the day too bright, / And withered up with cumber! / We're weary of that life abroad: / Come, we will now go home to God!" (*Rampolli* 15). In Kreglinger's words, he "experienced the paradox that the dark place: loss, suffering, grief, becomes the place where God reveals himself" (35). In *Lilith,* similarly, Mr. Vane learns that to "go home to God," or in MacDonald's language, "make [himself] at home," he must willingly surrender to the sleep of death (*Lilith* 10). In doing so, he not only gets closer to God, but he is also reunited with Lona in her death.

This all factors into MacDonald's philosophy of "home" as a state of contentment in liminality, where dichotomies can be reconciled. In *Dish of Orts,* MacDonald cites Novalis' claim that "philosophy is really home-sickness, an impulse to be at home everywhere," explaining that this yearning for "home" is ultimately a yearning for God (211). God must be approached through faith, not intellect, and when we find Him, it should change the way that we live. MacDonald speaks of "home" extensively in *Unspoken Sermons* as well, claiming, "That man is perfect in faith who can come to God in the utter dearth of his feelings and his desires, without a glow or an aspiration, with the weight of low thoughts, failures, neglects, and wandering forgetfulness, and say to him, 'Thou art my refuge, because thou art my home'" (17). Home, in other words, is a state of unperturbable faith in God that does not depend on ideas, circumstances, or feelings. As such, it accommodates the unexplainable, because what matters is not comprehending God, but communing with Him.

At the beginning of *Lilith*, Mr. Vane is distinctly *not* at home. In the first chapter, he introduces himself as an orphan who has just graduated from Oxford and is now taking over his family estate. He explains he is fascinated by the physical sciences because of the "wonder" they awake in him, and he frequently notices "strange analogies" between "physical and metaphysical

facts" (1). He sees correspondence, in other words, between the physical world of the sciences and the abstract world of metaphysics, and like MacDonald himself, he yearns to reconcile the dichotomy between them. Further, he notes that what he *most* enjoys studying is "the history of the human mind in relation to supposed knowledge," and that "Ptolemy, Dante, the two Bacons, and Boyle were even more to me than Darwin or Maxwell, as so much nearer the vanished van breaking into the dark of ignorance" (2). This suggests that, as Wilhelm notes, Vane is skeptical of the major developments in physics in his time, such as Darwin's evolutionary theory and Maxwell's theory of electromagnetism, which sought to explain reality solely through physical laws and axioms (Wilhelm 77). Like Novalis, he is frustrated with "merely rational and scientific understandings of the world," and he desires a more holistic concept of reality.

The trouble with Mr. Vane, however, is that the only place in which he seeks solutions to his frustration is within books. Indeed, he admits that he "mainly spent [his] time" alone in his library, reading and thinking (*Lilith* 2). He recognizes the incompleteness of the worldview he has been taught, but he is still convinced that with enough study, he can find the answers that he is looking for. MacDonald, however, would describe this as "intellectual greed," which, he says, "spoils countless precious things" (*Dish of Orts* 322). Mr. Vane has not yet learned the humility to accept the limits of his own understanding. Although he is intrigued by authors who demonstrate more nuanced worldviews than his own, such as Ptolemy, Dante, the Bacons, and Boyle, as Wilhelm puts it, "Even a great author like Dante will not illuminate a scientistic mind, so long as such a mind refuses to relinquish its intellectual greed" (89). Rather than persisting in his intellectual foraging, what Mr. Vane really needs is to acknowledge the insufficiency of his understanding. He has not yet learned to commune rather than dissect; to him, the books are still "dead bodies," and they must become butterflies.

In the very next chapter, however, Mr. Vane's entire framework of knowledge is called into question, initiating the trajectory of transformation that carries him through the rest of the novel. At the end of chapter one, while Mr. Vane reads in his library, he begins to notice a dark figure who occasionally makes appearances to borrow books or return them. The family butler explains that this figure is likely Mr. Raven, the former librarian of the house, who worked for Mr. Vane's ancestor and presumably still haunts the library hundreds of years later. Mr. Vane is remarkably unperturbed by this, and when he sees Mr. Raven again in chapter 2, he follows him out of the library up to a mysterious garret where he immediately notices an ornate mirror. Gazing into it, he realizes that it "reflected neither the chamber nor my own person" (*Lilith* 7), but reveals an otherworldly landscape with no signs of life except a large raven. Stepping closer, he tumbles through the frame and finds himself "nose to beak" with the raven in the "region of the seven dimensions," which he soon discovers is "little correspondent with the ways and modes of this world" (10). Here, all at once, the intellectual knowledge that he has sought for so long is useless to him.

Mr. Vane quickly realizes that the raven is simply Mr. Raven in bird form, and he asks him where they are. Mr. Raven responds that "you know nothing about *whereness.* The only way to come to know where you are is to begin to make yourself at home" (*Lilith* 10). This becomes the theme of Mr. Vane's personal growth throughout the rest of the novel. In chapter 9, after Mr. Vane goes through the mirror a second time and again comes up against the limits of his understanding, he asks Mr. Raven to "be so good as to show me the nearest way home," to which Mr. Raven responds that he cannot because:

> Home is ever so far away in the palm of your hand, and how to get there it is of no use to tell you. But you will get there; you must get there; you have to get there. Everybody who

> is not at home, has to go home. You thought you were at home where I found you: if that had been your home, you could not have left it. Nobody can leave home. And nobody ever was or ever will be at home without having gone there. (44)

Mr. Vane is initially indignant at Mr. Raven's bewildering riddling, but he gradually comes to understand his meaning.

For Mr. Vane, the process of "getting to be at home" begins with a restructuring of his understanding of death. As Wilhelm poignantly puts it, he must "repent" of his "false perceptions of the universe" (96). Mr. Raven helps him to do this when he takes him to the House of Death and invites him to go to sleep amongst the seemingly-dead bodies. "I almost forget what they mean by dead in the old world," he tells Vane, "If I said a person was dead, my wife would understand one thing, and you would imagine another" (*Lilith* 33). Indeed, the bodies are in a state somewhere between sleep and death. As Mr. Raven describes, "none of those you see are in truth quite dead yet...when such are indeed dead, that instant they will wake and leave us" (34). Here, death is not a departure from life, but part of the process of being born again into a new and higher form of life. For Mr. Vane, however, this is incomprehensible, and he leaves the House of Death in fear and anger. He is still clinging to his intellectual greed, refusing to believe what he cannot understand. It is not until after he has accepted Lona's death that he is able to come to terms with the inevitability of his own.

Initially, when Lona dies, Mr. Vane is shattered, and he laments that his "life is bare" and his heart "empty" (*Lilith* 94). He gradually realizes, however, that to honor her sacrifice properly, he must take her body back to Mr. Raven, who can give her "a couch among the chamber of the dead" (198). When he arrives, he lays down next to her and goes to sleep, just as Mr. Raven urged him to do from the beginning. Here, at last, he surrenders his desire for

understanding, accepting that "you can wake yourself no more than you can make yourself" (29); he is not ultimately in control either of his own death or of Lona's. Four days later, they both wake up, and together they explore the new creation which was reborn with them. In chapter 34, "The Journey Home," Mr. Vane describes this new world as abundantly alive and bright and interconnected, saying, "The soul of everything I met came out to greet me and make friends with me, telling me we came from the same, and meant the same. I was going to him, they said, with whom they always were, and whom they always meant" (255). Hand-in-hand with Lona, he rejoices that "My darling walked beside me, and we were on our way home to the Father!" (254). Eventually, they reach a beautiful city, where a "mighty angel" greets them at the gate and leads them to a staircase that ascends to the "throne of the Ancient of Days" (*Lilith* 260). He leaves them here to continue climbing alone, but just as they are nearing the top:

> A hand, warm and strong, laid hold of mine, and drew me to a little door with a golden lock. The door opened; the hand let mine go, and pushed me gently through. I turned quickly, and saw the board of a large book in the act of closing behind me. I stood alone in my library. (260)

On the verge of becoming completely at home in God, Mr. Vane is indecorously transplanted right back to the library where he began, which separates him from Lona and seems to negate his entire journey. As Manlove describes it, MacDonald gives us "two 'un-endings': the one where Vane is on the point of entering heaven and meeting God, and the other where, back in this world, trapped again in his mortality, he must continually oscillate between doubt and hope" (54). All is inconclusive.

Although Mr. Vane does not quite make it to the throne of God, the final chapter, "The Endless Ending," reveals that he has learned to be at home with God even after being removed

from God's physical presence. He questions whether he ever actually woke up or if he is still asleep in the House of Death, yet he is at peace in this state of existential liminality. He is also at peace with his separation from Lona, who, as far as we know, *did* make it to the throne of God. As he says, "I have never again sought the mirror. The hand sent me back: I will not go out again by that door! 'All the days of my appointed time will I wait till my change come" (*Lilith* 262). In other words, his faith is now stronger than his perception, and he remains steadfastly convinced of God's good intentions in both death and life despite his own lack of understanding.

This state of "home," then, is the end goal, not only of Mr. Vane's journey within the novel, but also of our journey with him as readers. *Lilith* itself demands communion rather than dissection. John Pridmore describes it as "transfiguring fantasy," drawing the name from the New Testament story of Christ's transfiguration on Mount Tabor. "What happens on the Mount of Transfiguration," he says, "where the veil between what is and what appears is parted, can only make sense to the disciples as they descend to the plain and confront its challenges. This is equally true for us who read the story. There is no comprehending the Transfiguration apart from obedience to the injunction" (Pridmore 62). True transformation, in other words, does not happen on top of the mountain, but after we descend back into the world of our fellow men. Indeed, for Mr. Vane to truly become "at home," he could not remain on the mountain of the Ancient of Days. Having glimpsed God and reckoned with the limits of his own humanity, it was time for him to return to normal life to embody his transformed worldview. Just so, Pridmore argues readers' encounters with *Lilith* should result in active response, not just passive aesthetic experience. "The book is a bridge between the worlds," he says, "an unfinished story which, as I identify with its protagonist, blends with my own and whose continuance is determined by what I make of it in the on-going narrative of my own life" (61). Raeper makes a similar claim about

the ending, explaining that "MacDonald expects his readers to identify themselves with Vane and so become heroes of their own tale" (369). *Lilith* invites readers to confront their own fears and frustrations and, like Mr. Vane, to relinquish their need for intellectual understanding, "making themselves at home" in the incomprehensible peace of God.

As evidenced by MacDonald's feverish writing process, Mr. Vane's transformation represents MacDonald's personal journey to make himself at home with God in the midst of his own tumultuous life experiences, and he invites us to embark on this journey too. This makes *Lilith* both a deeply complex and a deeply relatable novel. As McGillis puts it, we, like Mr. Vane, "yearn for home," but we "fear it at the same time because home contains death as well as life" (106). *Lilith,* however, reminds us that sometimes the realities that most terrify us only seem terrifying because we don't understand them. Perhaps, like Mr. Vane, in order to be at home with God in the tumult of these realities, we need a shift in perspective, and a little bit of faith.

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Laurel Beal

Gag

I had a gag reflex as a child.
Textures tingled against my teeth
to spew forth on our polished lacquer table:
things like chewed up peas and strawberries
I gagged on, seated atop a large Webster dictionary
so I could fit at granny's kitchen countertop, a
banana in hand, whimpering at the texture,
slimy and squirming in my throat…

My mother looked, saw
the agony on my peachy face–
a glare. A warning.
Don't spit that out!

It could make a mess if it came out,
so I swallowed. And the nausea subsided.

Taking pills now nearly impossible,
bitter coatings staining my tongue.
Bending over the sink, one thought:
Don't spit that out!

Water dripping from my lips,
stomach churning, I swallow,
cough, throat burning. Proud
that I did not make a mess!

What did I learn from this?
To keep my mouth shut,
to swallow.
Don't spit that out!
it *might* make a mess.

Flavors dull, reflexes change, I grow
up keeping my teeth guarded against
sentences struggling to spill out
into the silence like undigested dinner.
I chew on slimy avocado toast and
choke not on the grainy bread, but on
phrases that could grow fangs and bite
into the flesh of those I might wound–
or opinions I've formed that could be wrong
like pineapple on pizza that I pretend to like.

Every spectacular and unlovely word staining
my tongue like bitter blueberries, desperation dripping
from my lips, my stomach eerily still–
I glare at myself in the mirror. A warning.
I purse my lips and suppress. Swallow.
Don't spit that out!

It *would* make a mess.

Jackson Clark

Parking Lot Elegy

The perks of being out so late today
are barren concrete deserts in the dark.
The faded grids that used to serve as park-
ing spaces are the altars where I lay

boxed in by white lines, basking in the rays
of blinking LED's whose blinding mark
Blots out the beams of any stars who's stark-
ly gleaming gifts could serve to light the way

of Holy Spirit whom I seek. I guess
when asking "Gracious Father, please draw near"
a parking lot isn't exactly best
for making our Messiah feel revered,
and yet, if God Himself can choose to rest
in fading cells, then he is resting here.

Jackson Clark

Roadkill

In a flash, the dog-mush
passes the peripheral of my right mirror, sharp
against the molar white stripes stenciled on the trachea
of the road.

It passes by in a blink
but my sun-stained corneas
can't forget the vomit
of rotting raspberry tart on the shoulder,
as if Pollock had stained his canvas with cartilage in lieu of paint.

Whatever sufficed for legs are splayed upward in a cruel imitation of the surrounding
trees. Its neck twists towards the road, the glassy orbs in the face
Tracing the lifeblood back to the skid marks in the left lane.

The puddle of gristle remains, straddling the liminal space between breathing
and furniture, waiting for animal control to scrape off whatever's left.
Until then, it will sit on the shoulder
Of the highway, picked at by scavengers who strip it down to the ribcage,
Clasped like a bear trap ready to spring.

I turn the music up and keep driving until I forget.

Jalyn Douglas

My New Orleans

Here, echoes of screechy shouts for painted coconuts
dally down the streets of Tchoupitoulas.
Massive floats trample over tipsy folks.
If only they had seen it coming.

Here, in my New Orleans, mama never
let go of her kids cuz gutter punks
are hungry. Fragments of laughter on Mama Chere's front porch
and sirens on the street fight for first place.

If laughter prevails, we hit up Café Du Monde
like the addict hits up his plug. White powder stains my shirt
but leaves him lying breathless on Bourbon.
If only he had a Mama Chere.

Here, in my New Orleans, pinching, peeling, and sucking
welcome every age. Zatarain's Crab Boil, Tony Chachere's,
and Slap Ya Mama satisfy tastebuds and magnify heartburn.

A hug and a tin of fresh pralines soothe
the aching heart and rampant mind.
If I don't eat mama's food,
I might as well tell her I don't love her too.

Here, downtown is Sin City after dark.
Next morning, the church is flooded with sinners
masked in white dresses and filled with the Holy Ghost.
At least, that's why mama said they were falling to the ground.
If only their hearts had been healed.

Here, in my New Orleans, adults linger and stay awhile –
if they like each other. After mamas say goodnight to little ones,
they stay up for hours at the kitchen counter sharing dark secrets
that don't leave the four walls of their home.

In my New Orleans, I can still hear the remnant
of drumming and dancing down Congo Square.
They didn't have freedom, but they had each other
and their music.

Here, in our New Orleans, music is not just something we hear

on the radio and casually hum along to. It's something we feel
deep down in our souls. Like our ancestors, we keep on feeling the music
all the way until next year when the majestic King of Zulu trumpets
down St. Charles with that thick black paint dripping down his sweaty face.

If only you knew my New Orleans.

Sarah Ford

A Cold Walk Home to Nowhere

They say time stops here. My watch stops ticking the second my sorry soles
step into the house where spider lilies bloom before sunset,
and Johnny sings through the dust in the old stereo console.

They say time stops here, in the place where I'm
glowing in glamor and grief under Friday night lights and
helped through happy crowds with a true gentleman's hands.

They say time stops here, in the Southern Yellow Pine walls I once knew as home,
where I'm lost in a forest of memories I once called my own, forsaken to remember my
heart and stray chirping stars and old honeysuckle sweethearts.

I know time stops here, because I hear it start again
from my wretched wrist each time I've left, and I wrench it from my pulse and throw it
out to the wild wind on my cold walk home to nowhere.

Madison Morrison

A Love Letter to the Woman Who Smelled Like Lemons

With bright yellow lemons, still warm,
you wrung your labor out into cups of lemonade,
made from the garden. Over tea, you whispered to me about barn
owls that lived in a house at *Heather Farm* and, hands deep in mulch, told me about shade
for your begonias. In your kitchen, I would imagine myself to be a queen
as you poured copious cups of tea for me, and we dined on nilla wafers.
As my tiny hands clutched your world fair winning china, I was ever keen
to know the secret recipe to being you. You held vine chafers
and book clubs, between knitting and dinner parties, and I watched you
wishing my small hands could do the same. In my tender imagination,
your boughs of yarn branched out across the living room floor and in blue
bundles bounded over the hillside of your home. *You sparked in me the greatest inspiration,*
amongst lemons–the kind that, still warm, smelled like you, and in
the same way, I wished that I could resemble you too.

Madison Morrison

Why I Bake

When I was little, we communed
with kitchen bandits. Women who thought family
was built and broken upon the firm stone
of Sunday dinners, closely followed by chanting Gregorian music.
They treated farmer's market tomatoes like the incense
of their lasagna. It was only after I made the dough

that I was allowed to play outside. Though it was different dough
I wanted to make–the green kind offered before communion.
I was 16 when I thought I could flood a place with the incense
of gunpowder to make a name. Who needed family
when you had *the* "family" backing you and blasting the music
of 2Pac and Ice Cube, which painted this life as being stone or being stoned.

It wasn't until I had a *literal* stone
to the head I thought that maybe baking dough
with mama wasn't too bad, and that I could go back to simple church music–
the kind that didn't consist of gangster rap– and return to communion
with my real flesh and blood, who wanted to save me, family.
Mama broke when I came home. Papa was incensed.

My soul torn in two, I soon begged Father to incense
me and command the demon to flee. For something was gripping my stone
heart. With the gentle hand needed to sneak up and grasp the devil's neck, my family
restored me to goodness. I buried myself in baking dough
until my hands ached and bled like the host of communion.
Soon, I was in the kitchen with Mama so much I heard the music

I didn't know she made–tears and laughter, a guttural spasmodic melody. Her music
left me choking back baths of tears in its incense.
I no longer loathed how long my family would commune.
The grinding of thyme and rosemary between stone
became my favorite task. And despite being a young doe
I decided that a life of simplicity, like life before the *family*

could influence me, was better. The *family*
always lurked in the shadows. I went to mass and heard the music
for the funeral of a 16-year-old too often. They had just wanted to make dough.
They didn't know that cops killed incensed
kids, waving guns, who were only a stone

throw away from puberty. Allegiance made for a deathly communion.

Sometimes as I commune with my family,
I think about the fact it could be me buried under stone, me who couldn't hear music.
And so, for *them*, I mix flour and water and bake dough; it is my penance–the only incense

I can offer.

Alex Mouw

MY LORD I WATCHED JUSTIN VERNON HIDE

My Lord I watched Justin Vernon hide
behind a stand of vocoder keyboards
and auto-tune mics, a Gibson strung
around his neck, head wrapped in studio

headphones. He sang *why are you so far from*
shielding me. Sean Carey closed the high hat
and beat from it hundreds of sharp ticks while
three trombones rained schmaltzy harmony. Green

lasers panned the refurbished warehouse stage.
Pierced me like a scanner. Swallowed in general
admission, I clawed for air and space.
White light strobed smartphones held aloft, red

eyes. Lord, why are you so far from shielding
me? The floor tom rumbled, flapped its loose head.

Mark Olin

Dove Hunting

Gunshots ringing over the tops of trees
indicates it's time to begin the hunt.
gold retrieving dogs' ears flap in the breeze
while men with shotguns rack them with a grunt.
I'm sitting with another near a field
of corn, the gold stalks rustling restlessly
as we set up our equipment, eyes peeled
for the bobbing brown birds we hope to see,
but though I should keep my watch on the air,
I can't help but turn my attention to
Dad; his sun-tanned face and age-speckled hair
the old over-under he'll put rounds through
I may not see a dove at all today,
but I'll remember my dad when I'm gray.

Avery Risner

712 Miles

Each day I rumble down the highway, dodging semi-trucks and speed checks and
I consider driving on. Down the road, down the telephone wire of pavement, a fleeting
gap that spills and stretches straight to her. But it is not time. It is February.
Fleeting, frosty February, which is too frosty and never fleeting, as if it doesn't know
that it is what lies between here and her, as if it is not the 712 miles between us.
It is a gap that does not close, not now, but instead stands before me, arms wide,
forcing me into a stiffening submission. And I do not resist.
But I do dream.
A hot pink sweatshirt. A stuffed cow, propped on her bed. A tub of Vaseline,
a fan of flawless mascara. An imaginary eclipse, an improbably perfect moment
where our orbits cross paths, where I could float and still feel my feet on
the ground. Where I could read the magnets on her fridge, feel my cheeks
ache and my speech flow, flow like the winding world between us.
But it is still February, and February is never for dreams. February is never for us.
And February is never fleeting.

Emma Rogers

My Grandmother's Kitchen, Then and Now

Lemon-scented kitchen, kitchen
just-tidied-up but never not-tidied-up,
kitchen of every color, kitchen of all five senses
and the ones we don't have names for,
kitchen of midnight glasses of water
with fingernail-moon-shaped ice cubes
dispensed reluctantly
from the tall machine,
kitchen of the pantry that always smelled
the way it did,
like wood I think, or food, or dust,
kitchen of peanut butter cookies,
small and striped and freckled and
crumbling sugar into ziplock corners,
kitchen of children's art
above cabinets of memorized contents,
kitchen with the drawer
where the pens are stored,
with three separate places for silverware,
with the doll-sized turquoise crochet sweater on clothespins
in a frame over my grandma's desk
next to the picture of the real sweater—except
that the one next to it is real, it's right there, it would be
soft if I could touch it—on the real girl
whose name and story
I should have asked about. Maybe
it was her.

No room in this house has a scent anymore
other than the one in the living room: musk,
medicine, heavy breathing,
something that no one wants to call
decaying organic material,
with the thickness
of the smell of paint in a studio or

the oceanic haze of an aquarium.
I don't stay at "Grandpa's house" long enough
to need a glass of water
or retrieve something from a drawer, unless I'm asked.
The oven is still there.
I bet there are ziplocks in the pantry.
The baked goods on the counter are store-bought.
The fridge is still there, still groans, and looks
like a cloudy funhouse mirror
that smears
everything
in wavy verticals.
Color-coded baskets from my mom's Amazon hold
bottles of things, next to the paper towels and
under the shelves I remember straining to reach.
There's no citrus hand soap by the sink
and no towel on the hook.
The sweater is still there, and so is the girl, and the desk.
And Grandma's there, in the recliner.
Right now, she's still there.

Emma Rogers

Ring

The fifth bulb in the fixture
above my bathroom mirror
peals a tight band of sound, like a school bell,
but thinner,
the abraded whirr cleaved to half its shape,
like if you
put the sound of bells
through a strainer
and left a harmonized liquid buzzing.
This bathroom is yours now:
you sat on the edge of that tub
once last summer
watching me do my makeup,
which I did with the solemn
indulgence of lifting a veil.
I can see you there,
where you'll never be again. Beautiful
to remember, but I
flip the switch as I leave and the bells
stop.

Short Fiction

Maddie Benton

Got Milk

On the one-month anniversary of the day DCFS had taken her daughter, Ruby Brinkley realized with horror that she was waking up. Some merciful part of her subconscious prompted her to remember her dream, drawing her back into the silent haven of sleep. The details were soft and liquid; Ruby could only remember the warm feeling she'd gotten when she had thought she was holding her daughter, but then her mind fully awakened and reality seeped over her like a runny egg. She fixed her eyes on the ceiling fan above her bed with its one missing blade. It turned wearily.

Get up. You are stupid and lazy. The day won't start itself.

Ruby sighed and counted the fan's rotations until she got to ten. Then she swung her legs over the side of the bed onto the stained carpet. She stumbled into her apartment's kitchen, feeling for the light switch. Even though she had lived there for over a year, she was still learning to navigate it in her morning fog. Ruby blindly grabbed around for the box of cereal she always kept on the counter, her fingers grazing a few haphazard piles of mail, the curled edges of post it notes scribbled with long-forgotten reminders, and empty orange pill bottles. She picked up Thorne, Amelia: Hydrocodone, Quantity: 50 tablets, no refills just to make sure, but it was definitely empty.

You know what you should do? See that shiny, silver sink, the one with all your dirty dishes in it? You should clear it out. Plug the drain. Turn on the faucet. Set it to lukewarm if you want, no reason to be miserable, and fill it to the brim. Listen to the water shh-shh-shh. Then

plunge your face in. Let it bathe you. Let it soak into your every pore, and never come up for air. Never.

Ruby looked at the popcorn ceiling and took a deep breath through her mouth.

It would be so quiet under there.

She watched herself carefully take the two bowls and three cups out of the sink, watched herself plug the drain, watched herself turn the rusted handle to release the water, but as she did so, she found the cereal box, bumping it with her elbow and tipping hundreds of tiny flakes onto the counter. "Ugh, what a mess!" She turned off the sink and began sweeping the spilled cereal into her plastic, gray bowl, using a few of the envelopes to help her and then opened the fridge for milk. "Shoot! How did I forget milk?"

What kind of idiot forgets milk?

Ruby groaned. She scanned the shelves one more time for good measure. No milk. Her eyes cut to the microwave clock: 9:02. She couldn't start the day without milk…"I'll just have to go get some!" Ruby realized. She needed to go out to get milk. In fact, she *had* to. Milk was a necessity, so Ruby tied on a faded, plaid green robe, pulled her bushy red-brown hair into a ponytail, and ran down the fire escape stairs of the Karlson Apartment building. She flung open the door of her short, beige Kia, kicking the XXL Styrofoam Circle-K cups at her feet. (The one benefit of her new cashier job was one free XXL soda with every shift; that's what the employees had decided anyway.) She threw her car into reverse before she'd even closed the door. Her tires squealed as she swerved onto the pot-holed road.

"I'll just run to CVS and grab some milk," she explained to the dull, brown eyes in the rearview mirror. "No one can start a day without milk. That's just crazy. I'd probably be a wild mess if I didn't get my milk." She let out a short, barky laugh at this comment.

You are a wild mess. Why go to CVS? Other stores are closer, cheaper.

"CVS will be faster. I'll just run in and run out. It will be so fast I can probably still watch the morning session of *Jeopardy* while I eat my cereal."

There's no reason to go to CVS…unless you're planning on getting something besides milk.

"I just really want to go to CVS. There's nothing wrong with that!" Ruby realized she was yelling. She took a deep breath and smiled, shaking her head slightly. "There's nothing wrong with that."

Ruby veered into the parking lot. Only four other cars were there, so she assumed it wasn't a problem that she straddled the line between two spots, or rather she didn't take the time to notice. Slamming the car shut, she jogged up to the sliding doors that would let her into CVS, bouncing from foot to foot in the millisecond it took them to separate. Then, she made a beeline for the refrigerator section.

"Milk, milk, milk, milk, milk," she repeated under her breath as she scanned the dozens of glass refrigerator doors smudged with fingerprints in search of her prize. "There it is!" she whispered, banging the door into the one next to it in her haste. Her right hand closed around the 32 oz. carton of Horizon Organic whole milk. She smiled at the cow on the front.

Ruby started toward the checkout. After taking two steps, she swerved to the big red letters that spelled out Pharmacy. She just wanted to see, just wanted to check what was over there. Nothing wrong with that. Nothing at all. As she approached, she heard the voice of a woman speaking to a pharmacist. "That's right. It's just for my allergies. I pick it up once a month. It should be under Anderson?"

"I'll check. Give me one moment, ma'am."

"Thank you." She sounded genuinely appreciative.

The woman turned to a toddler in one of those plastic, red and yellow cars with big eyeballs and a half smile on the front. There were about eight more parked by the pharmacy counter, all smiling the same foolish grin. This particular car had seen better days. Its pink mouth sticker was peeling, and the pupils were all scratched up, but the little girl inside didn't seem to mind. Her legs went through the bottom of the car and touched the floor, her little shoes squeaking as she ran across the muddy, purple carpet and pretended to drive, repeatedly turning the wheel in circles.

"Are you a driver? Can you go *super, duper* fast?" the woman bent down to coo.

The child giggled in delight. "Yeah!" she cheered and then proceeded to move as fast as her stubby legs could carry her, which was not very fast at all.

Ruby got in line behind the woman and tucked the carton of milk under her arm for safekeeping. She inhaled shakily; she'd never done it at CVS before. But yesterday when she was at the gas station, Willow, who worked at the register next to hers, had mentioned that she needed to pick up her dad's back medication from CVS. Ruby hoped she hadn't picked it up yet, and she hoped she could remember Willow's address from that one time she'd been to her house to feed her cat. Ruby hadn't been to a pharmacy in almost two weeks, but she wasn't doing anything wrong. She had just happened to be at CVS. She came here for milk, a basic human right. Milk for her cereal. Maybe she'd pick up the medication and then give it to Willow herself. Yes, she would probably do just that. She was just trying to be helpful.

I told you you couldn't quit. You're worthless. Worthless. You know that, right?

Ruby put her hands on the side of her head. "Stop it," she hissed.

You wouldn't hear me if your head was under water. You wouldn't hear anyone.

"I'm sorry. Did you say something?" The woman in front of Ruby turned around. She had curly brown hair that coiled in tiny ringlets down her back, a constellation of freckles on her cheeks, and clear, aquamarine eyes. She was dressed in a swirly blue and white shirt with dark jeans.

"Ummm–no, sorry," Ruby whispered, dropping her eyes.

"No need to apologize. I just wanted to make sure I heard you." The woman gave a small smile and then turned her eyes back to the toddler in the car.

Ruby gasped. The girl in the car, the little girl, was Lucy.

She looked at her again. It was Lucy alright: the golden curls, the big blue eyes, the way she laughed. When Ms. Anderson wasn't looking, Ruby waved at Lucy, just to make sure she recognized her. The girl smiled, opening her mouth to reveal dozens of uneven baby teeth, and waved back with one hand while keeping the other on the wheel. It was Lucy, her Lucy, and she was here with this Anderson woman.

The pharmacist returned, walking up to the little counter. "I'm sorry, Ms. Anderson. Your medicine won't be ready for a few more minutes. Would you like to wait?"

"Yes, that's fine," Ms. Anderson nodded and sat in one of the cushioned, metal chairs to the left of the pharmacy. Ruby hardly noticed as her eyes drank in the sight of her daughter.

"Excuse me? Excuse me? Hey!" The pharmacist said.

Ruby snapped out of her trance and stepped forward. "Oh, sorry," she mumbled. "Um, I'm Willow Flick and I'm picking up medication for my father."

"Can you confirm the address?"

Ruby did.

"Wait here."

Ruby looked down at her plaid robe. She shifted the milk under her arm and glanced at Lucy, who was still in the car, running back and forth in front of Ms. Anderson and pretending to honk the horn as the woman laughed in delight. Ruby watched the scene intently.

"Here are your pills."

"Thank you," she mumbled, reaching forward to snatch the little paper bag.

She should just walk out the door, just take her milk and leave. But she watched her feet march over to Ms. Anderson instead.

Now pay close attention, Ruby, here is a real mom who takes care of her daughter. She wouldn't leave her two-year-old home alone. She wouldn't get a call that said the neighbors came to check on her daughter because she was screaming. She wouldn't ever hear the sound of angry men banging on her door. She wouldn't ever know the feeling of having the one person left in the world that she loved ripped from her arms. She wouldn't need to put her head under the water.

Ruby closed her eyes and then cleared her throat. "Excuse me?" she said.

Ms. Anderson turned toward her. "Yes?" she replied, a little startled but not rudely.

"You have a beautiful daughter."

"Thank you," Ms. Anderson replied warmly.

Ruby swallowed. "Hooooooowww did she, uh, get her name?"

Ms. Anderson looked surprised, and a cautious look crossed her face. "Um, she's named after my mother. Well, a combination of my mother's name and my name."

"What *is* her name?"

Ms. Anderson glanced about nervously. "Um, well, it was nice to meet you." She smiled and tried to rise, but her legs started to wobble.

Ruby felt her hands start to sweat. “It’s Lucy, isn’t it? Her name is Lucy, right? I know her. She’s-well, she’s my daughter. I’m going to get her back. I’m working very hard. And-”

“I think, actually, I think I need to leave. I can’t wait for my medicine, sir, I am so sorry.” Ms. Anderson called to the pharmacist. She scooped up the little girl and left the car in the middle of the floor, rapidly walking toward the door.

“Lucy!” Ruby called. The little girl did not respond. “LU-CY!” Ruby yelled. The girl looked up and matched her eyes with Ruby’s. She smiled and waved again, and then rested her head on Ms. Anderson’s shoulder.

The few patrons of CVS at 9:27 a.m. stared at Ruby. The pharmacist looked particularly appalled, his mouth hanging open while his eyes narrowed in distaste, but Ruby ignored them. She simply walked to the checkout with her milk, which was now warm, but she didn’t care. She handed it to the greasy teenager who asked if she had a membership (she did not) and after handing over a few crumpled dollars walked out the door to her beige car. Ruby ripped open the paper bag, fumbled with the lid for a minute, turned the container upside down, and swallowed two pills in quick succession. *You will never get her back, Ruby, and that’s probably for the best.* She drove back to her sink.

Short Fiction

Jalyn Douglas

Curls on Christmas

I ran the flat iron through a small section of my now-blown-out thick curls. Smoke arose, and I heard a sizzle. It would take roughly three hours for me to straighten my whole head of hair. Thank goodness I started getting ready early. I've only straightened my hair four times in my life—today included. Once for my first piano recital in third grade. Once when I was fifteen and sang the Nation Anthem at the Saints Game. Once for my senior prom. And today I straightened my hair for the Christmas dinner Matthew's parents invited me to. I never cared to straighten my hair because it makes me feel less original. Like I just blend in with every other pretty girl on the planet.

I was raking my hair through with oil when a text message notification interrupted Nat King Cole's "Christmas Song" on my speaker. I wiped my hands with a towel, ran out of the cluttered bathroom, and ran into my even more cluttered bedroom. Clothes, some with hangers still on and some without, were strewn across my halfway made-up bed because I needed to find the perfect outfit for tonight.

Mat: Hey love, otw. Be there in 10

I hearted the message and threw my phone back on my bed so I could finish getting ready. Matthew had warned me several times leading up to tonight that his parents didn't like for people to be late to functions. I certainly didn't want to make a bad first impression. Even though we'd been dating for a little over a year now, we felt that this was the perfect opportunity to take the next step and solidify the relationship. Although, at the time, I didn't realize that forward progress seldom comes without complication. I ran back into the bathroom and speedily brushed

my lashes with a generous coat of mascara, leaving little black specks on my eyelids. After wiping off the excess, I looked at myself in the mirror and practiced the way I would smile when Matthew's parents opened the front door for us. I looked different, though. I missed my curls.

"Matthew's here!" my mother yelled from downstairs. I jumped at the sudden sound of her voice. Before grabbing my purse, I peered out the window to find Matthew walking toward the house in his red and black flannel shirt and black cargo shorts. My heartbeat quickened, and my palms grew a little moist at the sight of him. Then, my mind flashed back to our first date when Matthew asked me out, placing me back on that bench beside him outside Creole Creamery. *You're truly something special, you know that right? Even if you do, I'll spend the rest of my days reminding you,* he had said. From that point on, he had made me believe it a little more with each day.

Returning to reality, I yelled "Coming" so that my mother didn't think I fell into the toilet or something.

As I came downstairs, I saw her talking to Matthew at the front door. She cracked the door open so that only her head popped out. From what I could tell, my mother kindly tolerated Matthew. Culture was a big thing for her and so was "sticking with your own people." Nothing I said would have convinced her in the slightest bit, let alone have changed her mind. Just the mention of his name would stir up an argument between us. So, I talked less around her and settled with the fact that she would grudgingly support us from a distance.

I stepped outside into the humid evening air. It doesn't get too cold in New Orleans during the winter. The sky just gets grey, and all the trees die. Humidity is the only constant.

Matthew reached over me to open my car door as I inhaled his blazing Baccarat. His scent was warm and compelling but in a delicate way. I took a quick look around the interior of

his 2008 Lexus SC as he circled around to the driver's side. The car was clean and lingered with the scent of him. I peered out of the foggy windshield to see if he noticed me peeping around. He didn't.

"Your hair. I've never seen it like this before," Matthew said in a different tone from when he said that I was special a year and some change ago. I felt the blood rush up to my cheeks like it would flow through my tan skin and onto my lap.

"I know. I wanted to change it up a bit for your parents. Something new," I said because I didn't know what else to say.

"They're gonna love you, Irene."

I forced a smile on my face. Matthew had talked about his parents many times before, and they seemed nice, just different. One time, he told me a story about how they avoided meeting his former girlfriend, Vivian. They had been dating for almost two years, and they hadn't met her once. They excused themselves for being busy and traveling for work, but I think it was because Vivian was Asian.

The car ride went by fast. Probably because Matthew didn't want to get there late, he went ten over the speed limit. We listened to Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong sing "I've Got My Love to Keep Me Warm," but my spiraling thoughts were louder than the singers' voices. I reached for a curl to twirl around my finger but forgot that my hair was straight now. I missed my curls.

We arrived at his parents' house at 5:57 pm. Just in time. As we walked from the street, I took in the amazing sight. It was an elegant Colonial Revival home with four large white columns separating the huge windows in the front. Old money lived Uptown.

Matthew led the way to the front door, me walking two steps behind. My heartbeat had that same pitter-patter sensation as before when I was peering through the window, and my hands were moist again. But this time, it was for different reasons. A grand red poinsettia wreath hung on the front door, accompanied by two smaller poinsettias on each end of the porch. I wanted to reach for Matthew's hand as we stood and waited for them to greet us at the door, but I didn't. My hair was getting frizzy in the muggy December air.

"Hello Matthew, baby." Mrs. Sherri opened the door and greeted her son with a warm smile across her wide face.

"Oh, it is so nice to meet you, Iris," she said.

I froze with an over-doing-it smile plastered on my face. The composed smile I'd practiced an hour earlier in my bathroom mirror had vanished.

"Irene, Mom," Matthew said as I pretended my name was actually Iris.

Mrs. Sherri looked me up and down, holding her gaze on my hair longer than anything else.

"No, that's alright. It's so nice to meet you, Mrs. Sherri," I said.

We walked through the door, Mrs. Sherri leading us, Matthew following, and me behind. The house was filled with the smell of fresh pine, but as we got closer to the kitchen, all I could smell was a foul stench from the deviled eggs Mrs. Sherri had prepared.

Everything inside the house matched the grandeur of the exterior. I noticed a tall grandfather clock sitting beside the fireplace. Its pendulum kept swaying from side to side, and the more I focused on it, the dizzier I became. Matthew's father was sitting reclined on the sofa in the living room like he was enjoying a nice vacation on Cancun beach. On the TV, Anderson

Cooper's monotonous voice played over flashing clips of thin brown children crammed in metal cages like animals.

Mrs. Sherri went into the kitchen, and Matthew split away, heading to the living room to greet his father. I followed behind his heels. Mr. Alvin didn't realize we were standing there until Matthew blurted out, "Hey, Dad." He reached down to hug him.

"Hey, son. It's so good to see you. And who is this fine young lady we have here?" Mr. Alvin said as he bent his head down to peer at me above his glasses. I felt like a gorilla in a zoo exhibit by the way he looked at me. I tried to smile.

"Hello, it's great to finally meet you, Mr. Alvin," I said as I reached out to shake his hand. His hand was surprisingly soft and smooth. I'm sure he noticed the extra moisture that the sweat was creating on my palm.

Matthew and I went back into the kitchen with his mother. He picked up the green onions off the counter and started cutting them like he knew exactly what to do. I sat at the barstool watching them prepare the food to be served. I watched how they talked like good friends, laughing and practically finishing each other's sentences. The only time my mother and I gelled that much was when she had about two drinks in her system and we weren't talking about me.

Mrs. Sherri announced that dinner was ready and told me to go call Mr. Alvin from the living room. I complied. Mr. Alvin went straight to the dining room table while he waited for Mrs. Sherri to serve him. He sat at the head of the table, opposite Mrs. Sherri, and Matthew sat across from me. I found it unsettling the way that the table distanced us. Matthew looked fine, though.

"Why don't you go ahead and bless the food for us, Irene," Mrs. Sherri said.

This had to be a setup. I said grace but tripped over some words as I sped through them. As I opened my eyes, I realized that they all held their eyes closed for two more seconds than I did and made the sign of the cross as they mumbled something to themselves.

I chewed on a piece of dry turkey for a bit while analyzing it on my plate so that I wouldn't make eye contact with Mrs. Sherri or Mr. Alvin. The sound of forks hitting porcelain plates accompanied the now-faint voice of Anderson Cooper coming from the adjacent room.

"Matthew tells us that your parents are both from the lower ninth ward. Talk about humble beginnings," Mr. Alvin broke the silence and addressed me.

I slightly choked on the piece of turkey I'd been chewing partially because it was so dry, and partially because of Mr. Alvin's statement. I quickly reached for a sip of Sprite so that I could rinse the bits of turkey down my throat and have time to formulate a response.

It was true that both of my parents were from the lower ninth ward. They actually had lived four blocks down from one another their whole childhood. *We were comfortable in that ole' shotgun. Sure, the ground peeked through the panels of the bathroom floor a lil bit, but times were fun. We had our family and our faith. That's why I always knew things would turn out alright for me,* my father explained to me one night when I was younger. I didn't think much of it at the time, but now I know that faith is what set my mother and father apart. She's still done her best, but I wonder how our house would have been different if she had just grabbed onto faith. I wonder if it would feel like Matthew's home.

"Yes, they did, actually. They seemed to have enjoyed simple things," I responded, trying to mask the offense. I was expecting Matthew to jump into the conversation, especially since I hadn't been really vulnerable with him about my parents before, but he didn't. I had just exposed

a special, unseen side of me to someone who seemed to simply not care. Maybe he needed to remind me that I was special just as much as he needed to convince himself.

Five minutes after this interaction, dinner was over. Matthew scraped his plate after he had finished his seconds. Mr. Alvin got up from the table, then we all proceeded after him. Mrs. Sherri started on the dishes, and Matthew began saving the food in containers. Mr. Alvin went back to his recliner chair at Cancun beach. He shut the door behind him and raised the TV volume up as if Anderson Cooper's tone was as sweet as a lullaby.

"Irene sweetie, would you mind helping to clear out the dining room?" Mrs. Sherri asked.

"Of course," I replied with a new certainty that I lacked when I first walked into their home.

She handed me a towel and honeysuckle scented multipurpose cleaner, then told me what to do. I started wiping off the wooden table that was too large for a three-person family. Looking out the window, I saw that the sky had turned elephant grey, and a light sheet of rain was falling down. So much for Christmas spirit. So much for straight hair. The rain intrigued me for some reason, though. How could one little drop of precipitation turn a straight strand of hair into a tight ringlet? How was my identity so dependent on the weather forecast? The rain pounded harder against the huge window as I pondered. I sought answers and was determined to find them.

I dropped the cleaner and rag that was in my hand and looked around for an exit. Without looking back, I slowly creeped out of the back door, leaving it slightly ajar. I came to the edge of the porch looking out into the grey backyard. Closing my eyes, I took one step from underneath the patio and into the rain. Then, I stood there. I stood there in the cold rain knowing that there

was no way of going back now. Instead of fearfully shrinking back, I lingered for a moment and embraced the peace that rained down on me. I was washed and made new.

Stepping back under the pavilion, I rang out my drenched clothes and wiped my feet on the doormat. I pulled out my phone to see if it was wet; it was only slightly. Opening the camera app, I saw that the length of my hair had shrunk about five inches already, and my thick coils started to reform within seconds. I raked my fingers through to the ends, separating the curls and letting them redefine themselves. Still holding the phone up, I smiled and snapped a quick picture of myself. I missed my curls.

Short Fiction

Avery Risner

A Non-Hiker's Guide to Appreciating Life

It came about, when my great-second-removed-uncle-or-something had worked for a horrifying number of years, that he stacked up such a great pile of money that he was able to purchase a vacation house. A cabin, jammed into the side of a mountain. However, my great-second-removed -uncle-or-something was wildly old, and he only visited this cabin once (or perhaps twice, I actually don't know this story very well) before he became so sickly that he was labeled unable to travel. He spent the remainder of his life in bed, gathering dust, and the cabin spent the remainder of his life right where he had left it, gathering dust.

Unfortunately, it came about that my great-second-removed-uncle-or-something's will bestowed said cabin upon my mother – thus leading her to furiously pack up her mediocre husband and asthmatic daughter to begin life anew in the mountains. Our move was wonderful news for the alpine cottage cheese industry (she eats three bowls a day). It was terrible news for me. She swore up and down that the fresh mountain air would revitalize my shoddy lungs, but I wasn't convinced. Sure, mountain air might be the best oxygen in the world. But last I checked, there's about five inhales to go around. That stuff is thin. I didn't see it and my asthma exactly going hand in hand, so I made a personal vow. No matter what, I would stay clear of any and all strenuous physical exercise, on penalty of death. Or worse, discomfort.

I figured this would be simple enough. As usual, I figured wrong.

It was on the morning of today that my mother announced our hiking trip. Actually, scratch that. It was HER hiking trip. My father and I were just decoration. She zoomed our excuse for a car through the squiggly mountain roads, her bi-focal sunglasses somehow adding

10 or 30 digits to the Speed Limit. My father clutched his new walking stick as if it was a replacement for an exciting personality. I quietly lectured my leg muscles on the importance of not taking PTO, even if we were in the mountains.

The starting line of our hiking trail was even more anti-climactic than I had anticipated. A gap in some trees, framed by two porta-potties and a weathered map. My mother approached said map with gusto, her visor revealing her grey roots and her backpack size revealing that she had never done this before.

“Eight miles!” She announced, swinging her hiking pole in the air and nearly clobbering a nearby child. “To a lake!”

My father flashed a thumbs up.

I frowned. Eight miles to a lake? We had lakes at home. And I mean this literally. We are from Michigan.

“So… we’re gonna climb our way to a lake, look at the lake, and then climb back to the car?”

“Sure enough!”

The cogs of my brain shifted, and I came to a sudden realization. This was idiotic. Sure, I could rationalize how, say, old timey settlers had climbed these mountains in the past. They had a real reason. They wanted to build a house up there. Us, however? We just wanted to... take a look. Call me crazy, but that’s not a great reason. I could Google a photo of a lake from the comfort of my bean-bag chair bed (the furniture part of our move is still in progress).

My mother started up the trail, but I yelled after her, "Not to be rude, but this seems... dumb! Are we going up just go to back down?”

She paused. “No, sweetie. We are going up to admire being up.”

My father sighed. “No. We are going up to enjoy the going up!”

Well. Neither of those answers were helpful. But dumb or not, we were going up. And she was intent that I would make something of it. Or else.

Step after step. Tree after tree. Chipmunk after chipmunk. Fleeting view after fleeting view that quickly vanished back into tree after tree. Step after step and breath after breath. After breath. After breath.

“I actually cannot breathe.” I complained, flopping down on a stump and adorably smothering myself in sap.

“Focus on your lungs!” My mother called back, marching on without me.

Thank god for her. I hadn’t thought of that.

We marched on, stumbling over roots and words and rocks and breaths and other hikers. Everyone else seemed to know what they were doing, all of them prepped and enthusiastic and (annoyingly) in perfect shape. I stood out more noticeably than my mother’s ridiculous visor, what with my burning red face and wafts of inner frustration. If this was about enjoying the going up, I was not succeeding. This was nothing but an eternal slog, where step after step got you where? Oh! Just another step.

“Look around, admire the view!” My father chided me.

But I didn’t want the view. I had enough of the view. I was supposed to want the lake, but gosh, the process was outweighing the end goal. All this for a fleeting glimpse at just an average amount of lovely?

I wanted a break, but no one else could be bothered to stop and take a breath. I wanted to at least be complimented on my endurance, but no one else could be bothered to stop taking photos of the trees. I wanted to be doing this right, but no one else – no, I couldn’t be bothered to

have the capabilities. My legs screamed at me as I inwardly screamed at them, stupid raw pasta noodles that were quickly wilting, no, disintegrating in the boiling water of our incline. I balled my fists and fought back the pressure rising in my scapula, threatening to blow through my muscles, my tissues, my lungs. It was swelling with the whoosh of an inflating hot air balloon, which is decidedly less romantic when it is inside your chest cavity. Consuming, vibrant, suffocating, expanding, and most importantly. On fire. My breaths began burning quicker and deeper, not from the elevation and strain, but from my intensifying frustration. It was as if I was a soda-can and life had given me a good shake. I needed to crack my lid and spray myself dry, but no. No! That's not how it works, not here, not now. How it works is keeping the can shut until the bubbles go away. Keeping a lid on it. Calming down. Taking a breath. Walking forward, fighting through it, inwardly screaming hoping wishing desiring for them to be gone and for me to be normal and why can't I just walk up this mountain and why am I walking up this mountain in the first place and this is the stupidest and worst thing I've ever done and at the least I could not be outstripped by my basically geriatric parents or even worse literally anyone that is able to breathe OH MY GOD WHY CAN'T I BE NORMAL ABOUT THIS

"Sweetie, look! We're at the lake!"

My eyes snapped up.

There it was.

Picturesque.

Blue.

Cold looking.

"It's nice." I wheezed. And it was.

My father offered me half of a sandwich.

I accepted.

The three of us munched and stared at the lake.

“I like how the light reflects on the water.” My mother commented.

I nodded.

Then we turned around and walked back to the car.

Upon reaching the base, my mother instructed an unlucky bystander to snap a photo of the three of us. I loudly declined, but they still dragged me into the frame, where I forced out a smile, as flushed and unattractive as they come.

She slapped the photo above our kitchen table, so that we might have the privilege of seeing it every single day. Me, half-smiling, half-gasping for air. My mother, one arm around me and the other flailing with seemingly irrepressible joy. My father, straight-faced but clutching his beloved walking stick (with more passion than I’ve seen him use to clutch my mother, if I’m honest).

In the frame next door, I threw up a photo I had taken of the lake itself. Picturesque. Blue. Cold looking.

My parents stumbled in on me, staring up at them.

“Fun outing.” My father commented.

“The most fun ever!!!” Harmonized my mother, a bowl of cottage cheese swaying in her grasp. “My favorite part was the chipmunks! Their cute little fat faces!”

My father dared to crack a smile, “And how you spilled a whole bag of chipmunk feed down your shirt.”

The two began to chuckle, but didn’t get away with it long before I interrupted, “What chipmunks? I don’t remember that.”

"Oh, honey." My mother waved her hand. "You were a bit preoccupied with yourself, if I do remember." She nudged my father noticeably, and he chimed in,

"Yes."

They quickly launched back into a whole autobiography of memories from the hike – trail friends they had made, rare birds they had seen, other slightly stupid things – but I didn't listen. I found my eyes wandering back to the photos above the kitchen table. My mother's photo, full of life and warmth and us and things I had missed. My father had more than a walking-stick, as I now spied a pair of binoculars hanging around his neck. I guess they were for the birdwatching I didn't know he enjoyed. The crinkled plastic of an abandoned Ziploc baggie stuck out of his backpack, reminding me of the sandwich we had shared. Or rather, that he had shared with me. My mother stood next to him, the hiking map she had studied for days, even weeks, peeking out of her pocket. I could see the remnants of what I now know to be chipmunk feed all down her shirt. And her face... well, it was as heated and sweaty as my own. Perhaps I hadn't been the only one struggling. But it seemed I had been the only one struggling alone.

Then my eyes fell to the photo on the right. My lake photo. Unique enough to have been copied out of Google images. Holding no trace of me or the people I had hiked with.

My mother interrupted me by tapping my shoulder, "Did you hear us?"

"Hmmm?" I turned.

"We were just saying that we should go back! Hit the trail again!" She jumped for momentary joy. "I gotta get my visor back out, it's just so stylish! I'm sure you wouldn't be interested but—"

"Actually...." I floundered for the least cringe way to admit that I would be interested, visor or not (though preferably not). "I'd go."

She gasped with enough power to shatter her trachea and slammed her bowl of cottage cheese onto the table. “Would you? Oh! I knew you’d come around!” She swiveled to my father. “Didn’t I say she’d come around?”

He shrugged.

“Calm down.” I waved my hands back and forth. “Don’t make a big deal of it. I just...” My eyes found the lake photo one last time, “think that frame could use a better picture.”

Short Fiction

Anna Saporito

Werewolf

The first dog I'd ever really met was the one chained outside a few trailers down from us. When I passed him on my way home, I would hear the chain lurch first. He growled and barked. All snapping teeth. He jerked on the chain until a hacking cough spat out. There were pink, irritated bald spots on his neck. Dust puffs appeared as he slammed his paws in the dirt. I never saw him with any food or water. But he was still alive.

I stood there, transfixed. We had just learned that word in school. It seemed to fit. I studied my vocabulary words during recess because none of the other kids would play with me. They called me dirty, because I walked that dust road to and from the trailer park every day.

I stayed away from the dog because if I got too close, he would bite me. But if I stood far away, he would choke himself. So it was better for the both of us if I stayed away. I peeked at him through the curtain of our kitchen, so he didn't see me. Opal and Winn Dixie could be happy in a park. I read and reread that story, believing that I could be her more and more with each chapter that passed. I just needed to try harder. Take some action like she did. Opal wasn't all that special.

"Stop lookin' at that dog and come help me!" Nana called.

"But, Nana, I'm transfixed!"

"You better be trans-fixin' to set this table!"

Sometimes, she liked to pretend that we still lived in a real house. The one with overgrown vines and chipped bricks. Dad's house. But they still say the trailer park is better. At

some point, at a distance wasn't enough anymore. My half-friendship wasn't enough. I wanted something to change. I needed it. I didn't want to go from an empty school to an empty trailer anymore. The only presence was that dog.

Over time, a small light of hope grew in my heart that was actually the devil. The one Nana talked about. Opal wasn't all that special. I knew that I would only get hurt, but the pain watching from the small panel over the sink was greater still. I approached the dog because I wanted my own Winn Dixie. I had to move because I couldn't be still.

There was no yelping or heaving from the dog. Only fangs that flashed into my arm and tugged like police dogs do on the TV. Goosebumps rose. I didn't know I was screaming until I stopped.

Nana cleaned me up. She said it "must've hurt like the dickens." Because anytime something was anything it was like the dickens.

"It's not like the dickens," I sobbed, "it is the dickens."

There was a lot of screaming the next few days that wasn't my own. Between Nana and the dog's dad. They both scared me. And some police came. But it couldn't have been that big of a deal because Mom didn't take off of work. If it wasn't a big deal, then why was I left more alone than ever?

I stopped seeing the dog one day. The bare post and chains not a blackhole that drags you in with the weight of it, but a cavity, a simple hole where something was missing that you couldn't name. I asked the dog's dad about him. I didn't want to talk to him for long because he had same twitching eyes and jerking hands Dad did. He said that I was the second person the dog had bitten. So, he had to be "youth-and-eyes." That word hadn't been on a test of mine yet, so I

didn't know what it meant. I asked Nana, and she wouldn't tell me. But I had known I was why my friend had went away. We were both punished for my hope.

I wore bandages on my arm the rest of the school year, phantom teeth itching my skin. It only made things worse. They crowded the school. I was no longer just dirty. I knew what the words "rabid" and "werewolf" meant. I started to hate them. Like the snapping dog was now chained inside me. Not my friend but what he became when he saw me. But I had no fangs to bear. No half-friend there to comfort me. I walked home every day on that vacant dirt road, my sneakers the only thing kicking up dust.

Creative Nonfiction

Mark Olin

Purple in the Springtime

My hometown used to turn purple in the springtime. Little wildflowers would cloak yards and empty yellow fields in an imperial shade so vibrant that you just couldn't help but stare. I remember the cotton gin too, with its baby blue walls and the rusty red metal work that spanned the length of the gravel lot upon which the gin was built. When it was summer they would spray paint the big bales of harvested cotton with the colors of the American Flag to celebrate the Fourth of July, and by fall they'd be gone, shipped off somewhere else to be made into textiles and the like. And I remember the woods with their greens and browns, and the shadows the sun would cast through the leaves at golden hour when I would get out of school and go wandering.

My friends and I used to play in those woods, bumping our way down a little suburban street to a creek that burbled with clear water. We would talk for hours there in our little oasis, laughing and joking and exploring everything that little creek had to offer. When we were donewe would go to my best friend's house to relax in the cool of the A/C, to drink Coke, Sprite, and A&W Root Beer; and eat homemade mac-and-cheese, Welch's Fruit Gummies, and Cosmic Brownies. Sometimes, we would have sleep-overs, staying up late into the night just to squeeze out every last bit of enjoyment from one-another until we were too tired to keep our eyes open.

Those were the days- back when we were all together. Those days are gone now. Now we're all scattered, different people in different places. College separated us. Jobs separated us. Stupid, petty dramathat we shouldn't have even bothered entertaining separated us. We used to

talk daily; now we barely talk. Some have even stopped talking altogether, or have stopped being talked to. No more sleep-overs. o more romps in the woods. The creek lays empty and undisturbed.

Not that there's much left to disturb anyways. Every day a new patch of nature is torn up, ripped out, and paved over. The town got too big, and now all the farmers are contractors, their fields — parking lots, their crops — apartment buildings. Where once stood a family-owned produce market now stands a Publix; where fields once grew rows of cotton, they now grow streets of cookie-cutter houses.

The cotton gin was torn down too. Only the gravel remains, boundless and bare like the sands of *Ozymandias*. There just wasn't enough crop to keep them afloat. They'll probably put in a gas station or a stripmall, and then every trace that it ever existed will be erased. Because that's what humanity craves most: pavement.

And the flowers? They're still there, but choked and strangled and maimed, trampled beneath the heel of so-called progress. They cling to life in cracks in the asphalt, gasping for fresh air that they'll never get again. They're just like me I suppose, still trying to hold on to whatwas. I used to walk down to the creek, trying to bring my memories back to life. I would make mental notes like, "There's where we shot that short film," or, "There's the tree we all used to try climbing," or, "There's the creepy old building we were warned not to go into (and didn't we think it was somehow related to the mafia?)."

One time it overwhelmed me. I sat on a log and screamed into the open blue void above me. I shed tears over the friends I used to know and the places I used to love. I cried, "Why? Why must time tear us apart? Why must time ruin the things I love? Why must it march onward, and why must I do the same?"

I've stopped going to the creek. It still makes me sad to be there. But things have changed since that day. I've changed, in some small ways. I reconnected with my best friend from back then recently. As it turns out, he's still my best friend. School, and work, and petty drama, and time may have separated us, but there are some things that can't ever truly be ruined. I visited his apartment a state over, and we spent the weekend together going over all the things that had happened to us since we last spoke. We made food, better than the junk we used to eat as kids. Though it wasn't a creek, there was a beach forty-five minutes away that we went to, and when night fell, I slept on a beanbag bed in his room. It wasn't quite the same as it was all those long years ago. It won't ever be that way again. But that's okay; it doesn't need to be. I realize that now.

The Sunday I left my friend's apartment, I packed up my car and drove eight hours back home. And in every field there were flowers. Little imperial wildflowers that cloaked everything. My hometown *still* turns purple in the springtime…

Creative Nonfiction

Ethan Howard

A Testimony

When you reflect on your hometown of Crestview, Florida, you think of First Baptist Church. It sits at the wonky intersection of 90 and 85, roads that are twisted together like pipe cleaners. You pass the blue and sun-faded awnings of the old campus, then take a left, and then the red-brick "New Sanctuary" vaults over the trees and the baking asphalt lot, over the shrubs planted and pruned to announce "HE IS RISEN" in lush green uppercase. You step inside, past the glass doors, through the lobby, and into the sanctuary. It is a field of pews standing guard over a deep maroon carpet, to which you have committed unforgivable coffee-stains. This is home.

But Home is across the street, on the opposite corner of the parking lot. Just off the main campus is a small meeting hut, all peeling white vinyl: the Student Center. Every Wednesday night, the 7th to 12th grade students meet there for worship and fellowship. But before, you called it the Lighthouse, and its steward was Brother Jeff.

He was tall, sturdy as a quarterback, and deeply tanned—pride of his indigenous heritage. He was a passionate, fiery preacher, and you can't remember him ever using a microphone. His favorite way to greet you was with that preacher voice, from right behind you (he wielded his silence, too, as a power) and right in your ear, "Hey!" And you would turn and see his whippish smile, but before he embraced you, his lucid eyes would watch carefully for the word, or the Name, on your tongue.

Every Wednesday night, in the musty, dim room with its sticky door and hard carpet and tan walls and loud metal chairs, Jeff would preach from his teetering wooden pulpit. The tendons would stretch in his tough neck as he retold his testimony. This testimony was The Testimony. He had been lost, lost completely, running wild, a "hellion," until one night in his dark bedroom, conviction had burst hot over his head, followed by soothing mercy. The new-Born man had gathered the refuse of the old life—the alcohol, the pot, the cassettes, and the magazines—gave it up in a gallon drum, and consecrated it with lighter fluid. This is what you need to do, he said as the ashes of the dead sin hazed his face. Turn and turn completely. One-hundred-eighty degrees. If you tell your testimony and you aren't one-hundred-eighty degrees of new then you better start asking yourself questions. If you think you've been saved and you don't know your rebirth date by heart you better start asking questions, he said. You would watch his smoking eyes and you wondered what you could offer to that holy drum, but your hands are empty. You knew that you had been baptized when you were seven, or maybe eight, but you can't remember the date. It might have been September.

You loved Brother Jeff for the deep pride and fervor with which he preached to you all. He knew you all by name, he took you in a bus to the Grand Canyon and back, and when he would pat your shoulder or welcome you in those solid arms, you knew this man would bleed for you. But when you step back to apprehend the man as he was then, the clash drowns his words, the sharp tide of sinsmoke crashes in your nose, so that you can't even remember the way he smelled. You are struck down by the hollow drumming of unanswered questions.

…

During the fall of 2019, First Baptist Crestview faced a bombardment of financial trouble. The church lacked the funds to pay both the ongoing construction debt and its four

pastors. There came a committee, a decision, and a vote: to maintain financial stability, two pastors must be let go.

One of those pastors, of course, was Jeff.

The backlash exploded. Jeff had always served the church faithfully, and his students loved him. He had done so much and poured out so much. A faction split off, claiming that the church had backstabbed him, spilled blood in the baptistery because they couldn't stand Jeff's fire and couldn't stand the conscience-burning heat. Whatever hope for objectivity disappeared in the battle of For or Against. What should have been committee business became a question of heart, this question of heart was now committee business, and the congregation took sides, willingly or otherwise. But the opinion-bombs and public blowouts were never the deadliest weapons in the ensuing fights. The modest hate, the quiet jabs that singled out weak points with precision—these attacks left the deepest wounds.

The decision, necessary as it was, dropped like a warhead. Jeff lost his job, and the church body splintered. Entire families evacuated, leaving only their shell-shocked pews. There was no more Wednesday night service. Even the Lighthouse fell casualty. Only a few weeks after Jeff's severance, a storm front struck during repairs to the building's roof. Rain punched through the ceiling, destroying most of the electronics and scattering fiberglass insulation. With the advent of social distancing, the disaster marked the end of the Lighthouse as you knew it. The space would not be renovated for three years.

…

It is late July of 2023, and the old church gang is in town for summer break. You go to Destin and eat overpriced tacos, reminiscing under fairy lights, on a humid patio that overlooks the gulf. As they share high school memories, the old harmonies of your keys, his drums, her

vocals float to you on the salt breeze. At some point, you mention Jeff. His name has the effect of a dirty word. The tiny audios around the table become distinct: ice rattles, an eyelid squelches, someone rustles in their clothes. There is a prick in their voices that wasn't before, and it makes your cold fingers spider down your legs. They hope never to see him again because to face him would mean the fault-seeking stare, the eyes like grapeshot punching your paper conscience with holes. Because he would wring his hands or pour dust over his head or batter their skulls with scriptures, if only he could see them as they are now.

As they nod and laugh—hitchingly—you ask yourself, how had you missed this? You never lived with the man nor fell under the shadow of his judgment. You never seemed to squirm beneath his scalding pulpit, so is your love and your respect that survived, despite everything, wrong? Why do you now feel like Jeff is on trial and that you are a lone juror? You grip the flaking metal chair arms for support because you must bear witness to their testimony, mark the man as he is. Each voice pours like sticky epoxy and crackles, his image contorts beneath each resin layer, hard in the heat. The contours smooth and flatten over. Bas-relief, ridgeless.

When they look at you and at your glass of ice water, one of your friends says, and says genuinely, that Jeff would be proud of you because you must be the only innocent one left, the only one who never strayed, never doubted, never fell away. You are meant to take this as a compliment. The sober glass sweats in your hand, and the drop ripples down your thumb and shivers, shivers like a body in a drained tub. His flattened face blazes, a sheet of sulfur above the gallon drum. The altar is open and smoking, but your hands are empty; you have no bottles, no magazine pages to offer. Your sins and fears are touchless. Do you give these hands?

You listen and, when appropriate, nod. The conversation filters into other topics.

…

Grasp the faux-crystal faucet, run your fingers over its crests. Hold. Hold it. Kneel, supplicant; cup your prayers beneath the cool and rolling storm.

…

You saw the man again. It was at a wedding, or a funeral. You can't remember which, but you can place yourself at the exact pew where he smiled, offered his blessings or his condolences, and took your hand. When you patted the arm of his humble grey jacket, you encountered the still-solid rod underneath; his handshake was distressed leather, and you could have broken it, had you wanted to. His face, you remember, was a man's.

A new pastor came, but when his calling ended, the Student Center remained standing. Now when you step over the threshold, you squint at the brightness. Now the walls gleam with a fresh white coat, and wood-grained vinyl lines the floor instead of stained carpet. There are yellow beanbags with person-sized impressions already worn into them, and hanging polaroids like grapevines along the walls. The air is balmy, thick and sweet, and when you turn to leave—grasp and hold the knob—the door sticks.

Commentary

Abi Doremus

"There I Never Go":

The Loss of Home in *A Christmas Memory*

Truman Capote grew up in the generation of my great-grandparents in a town not fifty miles from my own. His rearing was a responsibility shared by a host of family members, and he remembers the slow, smalltown Alabama years of his childhood fondly, much as I do. Perhaps it is because of these similarities that I find such personal resonance in the pages of his autobiographical works. While our respective Alabama childhoods were separated by time, if not space, I cannot help but consider them similar and, especially as I am now older and have left both childhood and my small town behind, I find myself remembering them in many of the ways and words that Capote does. Particularly in his short story *A Christmas Memory*, reflecting on the Christmas that he was seven, Capote approaches home and loss through a child's eyes, considering how they have shaped each stage of his life and poignantly offering alternative definitions of them. By emphasizing the closeness of one relationship in particular, and the absence of others, Capote offers a deeply personal and unique version of home — one developed in human relationships and forged in love.

A Christmas Memory centers around Capote's childhood Christmastime traditions with his elderly relative. He recounts helping her bake fruitcakes for friends and neighbors, venturing into the woods together to chop down a tree, and opening presents with her on Christmas morning. It becomes clear throughout the story that, while this "fruitcake weather" seems to be the primary memory being retold, Capote's true focus is on his fond memories of this elderly relative. He explains their relation by saying, "We are cousins, very distant ones, and we have

lived together, well, as long as I can remember" (Capote 3). Referred to throughout the story simply as "my friend," this cousin is understood to have been based on a real cousin of Capote's known as Sook, who served as one of his many guardians for a time during his childhood. In *A Christmas Memory*, Capote centers this unusual friendship in the opening lines of the story by simply saying, "we are each other's best friend" (Capote 3).

The conversations and relationship shared by this odd pair are retold in the story with care and attention. It is told like a memory, with Capote's childhood voice retelling their festive conversations and experiences as well as their more serious moments. Through the words of the little boy that knew her, Capote fills in details that bring his relationship with his friend to life, allowing the onlooking reader to feel rather like the third member of their family. He notes his friend's favorite color, (rose pink), brags about her killing of the "biggest rattlesnake ever seen in this county," and reveals the elaborate hiding place where they stash their collected money — "in an ancient bead purse under a loose board under the floor under a chamberpot under my friend's bed" (Capote 5). These details work overtime to communicate how important this friend was to him, as he remembers with great clarity the secrets and proximity they shared.

Capote further works to center this relationship in his childhood by dismissing all his other ones. He notes that "Other people inhabit the house, relatives; and though they have power over us, and frequently make us cry, we are not, on the whole, too much aware of them" (Capote, 2). He simultaneously diminishes the significance of the other family members in his life while further aligning his and his friend's opinions on them. Indeed, when the others are mentioned later in the story, they are portrayed as cruel and admonishing, as "potent with eyes that scold, tongues that scald," and their criticisms are called their "wrathful tune" (Capote 4). When he later describes the family's Christmas presents to one another, he refers only vaguely to making

scarves “for the ladies” and cough syrup “for the men,” while the kites that he and his friend make for each other are described in great detail, down to the gold and silver star stickers that his friend collected to decorate his. By highlighting only his memories with his friend, and glossing broadly over anything involving the rest of their family, Capote focuses his story around this elderly lady’s importance his life.

Capote similarly passes over his descriptions of the home he and his friend share with the rest of their relatives. He introduces readers to a few odd rooms, such as the kitchen they mix their fruitcakes in, the porch where they greet visitors, and her room where they concoct their plans, but largely neglects to describe the central parts of the house. Spaces that we might expect him to detail, such as the living room where he remembers opening presents on Christmas morning, or even his own bedroom, are never mentioned. By only highlighting, and in great detail, the spaces that he and his friend share in the house Capote is further emphasizing the centrality of their relationship in his memories of home. He recalls the exact dimensions of the out-of-the-way workspaces like the kitchen or his friend’s rambling attic bedroom, which the other family members did not enter, and primarily centers the story in these places. The nooks and corners left to the old ladies and the children are home to him because they were where he was with his friend.

In the final pages, Capote steps back from the memories of that Christmas, and we learn this was their last holiday together. He calls the faceless, nameless other relatives “those that know best,” a title given with great contempt, and describes how they soon after determined he needed to be in military school (Capote 9). The story winds in a new direction, taking on the voice of an older, reflective Capote. Once he is separated from his friend, the joyful Christmas memory full of childlike wonder immediately fades away; the reverie is shaken, and Capote’s

tone loses its luster. We are snapped away from the cozy fireside of the story thus far and introduced to his new life as "a miserable succession of bugle-blowing prisons, grim reveille-ridden summer camps" (Capote 9). The contrast is stark, as it becomes clear that Capote's life since leaving his friend has been hollow and lonely. He goes on to acknowledge that, while he and his friend continued to exchange letters, her memory begins to slip over time and nothing is ever the same once they have separated.

Now worlds apart from his friend, Capote is unsatisfied by his new surroundings. He says of his life in the military schools, "I have a new home too. But it doesn't count. Home is where my friend is, and there I never go" (Capote 12). This is the crux of Capote's story; he does not claim the house that sheltered him, nor the townspeople that he described in such detail, nor even the family members that paid for his schooling as his home. Rather, it was only the company of one aging cousin, who loved him as her own despite their distant relation, that felt like home to him. When he learns a few lines later that she has passed away, he describes it as the loss of an "irreplaceable part" of himself, let "loose like a kite on a broken string" (Capote 12). He becomes literally adrift and untethered in her absence and rendered permanently unable to ever return home again.

A piece of Capote's heart dies along with his friend, yes, but also pieces of his childhood and home. More than the house, the more clearly defined family relationships, or their protectiveness, her ability to see and understand him, despite their odd situation, is what Capote argues is home. His friend is his home because their relationship is one built fundamentally on love and companionship. With *A Christmas Memory,* he honors the one person who built a home for him by loving him simply, when he felt no one else did. While perhaps an unusual perspective, Capote's offered idea that home can just as easily be a person as a place, and thus be

lost far more quickly, serves as a haunting but poignant reminder to cherish every moment with the people holding our kite strings.

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Creative Nonfiction

Georgia Wessels

The Sehnsucht Gene

When my younger sister and I were little, about five and nine, I would try to trick her into believing in fairies. I would build houses with pine straw and glitter glue, using cantaloupe sized rocks as walls. Hidden in the fold of her closet door would be sticker-sealed notes signed by fairies that lead her to the fairy village in the yard. She would play along, pretending that I had successfully convinced her that fairy magic was real. We would play for a few hours and then get back to her favorite game: ordinary "house." No matter how many times I tried to convince her, we both knew she didn't believe.

My sister has an imagination. I am pretty sure. She has a vision in everything she does. However, the way we experience beauty differs. She experiences beauty through the coherence of her bedroom decor, the layers of a well-made latte, or the fluidity of a learned line dance. I like these daily-life beauties as well, but I feel like they slug me in the gut. I stare at the layers in my iced coffee glass as the ribbons of cream circle around ice and think about the philosophical significance of a good coffee. My sister would cringe at that thought. She sucks her latte down fast and says simply "it was good." A runner through and through, she isn't one who basks in the smell of roses.

Even now, though I don't read fantasy novels often or secretly believe in fairies, I feel like I am still trying to convince her that magic is real.

As a kid, I loved the movie *The Croods* (2013), a movie about a family having to leave their cave-home for the elusive "tomorrow" as natural disaster destroys their homeland. On their

journey, the family chases after the sun to ride it to tomorrow, where a better life will be. I remember watching the glow of sunlight warm the daughter's hand as she climbed up a cliff to see the last of the sunset. My sister remembers being scared of the cavemen (the main characters). I longed for tomorrow, to go wherever the golden light was going to. In *The Weight of Glory,* C. S. Lewis describes this longing when encountering beauty as "something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it" (Lewis 9). On the black leather couch in our basement, I wanted to become part of tomorrow.

Can you believe that the sun is never not rising or setting? Every second of everyday sunlight runs through the atmosphere, blue light scattering and the reds and pink being held onto for moments longer. And the Lord is not tired of painting it. As the sun is setting today, tomorrow is already on its way, crawling over the other side of the globe.

I was on an early morning flight headed to Nicaragua, high on Dramamine, when I first had my breath stolen. I had been at the airport at 2 in the morning, running on no sleep. Between the exhaustion and the motion-sickness drugs, I looped in and out of consciousness as we flew over the Gulf of Mexico. My window slide was open, and I woke as the yellow light punched through the layers of bleary glass. I looked out, and the sun was rising over brushed clouds, pastel light combing a field of cotton. In the center, the clouds cracked, and stream of yellow shone gold. I thought I saw golden fish flipping in the current, but that was probably the Dramamine. The person next to me was conked out and the whole plane was silent as I watched the golden river trickle away. I wanted to climb through the little pressure hole in the window. Jump out of the plane and sink my feet into the cloud field. My sternum ached, like it had been punctured with a straw, lasting long after we landed. Lewis calls this longing as "the secret

which hurts so much that you take your revenge on it by calling it names like Nostalgias and Romanticism and Adolescence" (3). The longing whispers something, an invitation, a reminder that we are not home.

Just like the sunrise, the New Heavens and New Earth is on its way. I think that's what I felt in the golden stream. The greater tomorrow is imminent. When Jesus returns, we will bask in in the light of the glory of God; "the Lamb is the light thereof," says Revelations 21:23. When I see the sunrise or sunset, I don't want to be sucked up into the burning orb of hydrogen and helium our planet turns around, but I want to be part of glory. I want to be in it. As nature declares that there is a God, I feel like beauty is constantly reminding me that this life is not the end. *The Croods* movie and the plane ride is not enough. There is somewhere *else* I belong.

Beauty is vital to our experience in this life. In his book *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense,* N. T. Wright argues that the church should have a particular interest in the arts because they "are not the pretty but irrelevant bits around the border of reality. They are the highways into the center of a reality which cannot be glimpsed, let alone grasped, any other way" (Wright 235). Art is not just the decorative mug we drink out of to spice up our morning, it is a lens we use to peak at what we cannot see yet. Experiencing beauty is one place where we are reminded of what is to come.

I have whatever gene it is that makes you sneeze when you see sunlight. A nerve misfire, static that jumps across the intersection where eye nerves meet nose nerves, whatever it is, I am plagued with it. I have another condition, unnamed but self-diagnosed, where when I listen to specific harmonies, especially an open D-tuning on a guitar, I feel it in my nose. Like a sneeze. Then, my tear ducts bloat with water and spill out of my eyes. I don't think anything when it happens, like "oh, how beautiful this dissonance is" or a more holy thought about how beauty

points us to out creator. The experience of hearing harmony overwhelms my nervous system. It doesn't know what else to do but well up and spill out.

My sister does not cry when she plays music. She likes music, but it does not "move" her in that way. I guess she didn't get the gene. She plays country music on her Alexa and dances to whatever Tiktok song is trending. At night, she plays Contemporary Christian Music as she falls asleep. The lyrics repeat who the Lord is, what He has done, what He will do, and who she is to Him. Blessings repeat as her soul rests in Him.

There is a German word for longing for a home one has never been to: Sehnsucht. When I was a child reading books about magical far-of lands, I would feel that punctured hole in my sternum. There was another place, behind the glossy sheet of fairy magic, that would catch my attention. It flickered and scattered like glittering fish scales in a river. One moment, it is there, lighting my corneas, and the next moment it is gone. This longing for a place I have never been, Sehnsucht, seemed to be a gene that hit me and skipped my sister. I wanted her to long for glory, to ache for the home we are both headed towards.

Last summer, my sister and I were headed to our grandparents' house, five minutes down the road, past the open hills of the black angus cattle farm. Our house is surrounded by trees, but here, the pasture rolls out to give us a full view of the sky. That evening, the sun stretched out under a contorted mass of indigo clouds, painting their undersides neon pink. Thinner ribbons of cloud were lined with yellow, glowing gold against the pink. My sister, whose window was already down, told me to stop, and I did. With her ribcage against the car door windowsill, half of her torso stretched out of the window, she snapped a picture of the sunset. Her phone didn't pick up the pink color, the greatest failing of every Apple iphone camera, and so she dropped her

phone back into her seat. We sat there for another moment, looking at the sky. “It’s beautiful” she said, simple and clear.

I realized I was wrong. My sister and I might not be prone to experience beauty in the same way, but there is something that she saw in that sunset that made her take a breath. Even the runner has to stop at some point.

She has the gene. We all do, I think. Thousands of years, and the Lord is still painting the sky for us every morning, tomorrow still on the next horizon. Sehnsucht is a word for a feeling, but I think it is something that can be fostered in us. Stopping to see the sunset is one place I have encountered the whispers of the New Creation. While we wait for the return of the Lamb, bask in the light of the morning and evening. He is coming, and we are headed home.

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Commentary

Cooper Pitts

"The warplanes must be silent":

A Reflection on Wordsworth, *Close-up*, and Makhoul

William Wordsworth famously declared poetry is "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" born from "emotions recollected in tranquility" (Wordsworth 260). An image comes to this writer's mind of an inspired writer sitting on the Cliffs of Mohre staring out at a wide expanse of nature's beauty with pen and paper in hand à la the magnificent painting "Wanderer above a Sea of Fog" by Caspar David Friedrich. Indeed, tranquil, serene, and gorgeous environments may have inspired some of the greatest works of literature. Wordsworth's poetry is about lofty ideals and returning to symbiosis with Nature. He typically dwells on the beauty of his surroundings and the rekindling of the lost sense of mystery the Enlightenment dispelled in many people. His verse offers a disordered view of the humanity that is slowly returning to harmony with the natural world, or at least his poems point to the possibility. While I get immense satisfaction from his poetic offerings, they often lack a basis in reality in my personal readings of his work. The concept of writers needing to produce out of tranquility seems to shortchange Wordsworth's poetry. The necessity of tranquility to create true "poetry" seems to undercut the vastness of the very spontaneous overflow he writes about. While spontaneity can certainly be captured upon reflection, is there not some part of the overflow missing when the feelings have quit their overflowing?

Now, there is something to be said for the relationship between solitude and creative output. I can attest to this in my own personal experience: oftentimes, I write much better in controlled, pleasant environments. Indeed, when deadlines are hot on my heels, I must retreat to

the quietest corner of the library to emerge with something worthy of my professor's time. When an idea for a story or poem strikes me during my day, I find a corner to jot it down in to reflect on later when I am alone in my room. But this cannot be the only way creative writing is produced, particularly for writers in turbulent circumstances who are appealing for the very tranquility needed to reflect on the good and the true. What then is the writer meant to do with the necessitation of tranquility for emotional recollection?

In this commentary, I want to interrogate the notion of poetry being produced out of tranquil recollection by examining the 1990 film *Close-Up* and a popular quote by Palestinian poet Marwan Makhoul to reveal how people in turbulent circumstances often appeal to the same ideals as Wordsworth without opportunity to tranquilly reflect on their strong emotions. In doing so, I hope to update Wordsworth's definition of poetry for an interconnected, war-ruled world.

Close-Up, directed by Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami and released in 1990, offers timely comment towards this question. In the film, Hossain Sabzian, an aimless impoverished cinephile, claims to be the renowned Iranian filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf to the matriarch of a well-off family in his town in a chance bus encounter in his own "spontaneous overflow" of sorts. When he gains their trust, he begins rehearsing a film he is working on with the family, slowly becoming integrated with them over the course of a week. When the family realizes his deception, they have him arrested for fraud.

The draw of the film is its basis in reality. The events in the film happened in the 1980s. Sabzian did indeed impersonate the filmmaker and began to "direct" the family in a film he wanted to make about his life and struggle. Half of the film is more akin to a documentary than a cinematic drama, with substantial portions of runtime featuring court proceedings and testimony from the trial against him. The rest of the film consists of reenactments of the alleged fraud with

the family "reprising" their roles in the recreations of the events. The resulting film is hazy and terribly poignant.

This quasi-documentary nature of the film creates a complicated relationship between Sabzian the man, Sabzian the character, and the camera. Kiarostami does seek to tell Sabzian's story, like Sabzian requests he does. But the film is nonetheless interested in lifting Sabzian's voice out of the courtroom and into active cultural conversation surrounding the silencing of disadvantaged voices. Thus, it is through this very melding of genres that *Close-Up* achieves the lifting of the unheard. However, it is not through Sabizian's will to be heard alone that we see and hear him on screen. Towards the beginning of the film, Sabzian asks Kiraostami, an established Iranian filmmaker, if he would "make a film about [his] suffering" (*Close-up,* 22:45). Sabzian needs the help of others to be heard because he cannot lift his own voice up. His only chance to appeal his case is before a judge, defending himself from the charge of fraud. But the filmmaker holds the power to give eyes to the issues of the unseen. Kiarostami is the only one able to gain permission to be in the courtroom and the only one able to obtain the budget to create the film starring Sabzian about Sabzian. Kiarostami is the only one with the connections that give him the creative freedom to elevate Sabzian's social critiques to the silver screen. But the film's power is in its rootedness in reality. Instead of making a standard biopic based on a true story which obscures facts or a standard documentary which is not palatable to mainstream audiences, *Close-up* maintains a balance between the two, creating something based on the critique of societal ills and the raising of lower-class voices.

Sabzian's own "spontaneous overflow" happens without contemplation or satisfaction of his personal needs. The snowballing of his fraudulent creativity is involuntary, reacting to his very real disenfranchisement. This disenfranchisement is political indeed, but, more important to

Sabzian, it is more so personal. His life is going by without recognition. He is suffering, and nobody is listening.

In fact, Sabzian spends most of his testimony pleading his need for expression and his identification with the work of Makhmalbaf, saying the filmmaker understands the plight of people like him. When responding to questioning about why he took the family to see a film by Makhmalbaf, Sabzian speaks about the importance of filmmakers to possess solidarity with "another social class as though it were his own" (*Close-up* 0:52:15). He says this is "the behavior of a director who's humble and close to the people" (0:52:36). The political bent of his testimony at this moment is important, but he is speaking about why he decided to impersonate the director in humility. His imitation of Makhmalbaf, or more pointedly his imitation of the genre of filmmaking, is thus his attempt to make Hossain Sabzian known, not the general struggling working-class man in 1980s Iran. The distinction Sabzian makes between the two (the personal and the political) reveals the goals of not only Sabzian's courtroom fight, but also the interest of the film itself.

The linkage between desperation to be heard and creativity seen in Sabzian is particularly pertinent in a modern, online world. The real time reactions of civilians in bombarded areas is now accessible in ways never seen before because of the internet. The implications for this interconnectedness are massive, giving the power of the voice into the hands of anybody with a smartphone (barring their country turning off access to the internet). Modern conflict is laid bare on the internet for all to see. Creative works from areas of conflict have begun playing a vital role in shaping public opinion in the global west because of the democratization of who is now able to produce writing heard by people on the other side of the world.

As I write this, the U.S., Israel, and Iran are at war. President Trump, after helping start the war with the nation of Israel, recently imposed a ceasefire deadline on Iran to open the Strait of Hormuz to restore the flow of oil. With less than a day left before the deadline, he posted on Truth Social that "A whole civilization will die tonight, never to be brought back again" (Donald J. Trump). He later rescinded this threat of genocidal collective punishment, but the comments remain striking. How is someone living under the threat of genocide meant to operate day to day life, much less create works of art?

Palestinian poet Marwan Makhoul is attributed with saying "In order for me to write poetry that isn't political, I must listen to the birds, and in order to hear the birds, the war planes must be silent." The quote circulated widely online at the beginning of the ongoing bombardment of the Gaza Strip, becoming somewhat of a rallying cry at pro-Palestine protests around the world while also becoming representative of the way some people conceptualized of the plight of Palestinians in Gaza. The quote's dissemination during wartime through largely Western media platforms and protest circles speaks to the same instinct Kiarostami exhibits in his depiction of Sabzian in *Close up*. Makhoul created a poem about the struggle of his people, using his creativity to appeal for peace to "hear the birds." People around the world used his words to speak out about the genocide of Palestinians of Gaza. Kiarostami used Sabzian's words to speak out about the fundamental struggle of the working class in Iran at the time. Perhaps this lifting up and platforming of the voiceless is a responsibility of the privileged creative.

It is imperative to not mistake creative writing with contemplative writing. According to Makhoul, the oppressed cannot make works of beauty which are not in conversation, implied or overt, with their material conditions. When bombs are raining overhead, one does not have time

to slow down and meditate on the good and the true. Instead, one must appeal for peace, because without it, the birds cannot be heard.

Wordsworth's definition of poetry remains true in a way. Yes, poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions recollected in tranquility. But not all poetry is able to contemplate on the Good and Beautiful in the way Wordsworth was afforded. Hossein Sabzian and Marwan Makhoul teach us creative drives do not go away because of "societal ills" or "warplanes." Instead, creative observers adapt to express a longing for the precise tranquility Wordsworth describes in the quote. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the listener to push for change to create the very tranquility which allows Sabzian to express himself and for Makhoul to hear the birds.

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