
# WEST 4TH STREET REVIEW

SPRING 2021

*NEW YORK UNIVERSITY*

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*The Literary Magazine of Liberal/Global Liberal Studies*

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# A Brief Note from the Faculty Editor

Vladimir Nabokov famously observed that reality is the only word which does not make sense without quotation marks.

If ever we doubted this was true, this past, exceedingly stupid year we have all lived through must surely dispel those doubts. That the plot of several bad dystopian YA novels seemed to play out (on some kind of endless loop) while we huddled in our various lockdown venues evoked, at the very least, the repeated question: Is this really happening? Is this dark and arguably pointless "reality" what we must live through, process, survive? And what will we be left with, after this "reality" is superseded by the next one?

OK, well, I can't answer those questions. But I will say that one of the more intriguing responses to the "reality" of 2020-21 is how much it seems to have inspired our students' creative efforts. We received at least 4 times as many submissions this year as ever before. Was it lockdown boredom? A sense that something creative must emerge from the darkness of the year? A random alteration never to be repeated? Don't know. But as someone who has been editing this journal since (gulp) 1988, I will say it was an astonishing flow of creativity. It made our job a little harder but it also was one of the few gratifying moments of the past 12—or was it 1200? —months.

To all who submitted, I say BRAVO! And KEEP IT UP!

Thanks to my able editorial and design staff. Thanks to Emily Bauman, Leah Guarino, and Billy Helton for help with the Elaine Kuntz Prize. And thanks to Dean Mostov for her support of our efforts.

Onward!

Stephen Policoff

Spring 2021

*Front and back cover art courtesy of Adrielle Lee*

# CONTRIBUTORS

**Laura Beard**, an LS sophomore, wrote this essay for Professor Dohrmann's class. It is the runner-up for this year's Elaine Kuntz Freshman Composition Prize.

**Brandon Bien**, an LS sophomore, writes poetry, art criticism, scripts, and miscellaneous essays, and is currently trying to figure out if there could be a genuine resurgence of the avant-garde. This essay, written for Professor Menghraj, is the winner of this year's Elaine Kuntz Freshman Composition Prize.

**Eloise Detmering** is a senior in Global Liberal Studies with a concentration in Critical Creative Production, and a triple minor in Spanish, Producing, and the Business of Entertainment, Media, and Technology.The first thing she looks forward to doing in the post-Covid-19 era is experiencing live music and live theatre again.

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**Alice Jiang** is a sophomore in Liberal Studies. She's a lover of all things philosophical and has a beta fish named Aphrodite

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**Ryan Thomas** is a sophomore in GLS who just recently began writing poetry, and even more recently let other people read it. This is her first published piece.

**VIXXON's** real name is Victoria. She is 22, Afro-Caribbean, a sophomore majoring in Global Liberal Studies: Politics, Rights and Development and English w/ Creative Writing Track. Some poetic giants she hangs on her mantle are Elizabeth Bishop, Frank O'Hara, Les Murray, Emily Dickinson and Derek Walcott.

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# The Bamboo Plant

By Laura Beard

One early summer morning, I stood in what used to be the breakfast area of my parent's house, cleaning alone. Behind me was the only open space of the ground floor, the area between the refrigerator and stove. In front of me was a space untouched by the family for the last decade. Heavy boxes were packed into every free space and covered most of the floor. Thick motes of dust rose into the air with every movement, catching the sunlight from the newly uncovered windows. The smell of old cat urine permeated the space. I had managed to clear a path that morning, one that took me past my great-grandmother's kitchen table to the furthermost window. There, I found the dead bamboo plant.

It was not dead in a way I had expected, black and molding. Instead, it was brittle, a light brown, as if life had simply left it. Once, it had been shaped into a pineapple, strong stems twisted around and thatched together, green leaves bursting out at the top. Now, the thatching was all that kept it together, dehydrated stems woven together into a skeleton. When I saw it, I teared up, just a little. I could not move away from the lopsided corpse, and I could not stop looking at it. I stood for a long while in that corner of the kitchen, thinking about what had led it to here.

I remember when the kitchen was open and airy, when my family was together. My sisters and I would sit at my great-grandmother's old table before school, looking out into the trees behind the house. The houseplants my mother collected surrounded us, their leaves limned in the golden morning light. My dad would plop Eggos and milk in front of us and my sisters and I would be left to eat together in beautiful, sleepy silence. Yet, as years went by, breakfast became shared less and less often; it was a meal we sometimes skipped altogether in the rush to get to school. Our kitchen table was vacated. A decade passed between the last of our breakfasts together and the moment I found the bamboo plant once more. In that time, the bamboo plant was lost.

My family has always been a family of gardeners. We all lived together in our quiet old house, deep in the woods outside of Memphis. Behind the house were the vegetable gardens my dad maintained alone, and to the front were the flower beds my mom claimed. In the summer, she would herd my sisters and me outside to help her, planting golden lantanas, pungent lavender, and durable zinnias. We would plunge our hands into the rich black earth, dislodging worms and small white grubs. The weeds would be discarded, the worms and grubs placed to the side, and in would go little nursery flowers. I would look to my mom and older sisters for guidance, mirroring them when I could. Dirt would work its way under my fingernails. Sweat would bead on my back, running so slowly down my spine. Yet, glancing around at my sisters and my mom, I had the sense that this was something beyond me, something sacred.

Even as time passed and gardening became something I did alone, it still held a touch of the divine. I learned from it. I know now that cilantro is not meant for Southern summers; it constantly droops to the ground, trying to go to seed. I have to drag the pots I plant them in to shadier spots, misting them frequently to keep them cool. Basil tries to grow too fast, putting out new buds while its lower leaves have not fully developed; if you do not prune off the top occasionally, it will grow top-heavy, unable to get the sun it later needs. Tomato vines thrive in the sweltering humidity of Memphis summers, but they need trellises, consistent watering, and a specific way

of planting that allows for a deeper root structure. Every plant has specific needs, specific wants; to garden is to consistently put forth the effort to care for something outside yourself, to be patient and understanding with this small, vibrant creature.

I remember when my mom was first given the bamboo plant. It was a present from a family friend's mom, meant to bring good luck to whoever received it. We all sat in that family's living room together, calm and peaceful. My mom's face lit up when they gave it to her. It was much smaller at the time, and she held it in the little dish it came in, hands wrapped gingerly around its base. She looked the bamboo pineapple over with care, with affection already for something she had only just received. My mom cradled that small life in her hands and took it home, and for years it grew in our home, well cared for.

Then, at a certain point, the bamboo plant was forgotten. When I found it that morning, so many years later, the dirt was bone dry and its dish was blanketed in a layer of dust. I was afraid to touch it, afraid that it would disintegrate if I so much as breathed on it. Later, I would find out that bamboo is considered nearly indestructible as a houseplant; it can come back from almost anything. It takes true abandonment for it to give up.

Courtesy of Ningrui Zhao

The first portent of its death was the closing of the blinds. My mom had become more paranoid and more irritable, starting when I was ten or so. She would mutter to herself; when someone would ask what she was saying, she would snap that it was nothing. The muttering grew louder and louder; her movements became more jerky, more sudden. She would peer furtively out the windows, look anxiously down our long driveway. Then, one day, she drew the blinds shut and they stayed shut. In that window in the corner of the kitchen, the barest hint of light came out the side. It fell just short of the bamboo plant.

It was the slowly accumulating stacks of boxes in the kitchen, though, that likely cemented its demise. The boxes had come in from the clearance sections of strange online stores—odd baubles and cheap plastic ornaments that my mother had ordered late at night. If someone wanted to reach the bamboo plant to water it, they would have to navigate the dust, the smell, and now the many obstacles on the floor. It was buried in the corner, the place where it had once thrived now its coffin.

That morning that I found the dead bamboo, I thought mainly of my mom, of her journey with this plant she was given. I remembered the version of her that had crouched next to me, gloved hands carefully removing a nursery plant from its wrappings, teasing out its roots and softly burying it in the soil. I remembered her hands, methodically weeding from around the hordes of flowers that surrounded our house. I'd watched her so intently when I was small, awed, hoping someday my hands could coax so much life from the ground.

But when I saw the bamboo plant recently, I saw it as almost another symptom of what had happened to her.

Long before the hard-won diagnosis of schizophrenia, my dad, my sisters, and I had pieced together an idea of what was happening to her. We had all witnessed the muttering, those one-sided conversations she had when she thought we could not hear; we had asked her, time and time again, what she was saying. She never responded. We watched her metamorphosis from someone we knew to someone we did not, a stranger wearing my mother's face.

The woman I know today does not go outside anymore, does not touch anything or anyone. The bugs she once tossed aside as she gardened now terrify her, so much so that she cannot step onto grass or dirt anymore. Her one chosen window to the outside world is her online shopping. The boxes that her orders arrive in form new barriers within the house, new ways to constrain the space. Santas from holiday sales line the hallways, glass ornaments dangle from every handle, and whatever was too tacky for the common consumer to buy is now stored in what used to be the living room, the dining room, and stuffed into the corners of the first floor. The house became a


Courtesy of Ningrui Zhao

space where nothing could grow, much less thrive.

Small neuroses built on each other. Nothing could go into the attic or outside anymore, in case of infestation. I could no longer throw out dairy or fruit; there was a new method to dispose of these things, the rules to it constantly changing. Every little thing I did was up for inspection, to see if it lined up with the new inscrutable code of law: Was I rinsing off my dishes in the right way? How was I putting away groceries? Was I standing too close, chewing too loud, or, the worst offense, hiccuping? I was no longer allowed to walk on the grass in peace. I was not allowed to do most anything, when in sight of my mother.

The responsibilities my mom had once claimed were slowly forgotten over the decade. The flower garden gave way to weeds, and the laundry waited until the end of the month. My sisters and I were often stuck at school until late, calling her over and over, knowing she did not realize the time; when or if she did pick up her phone, she would yell at us, enraged by a guilt she could not process. She could no longer handle the crowds and open space of the grocery store, so for a long time we either split the task or did not get groceries at all; a dinner of a few bags of Doritos was common for me.

Dishes piled high next to the sink. Houseplants died and were never removed from their pots.
I grew, both because of and despite the growing shade, the ever more pervasive smell of cat urine, and the thick layers of dust within our childhood home. When I was thirteen, my sister taught me how to do my own laundry. When I was sixteen, I finally received my driver's license. I was able to get groceries, exercise, see friends, go to therapy, and leave the house. My body stretched up higher and higher, much higher than my mother's, and the sense of power between her and I shifted. I took up space now.

I wielded this to establish my own place within the house, to push back against the barriers she had built into my life. I carved out my own section of the garden and began to frequent it more and more. I felt like I was a part of something sacred again. But on those days I spent alone, knees pressed into the ground, hands covered in dirt, it never occurred for me to look back into the house. I never realized there might be another small spark of life in that dark space, waiting for someone to care for it once more.

Who killed our bamboo plant? If I cannot place the blame at my mother's feet, then is it at my own? My mom lost the capacity to nurture any living creature; she's no longer the woman who gardened beside me as a child, who first showed me how to put beauty out into the world. She had the misfortune of coming down with an incredibly debilitating illness, one that makes a diagnosis much, much more difficult than a physical disease. My state still requires proof that someone intends to hurt themself or others in order to intervene. If they do intervene, it generally does not yield much in terms of sustainable treatment; in the rare chance she was diagnosed right then, where would she go? The psychiatric hospitals around us were not renowned for their treatment of patients, nor in much positive change for a schizophrenic patient after their stay there. It took my family, mainly my dad, a decade to find a way to help her.

In order to get even a little better, my mom had to receive a formal diagnosis, she had to accept medication, and she had to continually take it. But when your mom believes an invisible danger lurks at every corner, that everyone is out to get her, how do you get her to see a psychiatrist? After that, how do you get her to take medication when it makes her sleepy and she's convinced she needs to stay up all night to guard the house against spiders? How do you work through all the phobias she accumulated in the time it took to get help? How do you talk to your mom when you realize that, no matter how much progress she makes, it will never make up for everything that happened when you were little?

I was nineteen the morning I found proof of the bamboo's passing. I had been living at the house the entire time, another resident who allowed the corners of the kitchen to collect dust, another person who tried not to see what was happening around them. Maybe the plant would have lived if I had tunneled through the boxes earlier, risking my mother's wrath. Maybe it would be alive if we had found help for my mom sooner, or if we had pushed harder. Maybe it would be alive if we had access to better mental healthcare in this country.

When so much is lost, how do you allocate blame? In those ten years, I'd lost my mother, my mother had lost herself, and the bamboo had lost its life. Looking at that dead plant in the early morning light, I was hit with an aimless rage and a profound sense of grief, a twisted version of survivor's guilt. As wrong as it was, I was angry with my mother for not being the woman who had spent long summer days with my sisters and me, the woman I had tried my best to mirror, the woman who had loved me so freely. I wanted that version of her, the version from a decade ago. I wanted my mom, who used to look me in the eyes, wrap me up in her arms and make me feel safe. I wanted breakfast together as a family. I wanted the bamboo plant, alive and well.

I still do. Many days, in my mind, I am back to seeing the bamboo plant, brittle and dry, and back to wondering what could have been done differently. It wasn't just a matter of light and water, it was a matter of having that one person who had the capacity to care for something outside themselves. My mom lost that capacity because of an illness our healthcare system is not equipped to diagnose, much less treat. I gained the capacity, but much too late.

I can't take back what I have lost. I can't reach back and hold the hand of the mother that I trusted to love me unconditionally. The passage of time is written in the length of my spine, the development of my frontal lobe, and the necrotic tissue of the bamboo plant. I can forgive my mom for all that was out of her control, and I can do the same for myself. Time continues on still, taking with it the last remnants of my childhood.All that's left to me is memories. So, I remember sleepy mornings. I remember eating Eggos and drinking milk, looking out the kitchen windows past the bamboo plant. I remember breakfasts, surrounded by my family, all of us sitting together in the most beautiful kind of silence.

# Mi Identidad

By Amanda Ovalle

forever true to myself, i take an oath.
dominicana soy.
america, you see my accent as an embarrassment,
but in my accent i hear a generation's worth of struggle,
of desire.
i see my ancestors,
crying as trujillo removes their souls.
he tried to whiten my island like you try to whiten my being.
in my accent, i see a rainbow eternity of memories
from dancing merengue with my abuelo at age six,
to the everlasting homely smell of santo domingo coffee with cinnamon sticks.

you call me, and my colored brothers and sisters dirty
but where do you expect all the blood,
the sweat and the tears shed to go? i am dirty,
muddy with desire to be as big as the buildings on broadway, in a country that won't let me.
the ovalle's came for a star-spangled fantasy,
not star-spangled racism, not star-spangled prejudice, not star-spangled misery.

you call me lazy,
expecting me to sit on my behind and wait for the world to water me until i grow old.
dime, haven't you noticed? a mahogany tree of youth is what i am,
forever kept alive by the richness of my roots, and bright red of my soul.
i am the working class, i buy my own water and make my own sunshine.
i do what your heavy fruit, and empty trunk won't allow you.
what you see as unprofessional,
i see as my lion's mane out on display,
a small hint that my claws are quick to strike if you dare mistake me as prey.
you can strike, once, twice, three times
and i will still victoriously reign.
you see, i possess the fuel that you lack, i know it drives you insane.

pues dime america, are you ready for what's coming your way?
first, let's get something straight.
one, i am not white, or black, i am both.
my roots are as thick as my skin,
and as deep as the color of my brown eyes.
quit asking me to tell you what my race is.
two, my name is Ah-mahn-duh, not A-man-duh
quit trying to colonize my name like you tried to colonize my soul.
three, I won't let go of god's given gift of speaking
such a rich language because of your insecurities.
quit asking me to speak english in public just because you can't understand it.
and four, have you run out of adjectives? because if so i can help you out.
i am strong, independent, capable, and worthy.
quit calling me a spicy and fiery Latina, just because you are bland.
forever true to myself, i take an oath.
dominicana soy.

# I Think of You When I Feel Unknown

By Eloise Detmering

It is entirely possible
That you might walk through that door.
You who know me so well,
You might just walk towards me.
Take the seat opposite me.
Sit down and share stories of all that you have seen since I last saw you.

It is entirely possible that you might walk through that door.
You might never look up.
Your name might get caught in my throat.
I might let you walk right by.
I might let you sit ten feet away from me without a word.
It is entirely possible that this is the last time I'll see your face.

# Still Life of Summer

By Alice Jiang

This moment is summer,
The air of ripe nectarines and peaches
thick and sweet, condensing on our
lips—poised and curious.
Does the begonia murmur softly,
So it might be taken into our breath
—wholly and selfishly,
Does the tide wane,
knowing I am no longer the only one to watch it—How envious!
Does the moon see me and my friend, lover
Prest against one another—never separate—
our nightly happiness.
O—to think it was just last year
I sat by myself,
wondering silently for winter.

# Stained Teeth

## By Audra Fried

Roger called me Lola. Whatever Lola wants, Lola gets. Lola, what song do you want? Let me put a smile on those lips.

I called him The Jolly Devil. He had a red, hellish face that made him look merry in a grotesquely endearing way. He existed on the karaoke stage at the back of the club. I wondered if he had been born there, a wheezy note squeezed out of someone else's strangled music one night.

Seven bucks is all I want, Jolly.

He always stared at my lipstick, and he always slid me seven crumpled dollars.

No one listened to him sing, but everyone watched. All the club patrons cheered at eleven pm when he turned red from pumping gin-soaked air into "Total Eclipse of the Heart."

Sometimes I served him tequila instead of gin, and the sour formaldehyde fumes made him drunker, fouler, and funnier. Choking all the way up to the stage, he'd cough out 80s nostalgia in a stumbling four-and-a-half-minute huff. He made Bonnie Tyler even better and even worse.

We didn't know each other; we just knew each other's business. He sang, and I made his face redder. He asked me what song I wanted, and I never answered.

The Jolly Devil had a bowling ball instead of a skull. His legs rushed and clanked to the rhythm of his slurred songs, and I was always the last pin standing. This time was different. He left as late as I did on Friday night, and watched me fold my arms into my coat in the alley behind the club. He stepped forward. I half-expected him to slip; a bar counter threatened to burst from the ground and separate us. The pressure of it radiated from the asphalt in formaldehyde-scented waves as his staggering red shadow grew heavy on my face.

"Lola, give me a smile before you go."

"This isn't the place for it."

"Let me show you a place for it."

The bar table never erupted from under us. We spent forty-eight hours together.

His apartment stank, and so did his body. His thick skin clutched his ribs with the stale, determined energy of old beige wallpaper, and by the forty-eighth hour, so did mine. I walked into his bathroom on Monday morning and opened my mouth in the water-stained mirror. My lipstick had rubbed into my teeth from the disgusting, tender friction of two days, and the white was gone. I opened the door and left.

Tuesday.

Wednesday.

I didn't go back to the club because I knew he'd be there, warbling, but not in an endearing way. His skin still smothered my ribs, like a thick scab. I brushed my teeth, but the lipstick stuck. I never went back behind the bar.

# I Am Three Free-verse Sonnets

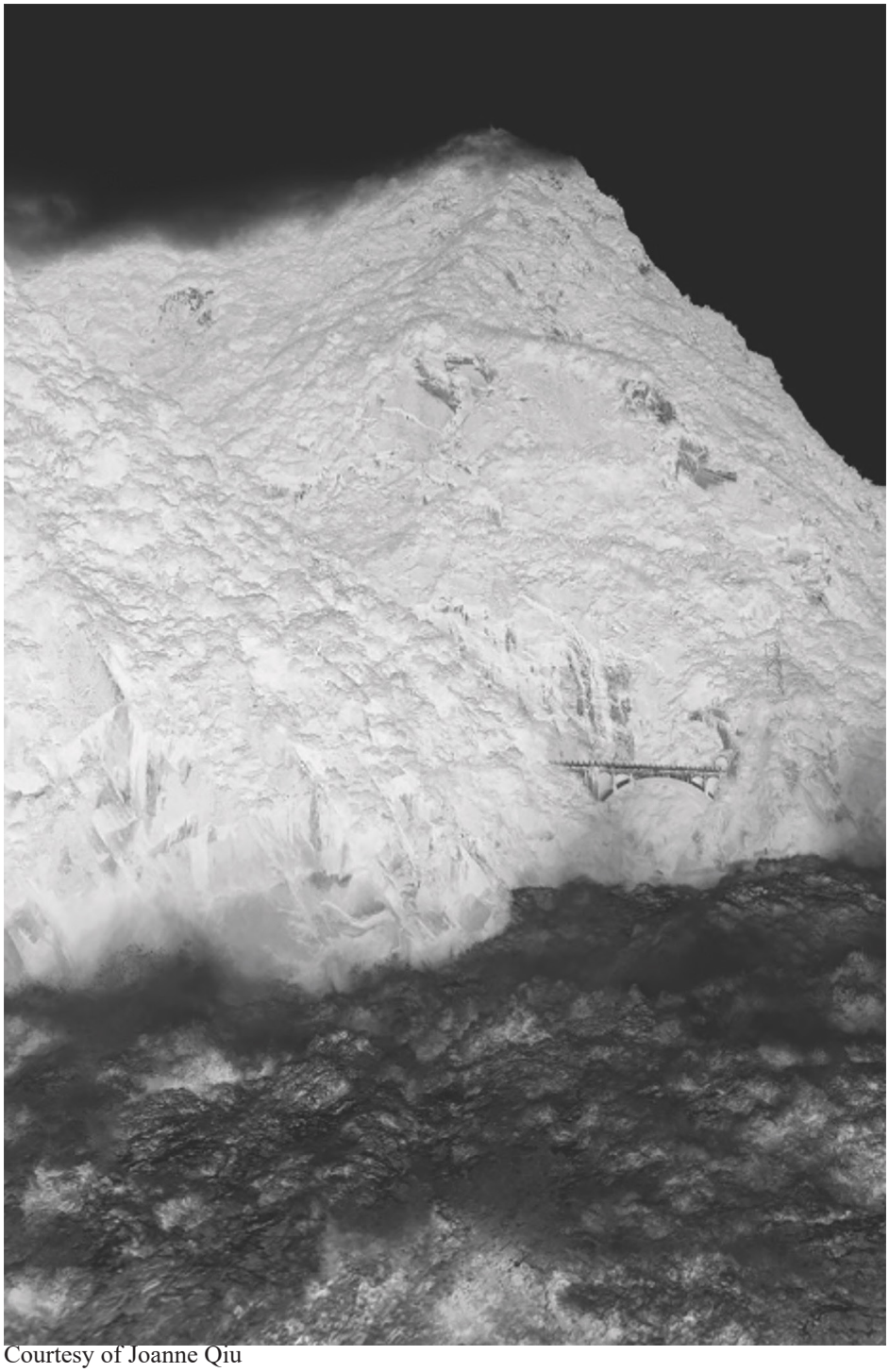
By Lorraine Olaya

the
sparkle of the skyline
whimper of train wheels
roar of the highways
still of murky city smog
whisper of distant cars
soft gleam of the light posts
pitter-patter of peaceful rain
squish of wet sneakers
kiss of the numbing wind
frost of your fingertips
cloud of your breath
groan of old bones
the
stories of your father
sacrifice of your mother

pungent of morning coffee
slosh of it in your belly
pride of self-prepared lunch
sob of sirens passing by
hiss of your too-old laptop
stubborn blink of the black line
absence of tiny letters
dance of cigarette smoke
thump of footsteps upstairs
static of your sleeping leg
squeal of bedsprings next door
growl of your stomach
creativity of your frontal cortex
words of 2 am inspiration

the potential of eventual
success

clink of coins in coat pockets
ache of too-tight ten-inch heels
shatter of expensive dinner plates
blurry of teary eyes
stop-light red of your dress
picked skin of your thumb
blisters of too-tired feet
constellation of pimples on chins
smooth of silk bed sheets
naked of your skin
empty of the bed's right side
chirp of crickets in your dreams
legacy of immigrant parents
promise of the American Dream



Courtesy of Joanne Qiu

# The Devil is Real, and He is Green

By Nicholas Dharmadi

They come at night, swooping down from the mountain and gliding soundlessly over the pastures. Those few who have seen their descent barely catch a glimpse of their silhouettes before they blend back into the darkness of the sky. Even in flocks of a dozen or more they remain invisible, the only sign of their dive towards the fields a shower of glimmering eyes that is mistaken for the light of the stars. The night refuses to reveal its infernal host.

The devils have their way with us. One night a farmer loses a sheep, a week later, he finds the rest of his flock are stricken with open sores. John Arden, at the next farm over, found one of his Leicester ewes collapsed and quivering just yesterday morning. Her wool had been stripped from its flanks and scattered about the grass, stained with pink splotches. Where the devils had gouged at her, it was dyed red.

Some men have resorted to building posts in the middle of their flock and draping them with rags or old clothes. It is useless. The devils know we cannot see in the dark. We yell impotently into the night, desperately clutching our lanterns and it does not deter them. What hope is there for scarecrows?

After the night raids, farmhands have found the rags missing, or the 'heads' made of straw-filled sacks torn open and emptied. One imagines the flock cackling into their night as they make off with the loot in their talons.

The few in the station who can afford dogs stave them off for a night or two, but they come back when they know they won't be caught. A dog can only bark at what he knows is there, and no dog can sense the entire flock. At the perimeter of the station, a pen goes unguarded and the sounds of a bleating lamb go unheard. The devils evade even canine noses, they are patient enough to only take sips of blood.

For months now, that old fool Colman has been trying to get all of us in the station to build barns that can hold all our animals each night. He ignores every man stretched thin by the devils themselves, insisting that if even one shepherd's flock is exposed, the devils will keep coming back to harry us. He doesn't realise even if we could build barns, it wouldn't do any good. The devils will climb in through the windows. That last town meeting, I left without a word.

We cannot go on like this.

…

Father joined the station late. He wasn't born into a shepherd family and unlike most of the people in Lieutenant Colman's station, he'd come to the South Island just a dozen years ago. Sometimes, when it's late and I haven't slept or when he's been lubricated by some drink, he tells me about that life before. About his old job in the army. About the weeks spent aboard the shifting hold of a ship, sleeping crammed between his fellow settlers. About mother.

Father's farm , our farm, was one of those at the edge of the station's perimeter. Built by the peak of a hill, our pasture followed its slope down to a narrow brook. The edge of the fence jutted just past its far side, making the claim that 'Yes, indeed, this part of the stream is ours too. Please have your flock drink elsewhere.'

Our sheep were different too, another thing setting us apart from the rest of the station. Father couldn't afford to raise shaggy, plump Lincolns when he first arrived. The cost of the lease took that chance away from him. He settled for a cross-breed, some unnamed hybrid sold by an Englishman named Little. Their wool was grey and

ruddy, and they were smaller than other breeds. But the cold never bothered them and they could graze on just about any stray weed poking out of the dirt.

Though in the fall, father always regretted never asking the Englishman how to breed them. I don't remember that first year on the station, I was too young to follow him into the fields, and Father never talked about it. All I know is that at night I'd hear the bleating of pregnant ewes, and in the morning, I'd find him collapsed in his rocking chair, shirt soaked up to the shoulders in red.

...

When I was old enough to carry his lantern, Father would take me by the arm into the field, to help with delivery as it got dark. Most highland ewes have the luxury of birthing their lambs right onto the grass, only to continue their stride moments later. Something about our sheep was different. As I held the greasy flame above his head, he would kneel, elbows deep in ewes who always seemed too small for their offspring. When the lamb finally came, it would land on the grass with a wet thump, expelled with a laborious shudder. They struggled to

Courtesy of Joanne Qiu

stand on the now moist earth, shaking thin pink strands out of their wool. The coppery smell clung to the nostrils.

That scent brought devils.

On these nights, father could afford no sleep. This last lambing cycle, he refused to even come back into the house. Father and I had delivered nearly thirty lambs over the last week and their holding pen was much too crowded for his liking.

As I went to clean myself, father took his rifle off its rack, picked up the lantern and ordered me to extinguish the fireplace. On his way out he sent me to bed. I was too young to protest. I asked him what he planned to do, alone in the fields with a gun in his hands. He told me he wanted to kill his quarry by the light of the stars.

...

I was wide awake when I heard the shot.

Throwing open the bedroom window, a chill draft passed through me as I stared out towards the moonlit fields. Near the edge of my vision I saw him. A single point of amber light swaying back and forth. At that distance, father must have been carrying the lantern in a full sprint. I called out but he didn't turn to face me, heading further north, further towards the mountains. I hoped that he merely couldn't hear me. He made his way down the slope of a hill, and the glow faded into nothing. I took my last look, and as I strained my eyes to see by starlight, I finally glimpsed what he was chasing. A fluttering shadow that blotted out the light of his lantern. It was the devils he was hunting.

...

I spotted him first as a silhouette on the dawn horizon, his shadow lengthening across the plain as an orange glow rose in the sky. Through the window, I saw his labored gait towards home and I rushed to meet him at the door. As he got closer, I could see that his shirt was torn and the lantern in his hand was shattered. I ran to him barefoot, feeling the morning dew on my soles and hugged him, face buried in his chest. His clothes smelled like cold earth. When I looked up, he stared down at me ragged and wild-eyed. He held that stare for too long before he returned my embrace. Then he launched into where he'd been that night.

Tales of swooping shadows spilled forth from his lips, muzzle shots flashing in inky midnight to reveal wings taking flight. He pulled at his skin to show where the demons had clawed at him, lifted up a pant leg to show where he'd fallen climbing up their rocky nest and hoisted the gun slung over his shoulder, praising its true aim to the heavens. All the while his giddiness kept building, his usually stern demeanor giving way to an inexplicable grin. As I struggled to keep up with the pace of his story and his stride, he stopped just on the edge of the porch. His last words were, "Go clean the lamb pen. I'm going into town."

As I watched him leave, I heard the sound of something slapping against his thigh. Hanging from the back of his belt was a bundle of cloth he had not left with. Only now I noticed his coat was missing. The bottom was soaked through with dark liquid. Noticing my gaze, Father flashed that mad grin again. My eyes were still on the sack. Out of its knotted mouth poked a green feather.. A green feather.

…

I found her dead on the grass. The other lambs were crowded around the front of the pen and I had to leap over the fence to get in. Wading through them would've been impossible, and I'd be trampled if I unlocked the gate. Barely any of them turned to face me, so busy bleating against the posts. The highland air was cool. I knew it wasn't the smell that spooked them. It occurred to me that unlike the flock in the open fields, there was no place for them to scatter. They must have stood like that for the whole night, trying to flee from the sight of the body in their midst.

At the far edge of the pen I saw the scraps of wool strewn about. She'd just been born a week ago so she didn't have much of a coat. I suppose that's why she died, easier for the devils to get to the skin. I'd never seen one so

close before. Father always used to turn me away when he spotted one of our flock lying on its side in the dawn mist. It was the one thing he never asked me to help him with. For a while I stood over the lamb and stared. The dime-sized hole in its temple stared back. I hope it knew Father hadn't let it die slowly.

I took hold of the ankles and started dragging it away. The grass underneath was stained in dark patches. Except for the green feathers. I watched as they drifted down onto the red, flattened grass and I looked again at the body I held in my hands. Peeking out from the underside of the lamb's belly, a mess of green feathers clung to the curls of white wool. They were matted with blood, but there the lamb was unblemished. Father really had hunted the devils. They could bleed.

They could cry too. When I heard the sound, I dropped the lamb and dove under the fence. The kee-aaa call of the devils after a night raid rang clear in the morning air. I dropped to my belly and prayed they'd only returned for their meal. But there was no hellish beating of wings. I lifted my head and stared at the sky. Nothing. Then it came again, shrieking closer. I was jolted to my feet, my eyes darting to find the source. A third time, a burst of shrillness then a warbling cry. There was something different. I could hear it wavering.

Slowly, I willed myself to crawl around the edge of the pen listening for the cry as it grew fainter. I almost froze again when I heard how close I was. That low to the ground, I knew the sound wasn't coming from the sky, it was right in front of me. I now knew what Father had done last night, what he had the strength to do. As the final cry pealed out, I waited. And with both hands pounced.

So fragile. So fragile it stopped my hands from crushing it. From just a brush of feathers against fingertips I knew its softness.

I looked at what I held.

I didn't want to believe it at first. That this feeble creature I had pinned to the grass was the plague of the island. What was this thing? It nursed a broken wing. Its talons didn't grip on the damp earth. Yet its beak, an iron-colored crescent was rusty with dried blood. As I lifted my hands it cried out once more and I could deny it no longer.

A bird. Just a green bird.

It could only limp and flutter, in an awkward, hopping escape across the grass. It must have been nicked by Father's shot. Left behind by its flock to die on the ground. I looked again at the body of the lamb I had dropped in my fear. I thought again about what Father had done last night.

I walked over to it, bent down and took the bird in my hands again. It could do little to resist. And yet, the fleeting strength of its talons almost broke the skin of my palm. In that spike of pain, I felt I held an ember in my hands. The last warm coal in a fireplace. In its squirming it presented a young, downy underbelly. Its light green breast rose and fell, heaving for air. For the first time I saw the golden iris around its dark eyes.

As I walked back home with the bird, I felt the weight of strength and mercy.

Courtesy of Joanne Qiu

# Estranged Matter

Zamir Kajoshi

Like the sun
Our face is so hard to look at
Our life's a divine comedy, hey?
But how many others can say they've made G_d laugh?

I want for it all to be explained away
Please, someone sit in a chair on wheels and tell me exactly why
I feel the way I do
"The body, temporal and sexual—"
I grip my wrist and my fingers go right through
Defying all diagnostic procedure, my flesh is a vapor,
And unlike the celestial bodies, nothing about mine aligns;
Cognition suspended as droplets that never reach equilibrium,
My neurons cirrocumulus: have we been happy this week?
What did we have for breakfast today?

How do you get up in the morning with a head made of smoke?
But with a body that sweats and drools and itches and aches, how do you lie down?
A body so disgustingly soft—all our childhood milk-drinking did nothing,
Our bones have liquefied through these boiling near-two decades—
That it can be sculpted into any visage and fill any container
So no, I don't mind if the sun cooks it;
I don't care if the cat bites it;
For what can a body possibly attract except that which would gladly chew through it?
Eating is the only thing we all know how to do
To be is to consume

How sweet it would be, then, to be a no-body:
That airless void between stars
A color you can't see
A dimension past the tenth
To dissipate into nothing and not care about anything—
To hunger for touch and happily starve—
If they can't feel you they can't use you
If they can't find you they can't hold you

# The Sky, at Dinner with Caitlin

Ryan Thomas

Courtesy of Joanne Qiu

Ruby's, 3rd Avenue and 12th Street. The sky, the perfect blue with small pink streaks of cloud. We sit across from each other at a small table outside. What I noticed, what we both felt: she is different, I am different, we are different. The weight of the last months bore down on us, yet still we laugh and could, for the first time in a long time, visualize a happier time coming.  It got dark; I don't remember when. The light glittered from the corners of the buildings and I sipped a prosecco that tasted like sunshine.

Courtesy of Joanne Qiu

# A Walk in Williamsburg

By Samantha Santana

There is something to be said about my pace when walking through Williamsburg. In Brooklyn, I'm not forced to walk at a quick pace as I exit the Marcy Avenue stop. Still, with the narrow streets and plethora of things going on every minute, the feel of a city is not lost. Bodegas greet passersby on every other corner, and dollar pizza is there to comfort those reaching the end of their night. Colourful murals outline nearly every street. The rough, authentic feel is punctuated by the brownstones and brick buildings, many of which were factories during the late eighteen hundreds and the early nineteen hundreds. During the Industrial Revolution, the opening of these factories on the Brooklyn waterfront attracted immigrants and created a huge population spike once the Williamsburg Bridge opened in 1903. That was the beginning of the working class community that defined Williamsburg for so long. The Domino Sugar Refinery, one of the most well-known factories in Williamsburg, operated for 148 years. It ceased operation in 2004 and laid off around 225 workers.

The old brick Domino sugar factory on Kent is vastly different from the sugarcane fields my family had worked on in Oahu. Despite the history behind sugarcane in Hawai'i, my family mourned its recent closure because of its symbolism in Hawaiian culture and their childhoods. Both amongst very diverse yet opposite environments, those sugar companies have similarly impacted the people in the surrounding area. They provide a connection between the generations and the neighborhood itself. Three of the old Domino factory buildings have been granted landmark status, but many have given way to become luxury apartment complexes. Against the clear skyline of October, the sight is beautiful, but unsettling. Red brick buildings that used to be places of employment for the working class are nestled in between banks and high, mint blue glass apartment complexes.

This Saturday morning, I was across the water from NYU's Washington Square campus, staring at these breathtaking buildings. Though I had only been at school for about a month and a half, I had heard numerous NYU kids shamelessly admitting that they had never strayed farther than Times Square, let alone to other boroughs. I did not want to be like that. In one of my classes, I was introduced to Jeremiah Moss's book, Vanishing New York: How a Great City Lost its Soul, which told the story of New York's ongoing destruction. The stories of lost neighborhoods guided me on my own journey throughout the city. My goal was to visit the five boroughs by the end of the semester. This was my first time trying to understand the neighborhood for myself, not through the weathered perspectives of people who had seen the destruction and rebirth of the city a dozen times over. My eyes weren't heavy yet, but maybe they were a bit too fresh. For New York City, at least.

Courtesy of Joanne Qiu

People seem to move to Williamsburg because of its raw, tough history. Unlike the sugar, the neighborhood is known for being less refined compared to Manhattan. However, with the current branding of Williamsburg as effortlessly cool and underground, the people who defined it in the first place are being displaced. The ability to be able to see both Williamsburgs was something that I craved. If you already view a place for what it is, I'm not sure you're able to understand what it now is from a blissfully ignorant perspective. For me, one of those places is Hawai'i.

When my newly blended family began to spend part of our summer break on Oahu, I found myself a little annoyed that I had to share this part of my life with them. Don't get it twisted-- I do love them and am immensely grateful that we became a family. However, their haoleness makes them stick out like uncracked glow sticks.

"Why are they holding those signs on the side of the road?" Jack, my oldest (but still younger than me) step brother asked as we approached them in our rental car.

A small crowd of people were gathered along the road, holding up the Hawai'i state flag and various hand

painted signs.

"Oh, honey, honk," my mother requested from the passenger side.
My step dad, Andy, honked a couple times, the sound coming out as supportive and optimistic.

"They're protesting against the project to build a telescope on the summit of Mauna Kea," I explained, feeling that childish desire to know everything and flaunt it bubble out of me. I would receive those long email chains about random things from both sides of my grandparents. Sometimes they were chains about old jokes from their youth, and others were more news-centered. I had received one about the protests against the telescope from my paternal grandfather one Sunday afternoon that year.

"But that sounds cool," Will, my younger step brother, chimed in from the third row. "I don't even like space. Why don't they want it?"

"Isn't it the tallest mountain, too? Then that makes sense why they want a telescope there," Jack added. He had a little less restraint on the know-it-all side of him.

"The land is sacred, especially the peak because they can reach the heavens. It's disrespectful to the land to take or use her without permission and without giving back to her," my mother explained.

"But they just want to use it for science!" Jack defended the construction company he knew very little about. Immediately, he sided with the white man. How surprising.

"You're missing the point," I rolled my eyes, retreating further into my window seat. This wasn't our first summer together on the islands, but I will say that each one got easier. Maybe I became more understanding of how they just didn't know these things. Or maybe they weren't as adverse to poi anymore.

NYU used to be known as a "real downtown school," as described by a professor I had who lived in New York for a majority of his life. The 1980s in New York City that he would often reference in class was rougher, cooler. The clean New York City that greeted me when I arrived from California had gone through numerous life cycles since my professor's favourite version of the city. Nonetheless, I was here, and I wanted to love it.

I discovered a screening of a documentary exposing the effects of gentrification on long-time New Yorkers, which in part was related to the book that inspired my travels. Jeremiah Moss would be at the Cooper Union where the screening was happening. I embraced my solo travels and decided to go.

After the screening was over, I was left inspired and angry. Nothing made sense-- how could these heartless people and corporations just sweep in with all their money and displace the people who make New York the city it is?

"What brought you here?" Jeremiah inquired, focusing on the Sharpie he was using.

"School! I found out about this through a class," I announced proudly. As the oldest child, I thrived off of praise.

"What school do you go to?" He handed me my copy of his book, now maintaining eye contact.

"NYU!"

It was then I realized how ironic it was to attend this screening on gentrification when I attended one of the biggest gentrifiers of Lower Manhattan. Jeremiah didn't say anything but nodded curtly as I took my book from him. His look had pricked me and left me deflated. The long sleeve I wore that loudly bore the logo of the enemy suddenly turned into a target on my chest.

Friends would always say to me, "Let's take a trip to Hawai'i!" and I would be adverse for two strong reasons. The first being that I would never pay for a flight to Hawai'i (thank you, Mom, for United's flight benefits). The second I could never truly pinpoint until the night I was walking back from the documentary screening. To New York, I am an outsider. I cannot fully understand what this city means to some people, or how it is so entwined with their own stories on such a deeper level than my own. In Hawai'i, though there is a lot I'm sure I don't fully understand, I see what my step family is to that land. Our experiences with Hawai'i are vastly different. What is a fun getaway to my friends is a time for me to reconnect with a place that has been home to generations of my family. What is a tumultuous college experience for me is the destruction of a city they once knew to true New Yorkers. I don't think I could leave New York, though. As John Steinbeck said, once you've settled here, there's no other place to go. You can't get any higher after New York.

# The Color Black

By Adrielle Lee

Not knowing what it is to feel
I drown in my own thoughts
All the colors of my energy intertwined
Perhaps I romanticize it

The mixture of my usual bright yellow
the sunshine, immortal happiness
with the bleak grey of my present state
The distasteful brown of the struggles the universe burdens on me now
that will turn as white and as pure as lessons
The deep blue of sorrow for the time and effort that surely will not have gone
to waste;
but for now, easy to think it has
The soft pale green of hope that whispers promises of the future
The fiery red and hues of orange that embolden me,
my drive to keep going forward,
reminding me that the seasons are ever changing
lost in the heat of it all
And yet again a darker, malignant grey that spreads across my mind,
a reminder of where I am now

What have I become?

# Liminal Loving

By Vixxon

Well, as usual I'm left to thinking bout fallacy realities,
Of sunlight strung moments
In rooms and under evergreen trees.
You
Cupping me, the spirits and afore's movements
Smoothly, it's all film-stripping for me in feverish flush hues
Tinged in candescence.

I can't help but feel to try your new things.
I wonder what excites you,
Drives you to shaking chills that loosen your firm grippings,
Of me, rather holding steady to the swing. True
things can mixed and matched, pieced together
And hung on my puppet strings.
I yield, as the master bobs and weaves me under

Vices like you, and other things to which I'm left screaming secret sirens of yearning
For depth, standing on the edge of nine clouds, until I'm shivering into the fall of
your vertigo.
There's a dissonance present when two forces superpose one another,
The leg trembling tremors, and aftershocks that haunt me into tomorrow--
Resonating through my flash imaginations of taking on such a lover,
Who would kindle fuel n flame the spark of such virilities.
Pouring gasoline down my throat to watch the nectar ignite me, as I swallow

The heat swelling into what he sees
In my eyes, masochism holding his skin to me like paper to the inferno
Burning the disco down to ashes of explicit
Dream specks, reminding me as your image goes that fantasies can't be.
The love of wishful thinking whilst I drone on complicit
To the lack lust of you in my visions of reality.

For now, the dream curtains close.

# Joan Didion

## By Jenna Elsetouhy

I like to wonder about what people think about in the shower. Notice I said wonder, and not inquire about, because how do you ask someone what they're thinking about in the shower without sounding like you want them to either say you, or some other weird thing? Joan Didion would probably know how to get an answer to that question. It seems like Joan Didion knows how to get to the bottom of just about anything. She doesn't have to explicitly say what she's found at the bottom of the barrel for you to get it, or even ask a question to begin with. Even though Joan Didion was a writer, I wonder if she ever found herself feeling like a psychologist. I'm not sure how easily I would be able to just write about a baby on acid and not feel entitled to psychologically interrogate the baby's mother, father, etcetera. Even though she's seen all of these crazy things, Joan Didion still—at the very least—appears to be at ease. Apparently in the 70's she used to have a cold bottle of Coke, fairly late in the morning, every morning, but then again, that was when Coke wasn't even called Coke, and I'm not sure that even says much about her being at ease—maybe routine says the opposite. Something I also know about Joan Didion is that in the same Hollywood home within which she would descend the stairs and have a Coca-Cola each morning, her husband and her threw magnificent parties. And when I say magnificent, I mean it. Linda Kasabian told Joan Didion she passed this house of Didion's on her way to kill Sharon Tate, which Joan Didion describes as "spooky." Luckily Joan Didion was out of town, and not having a party that night. Distinguished guests of the parties have been cited as the likes of Janis Joplin, Roman Polanski, Steven Spielberg, Marty Scorsese. I wonder what Joan Didion would be like as a party host. I imagine I could find her somewhere, not sitting, but leaning against a table or something, sunglasses on, blue smoke dancing out of the end of her cigarette and maybe even a drink nearby if she was a guest—but what about as host? Would she be greeting people when they walked in through the door? Would she be frantically running around? Joan Didion said that during these parties she would go to her daughter's room to check if she was okay, and once, she found drugs on the floor while she slept in her crib. Would she just throw the party to have something to look at, to write about, to see as a spectacle outside of her own participation? I probably shouldn't even ask myself these questions about Joan Didion, because they go against the nature of Joan Didion herself. She didn't really ask many questions—she said she liked rock stars, because she could watch them live their lives out in the open. Maybe Joan Didion wouldn't like me if we met at a party of hers, maybe because I'm not a rock star, or maybe because I ask too many questions. But then again, maybe Joan Didion would like me if we met at a party, because I wonder what people think about in the shower, instead of asking.

# Thin White Strokes

## By Philip Scarim

It was mid-July in southeastern Kentucky, and the heat in the back of the flatbed pickup truck made the air feel thick. The service trip only lasted for six days, so each afternoon seemed to melt away with the sun. I was working alongside some of my closest friends at the time, all of us content to be together, even when we were relegated to garbage pickup for the week. I took it upon myself to try and be a leader, to try to keep everyone on task. It was clear to me that some people on the trip were more interested in a week away from home than serving a deeply impoverished community, and I felt a sort of responsibility to put in the work when it was time for that. The house we were working on was in desperate need of a new roof, and the group who had left the site to us had scattered thousands of rotted-out shingles around the property. We brought along the decades-old pickup the local church lent to us, painted red by rust. Eventually, we decided on a particularly efficient method of moving the garbage around the lawn. A layer of painting tarps would sit near the truck, and all ten of us would toss shingles until it looked just full enough to lift it into the truck. As the morning dew lifted away from the grass and the sweat started to pour, each load started to get heavier. The tedious nature of the day's job, compounded by the longing for our brown bag lunches waiting in the van, contributed to the communal desire to finish up. I forced myself underneath the tarp to lift it into the truck; my exposed arms gripped the weight of the tarp. I pulled myself away to identify the source of the pulsing on my right forearm. A stray nail that snuck through the tarp was the culprit; left behind were a 2-inch gash, a trail of blood, and a wall of pale faces.

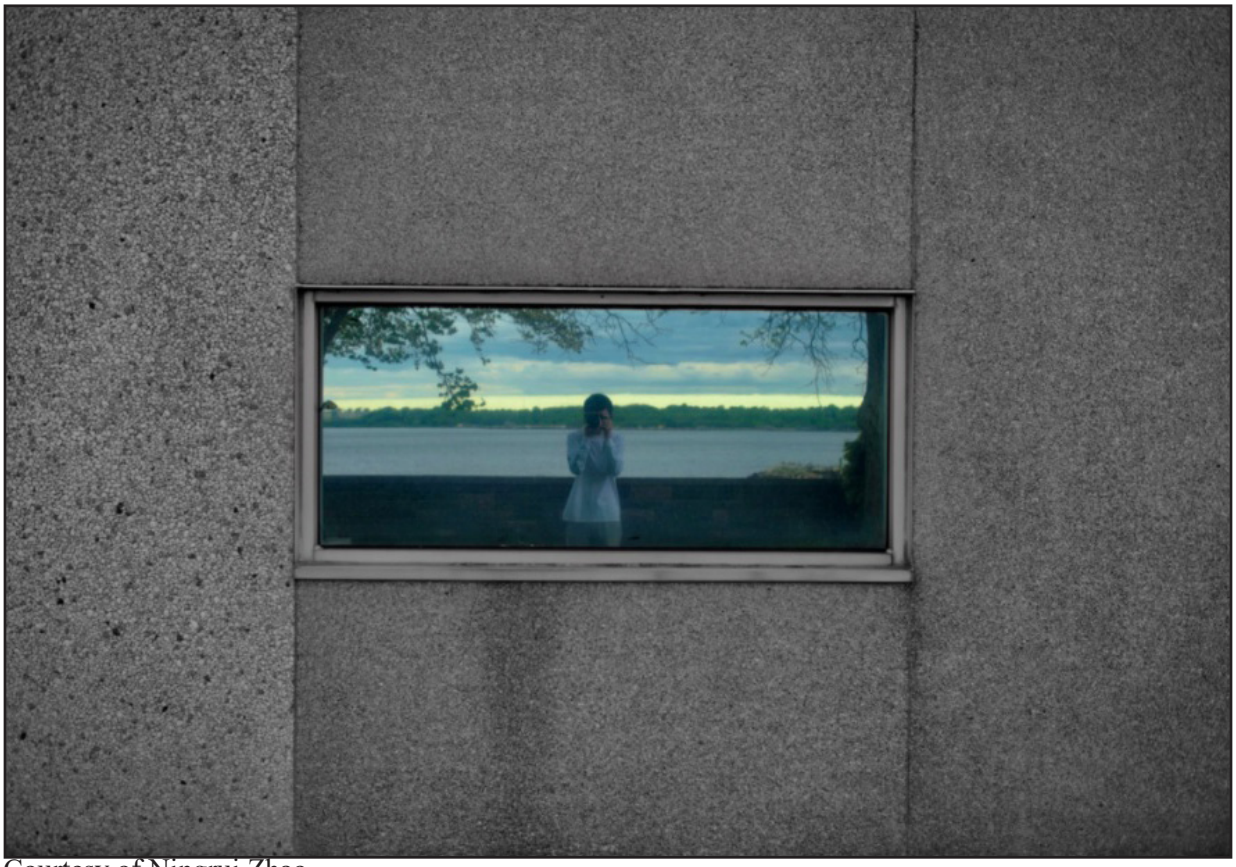
The fatigue that had settled in hours prior slowed everyone's reaction. Christine, the leader of our group, was the first to take action. With the steadying calmness only a mother could exude, she found the travel-sized first-aid kit in the back of our cluttered sprinter van and started to ask me questions in her soft, melodic tone. Something about the shock of the injury pulled me away from the austerity of the present. The natural spring of red on my arm left behind droplets of scarlet, accented by the complimentary green of the dewy grass below. The rolling hills of Appalachia surrounded me. Gracious forms of the earth topped with fluffy emerald forest, like the texture you find on a landscape painting when you get real close. When I took over applying pressure to my opened wrist, Christine made a call to D-Bill. The retired surgeon was a facet of our service trips. Trained by his 20 summers in Harlan, he navigated his way to our work site without hesitation. His presence grounded the whole situation in an aura of expertise. His quick examination of the wound followed by an even quicker call to my mom confirmed that everything was going to be okay. The cut was deep but clean, so the healing process was not going to be something to worry about. I was up to date on my tetanus shot (thanks, Mom!) so the long drive to the county hospital was not going to be necessary. All this chaos left the group quiet, a rarity for our rowdy bunch. An early trip to the town Dairy Queen was just what everyone needed; the van seemed to make its way there free of the fear that enveloped it just an hour before.

Naturally, we talked about that afternoon for the rest of the trip, repeating the story to each person who inquired. Despite the theatrics that surrounded the original experience, all that is left to show for it is a faint line of scar tissue on my wrist, a physical marker of an experience that feels far removed from where I am today. That is what a scar really is: a reminder. If our bodies are canvases to the art of human experience, scars can be the defining strokes in a beautiful self-portrait. I find myself now gazing at that faint white line, seven hundred miles from beautiful Harlan, Kentucky, thinking about how formative and complex the trip that created it was. Looking back on an experience with the tools of maturity and personal growth is an inherently productive practice. You can see more clearly the circumstances of an experience, and allow such clarity to inform the lessons you take away from it. Never would a fifteen-year-old version of myself have thought that a week of service and laughs with my friends could act as a reinforcement for my values years down the road of my experience.

This scar of mine can not be singularly tied to the second it was carved into me; instead, it has become representative of a series of experiences, a mixture of emotion. It could have become a trite reminder to myself about the importance of proper working clothes - though this message would have been futile for the boy who rocked cut-offs with the same gusto as a Jersey Shore cast member - or even a deterrent from the kind of volunteer work that birthed the injury. I am deeply grateful that I did not constrain myself to such a surface-level attachment to my scar. Instead, it reminds me to open up my camera roll and revisit

the recordings of laughter during the long and scenic van rides. It reminds me of a friend group, now separated by the equally powerful forces of time and high school, that never failed to put a smile on my face. It reminds me that no matter where I am in my relationship to religion, I can have community in the colorful youth group room at my church, just down the road. I am reminded of the sinking feeling in my stomach when I realized the scale of poverty in rural America; just as strongly, I remember the anger I felt towards the ravenous practices of the energy corporations that extracted their profits from Appalachia and left suffering in their wake. My passion for service work, the honing of my leadership skills, and the connection I feel to a place I have been so few times can all be traced through to the thinnest part of my scar, the part where if you didn't look close enough you might not be able to separate the ragged tissue from the rest of my body. The formative experiences that are tied to this scar all come from the same place, but certainly can not be subtracted from the rest of my identity.

The art of my life is constantly in progress. The canvas of my body is not yet marked by the subtle strokes that come with age. But the scars that are present now, tied to my physical being for the rest of my life, carry reminders of how each of my experiences is to be valued as an integral part of my identity. The thoughts and emotions that give any of my experiences credence exist only in my brain - untouchable. This is why it is so important for me to value the physical connections that my body creates to the otherwise intangible phenomena of identity. We use our bodies to present ourselves to others, to accomplish the goals that we prioritize, and to express the thoughts that comprise us. If experience is the curator of someone's identity, then such an identity is not possible without the vehicle for experience. We so often focus on the aesthetic components of physicality instead of appreciating how important the very function of a physical body can be. My body carries a scar that anchors the development of my identity in a permanent and physical way: forevermore stored in that thin white stroke.



Courtesy of Ningrui Zhao

# Two Truths and a Lie

## By Megan Finkle

One
I am my family's only child

Two
My mouth bleeds when I speak

Three
There's a spider crawling across the
wall behind you
Please don't turn to look

When I say one thing, I am speaking of another
like when he said the Word it really meant
Chaos qua Dying qua insanity
and so on

One,
He puts his white teeth between my eyes
and smiles without sound

Two,
I dance in the hours after they have
fallen asleep and am happy

Three,
I brought a wild animal home
you'll never guess what it was
but all that matters is that
now it is mine

One,
They took me to the circus
to watch the acrobats fly
A woman with long, curled fingernails
kissed my cheek and called me
beautiful
when I tried to turn my face away
because I was ashamed

I felt her nails digging in

Two,
I watched his finger
my father's
hold still as it paused
over the trigger
A deer with anxious eyes stood
in the meadow
Its mouth was stuffed with tall grass
head held down
like a prisoner kneeling
before the executioner

That animal you say you have
will never be yours

I do not believe you
when you say that you brought it home
You have never taken anything from
its place

Three,
My favorite place as a child was the lake
the big smelly swamp where cattails soared to the heavens
where I could stare at the lifeforms trapped
under the water
They moved so differently from people
more gracefully
They accentuated the water with slender bodies
in phantom passing

The first time I saw them
I cried
I took myself out of the circle
to kneel behind a rock that was cold
The music came into my head and
died there
because I was crying

I am talking about stars of course
beholding them like discovering
some new ritual
that should have been mine
but was not

Truth,
I am the expiation that threatens to last
for all of eternity

I know that you did not stare
at the water but at yourself
because you thought your face
was beautiful and lost yourself in it

Lie,
I have to stop you there
We promised this would be a game

Truth,
I know that you did not stare
at the water because as a child
you were blind

Yes,
you were blinded by some beauty that came
from the External
and you would say that this beauty was
natural not manufactured out of some False
thing

and you wanted to become this thing

One,
I wore a cross around my neck hidden beneath
my shirt and father tore it off a week before
Christmas and said

We don’t believe in that
We don’t believe in anything

Two,
I am expiating the falseness
that corrodes at my center

Three,
I am corroding at my center in falseness

Truth,
The problem may be found at my center

# Lalita

## By Rebecca Stevenson

"You know how to read, don't you?" Frank smiles and rips the Amazon package with his pinky nail. Four cookbooks drop out. "Or is that still forbidden for women over in India."

He laughs as I lean against the coat rack and stare. I haven't told Frank about my father's plans and the money he saved, not for my dowry, but for my medical degree, so I guess I'm to blame for his ignorance.

"See." He lifts his shoulders as I snatch his wool coat off and hang it. "The North End Italian Cookbook. Fifth edition. Italian. You love Fiola Mare, so, you know, make it at home. Lasagna?" Frank yawns, his tone salsaing. "Made in India: Recipes from an Indian Family Kitchen, Classic Indian Cooking. That'll remind you of home, huh?"

I grab the cookbook and flip the cover. A light-skinned North Indian poses like a Fair & Lovely model.

"Ok." I clutch the cookbooks and remember how I followed my mother around the kitchen when I was a child, observing, learning, trying to help.

She laughed and kicked my baby belly until I screeched out the kitchen. "You want to cook? You don't want to cook! You want to be a rajakumari. Spoiled! So spoiled!"

My mother told me to be patient, that once I married my Roman Catholic Malayalee husband (from the right part of the village, the left bank of Parvathy Puthanaar) and he moved in, then she'd teach me her recipes, then I could cook all day, all night.

When my father was home, he shook his head, squatted with me, and whispered, "You're too smart to cook. We'll have you in medical school. We'll have servants for you in medical school. Seven different servants, different every day, so you won't get bored." He winked twice, switching eyes.

I pick the edges of the cookbook's sleeve until it peels. I think about calling and asking my mother for her achappam recipe. But I know she'd delete my message before listening.

I wedge the cookbooks between my legs and tie my hair. "We have Tara Thai leftovers for tonight, though."

"Took it for lunch."

"Oh." I blink. "We can order for tonight?"

"Lalita."

"Never mind. There just isn't the money."

He nods and sits in front of the TV, streaming ER and pouring a five-hundred dollar bottle of bourbon.

I sit on the kitchen floor. The linoleum argues with my tailbone. I open Made in India: Recipes from an Indian Family Kitchen to an aubergine tomato curry recipe. I lick the hot colors of the photo with my palms and close my eyes. I've eaten this at an Indian restaurant in America, but never seen it in Kerala.

I keep flipping and find idiyappam. I smile. Puttu was my sister's favorite, but even soaked in vegetable stew, it was too dry and crumbly for me to stand. I begged my mother for idiyappam instead, to make it special for me.

"Diay!" she'd say. "Am I your maid, you order me around like this?"

But she cooked it for me, anyway. Every time.

I pick the aubergine tomato curry recipe.

I told Frank the idiyappam story on our second date, at a Michelin-starred restaurant on Pennsylvania Ave. He laughed, but didn't believe me. "That doesn't sound like you."

I shrugged. I didn't know what did.

"Well," he continued, his wine glass in the air. "A toast to your high expectations. May they always be satisfied."

The next restaurant had two Michelin stars. I ate blood-sausage-topped toasted-rice custard and hated it. But I smiled and chewed, because I was showing Frank I was young and adventurous as he was showing me he was old and rich, and we were agreeing how harmonious a pairing that was.

Frank, I realized when I browsed his tax returns, isn't rich. He could be, but spends too much money on Michelin starred restaurants.

I drag a mahogany-backed chair to the kitchen and climb to reach the cupboard's spices. My first week with Frank in Chevy Chase, I bought cumin, turmeric, coriander, and all the oranges and yellows I'd seen both in my mother's kitchen, and in America's vegan chocolate flavors.

My father's cousin got me and my sister the jobs at Dupont Chocolatiers, where Frank and I met. My father

wanted me at Johns Hopkins med school, but he needed a few more years working in Delhi to afford it. My mother didn't like us stooping to cashier jobs either, not when our father was a barrister, but our father's achievements were irrelevant; immigration to America was reincarnation before death. She still complained, but finished the chocolate bars I snuck home for her, licking fingers between bites.

My sister kept silent when Frank first asked me to lunch. She covered for me the first month.

My father died during the second. He was at work. He was giving a presentation. He'd called the night before, vibrant, hoping for a promotion. He had a heart attack after his introduction.

The day after, Frank took me to Fiola Mare. I spoke nothing of my father.

"How can it be fun, still?" my sister shouted that night. "Do you think your secret shame hasn't killed Acha? Do you think God doesn't see, God doesn't punish?"

"No." I said after a silence. "I don't think he does."

I went to Mass the next day, alone.

I slice the onions with my eyes closed. The knife cuts my left index finger but I keep slicing until the sting of my finger is stronger than the sting in my eyes. When I open them, blood drips through a few cubes. I dampen a paper towel and wipe the blood off each piece, pausing at the last one. The blood sits on top, slowly seeping. I pop the onion cube in my mouth, sucking. I hear Frank cough and I swallow.

I know I embarrass Frank. He tells me. Or, in public, he belittles me, laughing at my ignorance, my poor pronunciation. He did so last weekend, at Colonel Boyd's house. I liked it there. All the Pentagon wives were middle-aged and wore diamond necklaces to distract from their saggy white breasts. My breasts, in contrast, were beautiful. I hope that was mentioned after ridiculing my accent and my age.

I don't think Frank knows how much he embarrasses me, too. I calculated how much the rug he imported from Iran was and added the bottles of scotch in his office and counted every dinner he treated his friends to. I searched his house on Zillow, too, and found it to be a four-million-dollar "Tudor Revival." I thought of what my father might've done with that money. I thought of the years he wouldn't have had to work. I tried to imagine him living in this big house, but he'd never have spent his money on something so stupid. I became nauseous. I laughed and thought, I would've saved myself for Mammootty's son if I'd known.

Courtesy of Joanne Qiu

My mother knew, at least, more than I did. We had to fly in two days for my father's funeral when I told her Frank proposed. She shut the apartment dishwasher with her palm and paused. She walked to my bedroom with a hand on her back. She slammed the half-scraped door open and banged my top dresser drawer onto the carpet, breaking a handle. She grabbed clumps of my clothes, my passport shoved between, tossing them out the second story window and into the apartment common area. I shouted and stretched to catch the green sari my father had sent me, but it fell with the rest.

My mother returned both hands to her back and yelled, "Go! Go stay with your white man. Or come back. But you come back without him!"

I took the bus to Frank's house on Elmwood. I knocked. The green sari drooped out my tote bag as I sagged on his couch.

"Oh!" Frank picked the sari up. "Wouldn't want this to tear. This the one you wore last week?" He stretched the fabric out and folded, patting the gold border. "Your father gave you, didn't he?"

I watched him, quiet. And I would've left Frank, if my father were alive. I would've had a year before I started at Johns Hopkins, if my father were alive.

I close my eyes again as I toss green chili and ginger into the pan of warm oil. I wonder if when my mother realized I wasn't returning, it sounded like this sizzle.

I heat up another pan and toss a frozen naan in. I pick it up and flip it again, counting its rotations. I laugh, but not loudly enough for Frank to hear.

I prayed in the Basilica the first week of our elopement, while Frank was at work. When I knew she was back from India, I called my mother for weeks. I don't know how she knew Frank's caller ID, but she never answered. The next month, I tried my sister instead. I took the red line to Dupont Chocolatiers. I tapped her frizzy hair from behind and she turned. She smiled at me, and I hoped. But any word I spoke, English or Malayalam, pleading or pissed, she only blinked through, silent. I tried for two weeks.
Now I watch a lot of TV instead. Days of Our Lives reminds me of my family.
Often, after the cleaning lady leaves, I stare at myself naked. I don't want Frank to know my body more than I do. That seems an unfair advantage, somehow.
Or, when I get lonely, I go to Whole Foods. There's Kiran. He's a cashier from Nepal. He showed me pictures of his kids, once. Both are ugly, but so is Kiran.
Usually, I stay home. I cry while Frank isn't there. Crying makes him uncomfortable, he told me, because it reminds him of his first wife, who was nasty, manipulative, and mean. But sometimes I cry at night, too. I try to be quiet, but I know Frank's a light sleeper. I wish I could turn and see his face or he would turn to see mine. But I keep my back to him, staring at the white wall with floral Neiman Marcus curtains I picked out with his card. And I cry that way.
I swish the curry around with a wooden spoon and blow until my spit flies back spicy. I turn the heat off and try an eggplant shard. It's hot. I open my mouth and let it fall to the floor. I fling it into the trash with my toes.
"It's ready!" I call. I place the naan on a ceramic plate and pile the curry on with the wooden spoon. I dust the cookbook off and shut it.
I keep my back straight and smile as I walk through the framed corridor. The walls are still white, but seasoned now. I see orange turmeric footprints on the ceiling until my brimming blinks scrub them away.
I remember when we landed in America and my father took us to Minerva for an Indian buffet. My sister spilled mango lassi on my lap and laughed. I dumped my mango lassi on her head and laughed back. My mother and father scolded us, but laughed too, wiping us both. And we all sat there, sweaty brown and foreign, but laughing. I think that was when I first tried aubergine tomato curry.
It's when I remember how happy I was that I cry. I stop and stomp my left foot with my right.
The living room is fresher, as if cornbread is sponging the heat. Frank grips the leather couch as he turns and smiles. "Smells delicious."
I tap his knees down and place the plate on his lap.
"Looks delicious, too." Frank wavers above the dish. "How about a fork."
I stare at Frank's spotting, cashew hands. We didn't touch the half-washed forks at Minerva, I remember. We scooped with our fingers, our sweat adding salt to the chilli powder and cumin.
"Lalita?" Frank stares back. "You hear me? Fork?"
I shake my head.
Frank sees my eyes and slumps, almost rolling his eyes. He toggles and turns ER up. He's uncomfortable, but so am I.
I lean over and rip a bite of naan off. I scoop the curry and place it in my mouth. I let the spices soak my tongue before I chew. Frank stares at the TV.
My father stayed in DC with the family for a month before returning to Delhi. I sobbed at the airport and he told me, "What are you crying for? Cry when I'm dead, yes. I want lots of tears at my funeral!"
I didn't go to my father's funeral. I went to Frank's house. I didn't tell Frank my father was dead, or that he was going to send me to medical school, or that I loved my father and I'm grieving, and I'm grieving alone. I want to tell him now.
I grab the plate and lift it, the naan flopping to the floor and curry sliding on my head, chin, and in between my breasts. I scream with my face up, the curry still falling, into my mouth now. I stop, silent, and stare into Frank's disco ball eyes. I smash the plate down and it shatters, but not enough. Drooling, spitting, I drop to my hands and knees and ravage the shards. I grab the large pieces and slam them down again and again and again until the plate is small enough to snort.
And silence, until Frank shakes his head, barely, and whispers, "What is wrong with you."
I sit up and cross my legs. Little ceramic pieces enter my ankles. "Well. You can read, can't you?"
Frank stares down at me. He scrapes his toe against the tile, smearing the curry off.
He stands and curry slops from the rims of his pants. He slides his belt out, unzips his fly, and folds his pants

on top of the couch, stained side up.
Frank steps over spots and shards into the kitchen. He pulls the trash can out of the tall cupboard, plastic bags falling and bruising on his gelled hair. He reaches back for the white broom and dustpan. I'm surprised he knows where they're kept.
He sweeps around me, but the floor is still stained. I start crying again when he leaves to get the Swiffer WetJet from the basement and continue when he returns.
He mops to my feet, then sets the Swiffer gently down. "How about we get you in the shower," says Frank. His right hand cups to help me up and the left reaches, hovering, for the snot and tears on my chin.
I nod and take Frank's hand. He grips the glossy railing up the stairs as I hold his arm.
Frank lifts and slides my sweat clothes off. He turns the tap on and tests the water, pointing me in when it's hot enough. He glops Crabtree & Evelyn body wash on my torso and spreads it from shoulder to ankle and tilts my face under the faucet. He sits in the tub with me. His shirt and underwear are still on. And we sit there in the tub, together.

Courtesy of Joanne Qiu

The Winner of The Elaine Kuntz Prize

# Writing for the Edge

## By Brandon Bien

About two years ago my father's friend Rachel told me to take photos with my eyes. I was confused by what she meant, and for a while I forgot her suggestion. Eventually I became more experienced with actual cameras through making a couple films and shooting a lot of photos. Looking around for shots became somewhat of a habit, then slowly developed into instinct. When this happened moments in time started to freeze. For example, I was with some friends and someone sparked a lighter and it sent sparks cascading for an instant into the night. Or a rainy night on third avenue looking down the road and the mirror like water reflects the streetlights and the fluorescent signs. Then it looks something like an impressionist painting and there is another photo from the eyes. But it is not a real photo, which is a digital snapshot that captures direct present. Instead, it is a pause in which I may observe and convert the world into a snapshot memory. Looking back into this imaginary camera roll is an intriguing process. There is no image, rather it all comes back in descriptions. In simpler terms it all comes back in words. In actuality, I was writing the whole time.

I was reading Letters to a Young Poet by Rainer Maria Rilke. It was a lonely time, I was frequently in my room looking out the window watching sky fall to dusk, or walking around the neighborhood as the leaves turned orange then red, the color of the houses. It was peaceful but also melancholic, solemn and absolutely private. I wondered why I felt separated, or was unknowingly separating myself. I did not know if I wanted to share this world I was in and if it was even possible to do so. That's where Rilke comes in. To the young poet he said treasure your solitude because it is the purest state of being and therefore more beautiful than anything else. It is where poems arise from (Rilke 23). More and more I have taken comfort in this advice from his text. Recently, I have embraced it. The people I surround myself with are all people I can be alone with. Accepting silence within a group of people is often proof of genuine friendship. It is in the quiet that I find my voice.

A notebook is a noiseless thing. The pages will occasionally rustle when turned, but when I am writing or reading what I have written there is not a single sound. Sometimes I look back through my notebooks and am reacquainted with voices from my past. Doing so is often a disjointed process. On one page it reads: "last night we sat at the dead end of the tram stop under the awning, dripping with rain". What was dripping with rain, the awning or us? Thinking back it was probably the mood of the scene. It was raining torrentially beyond our shelter, but underneath our little roof it was dry. It must have been the contradiction of being outside for hours during a storm yet remaining unscathed that I thought was worth noting. It will not ever happen again in that way, because my friendship with those people will change, the tram stop might be renovated, and I am also becoming something different.

What is real is in flux, but words are not real. They are a symbolic representation of reality, existing first in abstract thought then transitioning into the literal once they are written down. In her essay "On Keeping a Notebook", Joan Didion writes, "How it felt to me: that is getting closer to the truth about a notebook" (Didion 134). It is similar to Rilke's idea on solitude which is that life is inherently lived alone within the boundaries of our own minds. Didion's concept of "how it felt to me" acts as an umbrella over perception and experience. By writing we discover the characteristics of that umbrella: its weight and the shadow it casts at our feet.

One of the friends I was with on that night in the tram stop could read my account, recognize the moment, but to them it would conjure something other then what it makes me remember. When reading my own writing it is a reinternalization of what was originally internal. When reading the writing of others it can only be an internalization of the external. I tend to agree with Didion regarding the fact that keeping a notebook has been vital to the reconciliation of loss within my own personal experience. She writes, "keepers of private notebooks are a different breed altogether, lonely and resistant rearrangers of things, anxious malcontents, children afflicted apparently at birth with some presentiment of loss." (Didion 132, 133) I guess I am like this too. When I first started writing I was making songs with my friends Martin and Gib. One day Martin came into the practice room with a chord progression that conjured longing and sorrow. He played it with incredible seriousness and I sang over it almost unconsciously, "o we've reached the edge, and there's nowhere to go but over it". Those two words, the edge, have followed me around since then, a dogma echoing through my head, sometimes loud and immediate, but more often as a whisper. It was like they were something I had known forever. I wonder if Didion and Rilke have words like that. I think they must.

We tried to finish that song for a while but I never completed the lyrics. Other words loss their power and fell away into obscurity in the face of the edge. It became something else entirely, living as part of myself for nearly two years, developing its meaning, and growing as I grow. Later, the edge became the title of our collection of songs. Back then it meant a point in time when romantic love fades away. But that is just an edge. The edge is pervasive, and common to human experience. Love was too specific, and in the end love was just another emotion the edge had grafted itself onto. So what is it then?

There is a painting by Kazimir Malevich entitled Black Square. In it there is a black square bordered on all side by a few inches of white. I saw it in the Jerusalem Museum after I had finished my high school exams. That stage of my life would soon be over and it was as if everything was coming to an end. I thought Black Square was beautiful because of its simplicity. In many ways it was an aesthetic counterpart to the edge. There is the white border, light and life, then it sinks into the black nothing. What goes over the edge falls into that abyss. It became the fear of a fading present. That by failing to remember what had happened and who I was I would exist in a constant state of was not, disembodied from all except the now. Here I disagree with Didion's statement that our past selves will "come hammering on the minds door at 4 A.M" if we do not have them stored in a notebook (139). How are they supposed to hammer if they have no character, no story, no arms to knock, and no legs to walk up to the door? How will they appear when they already fell off the edge long ago? Sometimes I see them as obscure glimmers but they flicker out before they can take form.

Looking more closely at Black Square I began to notice cracks in the black paint which the white underneath shone through. I thought it was an appropriate metaphor for my keeping of a notebook. By writing the void was no longer totally impervious, memories buried deep in its ocean began to float back up. Eventually the black paint will completely crack away and only the white will remain. But that will take many years and memory is not as simple as the way paint behaves over time. I only hope that my own black continues to crack.

I love poetry because of its ambiguity. A line in a poem parallels the fuzziness of a memory. At first its meaning seems impossible to understand, but then I read it again and it starts to make sense. Then I forget about it until one day I'm walking home from the bus and the line reappears like an epiphany because right then, like in the poem, there is dew on the overhanging branches of a tree. Oddly enough the emotions of the work only truly come at this point. There is a tingling ecstasy and the satisfaction of unpacking your newfound ideas. It is antithetical to the way we experience life, which in present is full of sensation, immediacy, and emotion, and in memory is quite nonsensical because all of this has disappeared. In reversing the process of human experience a poem spawns its own reality, one that will not dissipate because words are eternal once written.

In his interviews with Janet Malcolm, the painter David Salle somewhat unintentionally provided a brilliant justification for the existence of poetry: "I'm bored when it's all written out, when there isn't any shorthand". (Malcolm 58) Intrinsically, a poem is written entirely in this shorthand because life does not have a story that can be "all written out". It is far too complicated, and often too unimportant to be written about. If I did so my notebooks would be banal like a diary. But here arises a vital question; what distinguishes the contents of life that deserve the poetic shorthand and those that do not? Once again I turn to Rilke for answers, this time in his novel The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge. What is worthy is "everything that is barely measurable – an emotion that rises by half a degree, the angle of deflection, read off from up close, of a will burdened by an almost infinitesimal weight, the slight cloudiness in a drop of longing, and that barely perceptible color-change in an atom of confidence" (Rilke 82). In other words, they will separate themselves because somehow they have already been separated as if there is a sift within our minds that distills what is poignant and what is not. Yet there is another even more difficult issue to overcome that Rilke highlights: how then do I transition this incremental hyper-specific form of perception back to a communicable form of language (Rilke 83)? This is not a question about how to write, it is a question about how to live in a way in which the two are already married.

This brings me back to the eye photos I have been taking for so long. I find many of the older ones, like my older writings, to be rather useless. They are perceptions of things simply as they were, far too grounded in the reality of the present, with no thought of what could be. It is the what could be which underlies the beauty of a poem. The layers that come to life underneath that first shade of black paint once it begins to peel away.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