Wide Angle

A journal of literature and film

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Wide Angle

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Dedicated to
Dr. Geoffrey A. Wright
Founding General Editor of *Wide Angle*, 2012-2024

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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.

Cover Art

"Stanley"
By Dora Baca

Special Topic

This issue features pieces that responded to the call for works on attention in literature and film.

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Sam Allen is a senior JMC major with a minor in Film Production, who will be attending Florida State University in the fall in pursuit of a Master's in Screenwriting. He hopes to make a career out of writing in the entertainment industry, or at least find a way to be funny enough to skate by for a while.

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Dora Baca grew up in Lima, Perú, and Huntsville, Alabama. As a multidisciplinary artist, Dora hopes to create harmony in the differing seams of her life and to bring attention to the love she feels for her friends and family in everything she does. As a Studio Art senior, Dora has been contemplating the next steps of her career and has come to the natural conclusion that she should find herself collaging somewhere in Germany while mastering the art of freestyle rapping this summer.

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Avery Risner is a sophomore English major from the most picturesque town on earth: Edmond, OK. She likes to procrastinate her writing by awaiting the next episode of SNL, burning something in her air-fryer, needlessly trying to adopt random dogs off of the internet, or joyfully weeping about being published in *Wide Angle*.

Ana Wright is a junior English major with minors in Music and Biblical Studies. She thinks that the human experience is intricate and baffling and wonderful, and things like music and writing allow us to experience this beautiful complexity together. Ana loves making music with friends, drinking tea and chatting about poetry, and watching the stars come out right after the sun sets. After graduation, she hopes to continue to do such things.

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.

Editor's Note

Jennifer Ellis West

Welcome to Volume 14 of *Wide Angle*, Samford University's literary and cinematic arts journal. The editorial team has selected attention as this year's theme, and so I want to begin by drawing your attention to the story of how this journal came to be. One reason for attending to the journal's past is that this year marks a significant transition: Dr. Geoffrey A. Wright, former faculty member in the English Department, founded the journal in 2012 and led its student editorial team in producing 18 issues over the past 13 years. In January, Dr. Wright left Samford, and he left the supervision of the journal to me.

In November, before the end of his last semester, Dr. Wright met with our current editorial team to give them their charge. I had the honor of sitting in the room as he described for students the way he envisioned their work. He talked about *Wide Angle* both as an extension of the work of the English Department, a learning experience beyond the four walls of the classroom, and as a legacy, an opportunity for students to leave behind something that they're proud of. When he started the journal soon after joining the faculty at Samford, Dr. Wright hoped to replicate some of the powerful experiences he had had as a student, working for journals at both his undergraduate and graduate institutions. He envisioned the journal as a partnership between faculty and students, a space to nurture writers and their work in some of the most formative years of writers' lives. His call to maintain excellence and to operate with a teacherly spirit, always aiming to help young writers get better, has echoed in the Ingalls Annex as we have worked to put this issue together.

As the faculty member who steps into his stead with much trepidation, I take on this responsibility thinking about the careful attention Dr. Wright has paid over the years to students, those whose work has been published in the journal, those who have submitted work but not had it published, and those who have worked as part of the editorial team. When I began at Samford in 2021, I remember attending my first English Department Awards ceremony. Held the Friday before exam week, this event gathers together faculty, staff, and students to celebrate the accomplishments of the department that year. I sat in my pew in Reid Chapel, listening as my new colleagues read the names of scholarship recipients and talked about the clubs and organizations they supervised. Then, Dr. Wright got up. He asked the *Wide Angle* team to join him at the front of the chapel. He had prepared remarks about each member of the team, naming their particular strengths with specificity and nuance. He spoke passionately about the hard work of spending time with others' writing, of the careful judgment and collaborative decision-making the editors had developed over the semester. As I think about it now, what Dr. Wright demonstrated is precisely what this year's theme celebrates: the gift of deep attention to the voices of others.

We in the Samford English Department have benefited richly from the years Dr. Wright spent cultivating the film concentration, teaching American literature, and supervising this journal. He leaves behind a legacy of attentiveness to students' engagement with and production of the arts that we hope to carry on in the pages of this journal for many years to come. It is with deep gratitude for his years of service that we dedicate this issue, Volume 14, to him.

Essay

Clay Birchfield

Permeability of Self as Answer: The Epistemology of Ishmael's Survival

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Moby-Dick's critique of the practices and findings of nineteenth-century ethnology and phrenology has been widely debated and studied. Ethnographic commentary has been the topic of many writings and has joined in scholarly conversations with the study of the body in the novel. Both topics have impacted the perception of the role of the physical body in *Moby-Dick*, particularly those of non-white characters. The idea that these bodies can be "known" by the characters in the novel demonstrates an analogy to the ethnological practices of phrenology and is critiqued through the development of Ishmael's character. Furthermore, the culmination of Ishmael's discovery of a new epistemology that recognizes the permeability of self, alongside the shifting format of the novel, and Ishmael's status as the lone survivor of the *Pequod*'s journey, illustrates a worldview that Melville offers in opposition to that of the racially biased, pseudo-scientific findings of nineteenth-century ethnologists, represented by the character of Ahab. By close-reading the chapters "A Bosom Friend," "The Mast-Head" through "Midnight, Forecastle," and "A Squeeze of the Hand" alongside critical scholarship, I seek to offer a new reading of Ishmael's character as a counter to the flawed perspectives of Ahab and the nineteenth century ethnologists. I also make the argument that the nature of such a solution, and the implications of its employment, could have led to its contemporary failure and modern success.

Queequeg's character in *Moby-Dick* and his relationship to Ishmael are particularly complex. Scholars have long debated Queequeg's involvement in the narrative, explaining it "in

one of two ways: either Queequeg is less important than he appears to be in the first fifth of the book, or Queequeg is more important than he appears to be in the last four-fifths of the book" (Sanborn 125). Sanborn argues that "Queequeg prepares us for the advent of Ahab… by drawing us away from a mode of interpretation that Melville now feels he did not sufficiently fend off in *Typee*, and" (more importantly) "by embodying an ideal 'savagery' against which Ahab… will be measured" (Sanborn 125–126). Building on Sanborn's conclusions, Joseph Fruscione claims that Queequeg operates along with the other non-white characters in the novel to allow Melville to represent "an imagined setting where his more enlightened experiment of cultural interaction could play itself out" (Fruscione 23). In both cases, Queequeg is operating in a way that presents the perception of his character as a comparison to the characters of Ishmael, Ahab, and other members of the crew. While these interpretations bring interesting scholarly conversations to light, the "function," for lack of better term, of Queequeg's character has yet to be fully explored, particularly as it pertains to his assistance in laying the foundation of Ishmael's epistemological development.

After the initial shock Ishmael experiences in sharing a room with Queequeg, the relationship between these two characters deepens. In the simple fact that he has shared a bed with someone he at first deemed "savage," "Ishmael indicates that he has overcome the dread that was conventionally associated with the experience of being touched by a cannibal" (Sanborn 138). In the words of Sanborn, this shift "[expresses] a willingness to splice with Queequeg" (138). Ishmael has undergone a change where "Queequeg's touch has lost its power to provoke" fear; Ishmael "no longer seems to share the inclination to recoil from the touch of a fellow man, any more than he shares the inclination to treat the sight of interracial intimacy as a freakish

spectacle" (138–139). Sanborn argues that this is because, in Queequeg, Ishmael begins to see "an idealized masculine savagery" (140).

A possible explanation of this change and another example of Ishmael's perceptual reconciliation is found in the scene at the whaleman's chapel and through Father Mapple's sermon. Father Mapple calls on his congregation to know that "if [they] obey God, [they] must disobey themselves" (Melville 48). Ishmael takes this advice to the extreme, using this simple logic to deny his initial reactions to his next encounter with Queequeg. When he sees his roommate worshipping the wooden idol, Yojo, Ishmael overcomes his initial inclination to recoil from Queequeg's "savagery" and "paganism" and instead joins his friend (58). Using Father Mapple's logic (albeit, maybe not in the way the parson intended), Ishmael tells the reader, "I felt a melting in me. No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. The soothing savage had redeemed it" (57). This emotional reaction, coming off the heels of a radical shift in his view of Queequeg, demonstrates the foundational character development that Ishmael undergoes at the beginning of the novel that will lead him to the epistemology of a permeable identity.

Unfortunately, while this instance begins to break down the dominant cultural perceptions of identity and self, it does so in a way that affirms the nineteenth-century inclinations that it seems to argue against. Nineteenth-century America's preoccupation with classifying, categorizing, and knowing bodies was spread all "across antebellum United States culture" and demonstrated through scenes "of bodily and especially cranial contemplation" enacted by phrenologists and physiognomists (Otter 101). In his essay, "What is Called Savagery," Joseph Fruscione succinctly describes the impact of these ethnologists: "As Josiah Nott, Samuel George Morton, and other nineteenth-century ethnologists proferred, analyzing the

body of the 'other' marked differences in character and intelligence in favor of whites and, in turn, buttressed racial hierarchies and colonialism" (3). The inherent racial bias within these works were so severe that Morton's writing was said to "reveal the truth about racial hierarchy" (Otter 119). Nott worked with another ethnologist named George Gliddon to produce *Types of Mankind* which gave readers a "ranking" of the different races in the world, complete with animal comparisons. Initially, the way that Ishmael overcomes his inherent racial bias is *through* the techniques used by such ethnologists.

In his observations of his roommate, Ishmael mimics and ultimately parodies the practices of phrenologists and ethnologists. Ishmael "[w]ith much interest… sat watching [Queequeg]," and eventually comes to the conclusion that he has nothing to fear from him (Melville 55). Ishmael even claims that Queequeg's "head was phrenologically an excellent one," that it "reminded [him] of George Washington's head" (56). Ishmael's earliest conclusions about the civility and positive attributes of Queequeg are found by employing the same level of clinical study and racially biased scientific findings as the contemporary ethnologists. Just as Ishmael adheres to the contemporary racist perceptions in his initial reactions to Queequeg, that his initial "complaint is that he did not know that his bedmate was *not white*," he perpetuates such standards by validating Queequeg's amicability and honor on the standards that he is *like white*, as evidenced in his comparison to George Washington (Sanborn 129).

However, even in the application of ethnological methodology, Ishmael recognizes the falsity and the lack of fulfillment within these standards. By judging Queequeg and finding that "Christian kindness has proved but hollow courtesy," Ishmael appears to adhere to the methodologies of the ethnologists while simultaneously critiquing the dominant societal paradigms (Melville 57). This example is, borrowing the words of Fruscione, "unexpectedly

complex—a racial condescension and yet a self-conscious irony that anticipates further encounters" (16). Considering, though, that "Melville's fiction often examines—even questions… systems of power" (in this case, the ethnological conclusions of white superiority) "particularly their ways of refocusing colonial and racial oppression on the bodies of non-whites," it would be safe to say that, flawed as it is, Ishmael's conclusions here work to serve a greater purpose (Fruscione 3). Ironically, Ishmael overcomes his inherent racial bias *through* the techniques used by such ethnologists. I argue that it is but the first step in the development of a new epistemology.

The next step is demonstrated as a dissolution of self through a shift in the form of the novel in the chapters "The Mast-Head" through "Midnight, Forecastle." "The Mast-Head" begins by describing the tradition of keeping a rotating watch for signs of whales upon the mast of the ship. However, as Ishmael philosophizes on this task, he makes a confession that he "kept but sorry guard," thinking about "the problem of the universe revolving in" him in the "thought engendering altitude" of the mast-head instead of watching for whale spouts (Melville 171–172). He is "lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie… by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last he loses his identity" (172). This "loss of identity" foreshadows the shift in the perspective of the narrator and the narrative format in the next five chapters.

After the conclusion of "The Mast-Head," the chapter "The Quarter-Deck" opens with the stage directions "(Enter Ahab: Then, all.)" (174). The form of the novel has shifted and, with it, the revelation of Ishmael losing his identity, which was mentioned in the previous chapter, comes to fruition as "The Quarter-Deck" contains no first-person narration. Instead, it presents itself as a third-person omniscient narrative that focuses on the thoughts and feelings of Ahab

and Starbuck. This is coupled with the allusions to the composition of a stage play that comes in the form of opening stage directions and with private "(Aside)"s from Ahab and Starbuck (179).

While the removal of Ishmael's "I" is a stark difference from the previous narrative style, his self-dissolution is emphasized further through the next chapters, "Sunset," "Dusk," and "First Night-Watch," as Ishmael's identity is completely left behind and is instead replaced by the first-person narration of Ahab, Starbuck, and Flask. The narrator who so strongly introduces themself to the reader at the outset of the novel with the famous phrase "Call me Ishmael" is now giving the audience a view into the interiority of others by dissolving his identity and occupying the consciousness of three other characters through the first-person perspective (Melville 3). Whereas Ahab deems his "fixed purpose…laid with iron rails, whereon [his] soul is grooved to run," Ishmael demonstrates to the audience that this is not the case for himself (183). Instead, Ishmael's purpose is "more fluid and flexible" (Mitchell 13).

While the introductory stage directions are continued in the chapters "Sunset," "Dusk," and "First Night-Watch," all pretenses of a consistent narrative format are dropped in the chapter "Midnight, Forecastle." Instead of just stage directions, the audience is presented with a cast list, setting, and lines. The entire chapter is written in the format of a play, detailing the rambunctious nature of the sailors' revelries following their oaths to hunt Moby Dick. Ishmael is not even mentioned as one of the sailors except for after the fact when, in the chapter titled "Moby Dick," he begins with the line "I, Ishmael, was one of that crew" (Melville 194). Even in that reintroduction it is clear just how far Ishmael's loss of identity went; it is almost as if Ishmael needed to remind himself, in writing, that he exists, that he was a part of these events, to bring an end to his dissolution of self. The shift from a first-person limited to a third-person omniscient

narration further illustrates Ishmael's developing epistemology by demonstrating to the reader the benefits of having a permeable self.

This may seem like an argument for a complete loss of corporeality. While the "daydreaming atop the mast has traditionally been read as an instance of disembodied spirituality and its final warning to 'ye Pantheists' [155] as a tongue-in-cheek critique of Emersonian transcendentalism," it is important for Ishmael to maintain the status of his body in these chapters, even if it seems to be absent, for his epistemology to come to fruition (Benedí 70). Benedí's article, "Navigating Dualism on the Mast-Head," reintroduces the body into the critical conversation of this chapter and pairs nicely with the close reading that I offer in this essay. Benedí's argument centers around the attention that Melville pays to Ishmael's senses and the position of his body. He argues that:

> Sensation thus points back to the perceiving body that recedes in its opening up to the world, disclosing a pervading corporeality, or materiality, that supports experience. 'The Mast-Head,' we might say, depicts an Ishmael ecstatically caught up in the world, whose body seems to have transcended its confines to become an ethereal substance devoted to metaphysical musings. However, careful attention to the sensory texture of Melville's descriptions challenges this view. Ishmael's bodily presence is pervasive, his apparent corporeal disappearance notwithstanding. (Benedí 71–72)

This inclusion of the body is important because it prevents Ishmael's burgeoning epistemology from roaming into the realm of transcendentalist idealism. By continuing to emphasize the presence of Ishmael's senses in the narration, Melville grounds his main character's cognitive and perceptional dissolution in a recognition that the body is still present. It does not argue for the idealistic and Romantic call to exceed one's bounds and enter a realm of Cartesian binaries

that negates and refutes the body but works to create "connections between bodily sensations and mental states" (Benedí 75).

Instead of a complete spiritual abandonment of the corporeal through a cognitive escape, Benedí argues that the "chapter represents a corporeality that is inseparable from perceptual, motor, and visceral processes: a body that is porous, with permeable boundaries, open to being affected by external forces and open to affecting the external world in turn" (Benedí 75). Ishmael's heightened sensory perception through bodily permeability allows him to become an omniscient narrator of the events he witnesses, and his recognition of a permeable self allows him to employ an almost perfect sense of empathy to join in the first-person experiences of Ahab, Starbuck, and Flask.

This development of a permeable body and self, and the culmination of Ishmael's epistemology, is most potently demonstrated in the chapter "A Squeeze of the Hand." "A Squeeze of the Hand" details Ishmael squeezing crystallized spermacetti oil with other sailors to return it to its liquid form. This activity, as with many of the other activities in the novel, inspires Ishmael to philosophical reflections. While describing the process of squeezing the crystallized oil, Ishmael claims the process made him feel as if he "almost melted into it" (Melville 456). To take the conclusions a step further, he says "that while bathing in that bath, [he] felt free from all ill-will, or petulance, or malice, of any sort" (456). By the end of the event, Ishmael's body is figuratively and spiritually dissolved in the sperm. He "unwittingly" squeezes his "co-laborers' hands… mistaking their hands for the gentle globules" (456). In an address to these "co-laborers," Ishmael calls them to "let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness" (456). This chapter of the novel represents the culmination of the journey begun in Ishmael's sharing a bed with Queequeg and

demonstrated through the chapters "The Mast-Head" through "Midnight – Forecastle." In the vats of spermacetti oil, Ishmaels allows his identity to completely dissolve, releasing his idea of a closed, contained self and practices the revelation of a permeable selfhood that interacts and engages with other bodies.

Sanborn also addresses this instance in his book *The Sign of the Cannibal*. He recognizes that in this case, "the model of selfhood structured by sight appears to give way to a model of selfhood in which the other joins with the surface of the body, rather than phantasmatically entering the eye" through exotic observational spectacle (136). However, Sanborn's analysis complicates this reading of "A Squeeze of the Hand" by claiming that Ishmael's "dream… is explicitly represented *as* a dream" (137). Unfortunately for Ishmael—and for the reader—"sperm squeezing may be pleasurable" but "is in the end a solitary pleasure" (Sanborn 138). Even "though it is clear that [Ishmael] *desires* intersubjective connectedness and that this desire signals a repudiation of the spectacle, it is not clear that this desire is *realized*, or even that it is realizable" (Sanborn 137). In other words, to Sanborn, this example simply proves that "touch operates in *Moby-Dick* more as the rhetorical negation of the ethic of the spectacle than as the separate ethic in itself" (138). Because Ishmael's realization of the permeability of self on the physical level is realistically impossible, the epistemology of self-dissolution and a permeable body is seemingly negated.

However, in turning back to Benedí's argument, we find that the logic of the novel itself allows us to operate within the confines of an unrealistic dissolution. Ishmael's enactment of hypersensitivity allows him to fuse with the *Pequod* as he "portrays the mast-stilts as extensions of his own limbs" (Benedí 73). While the action of this permeable self is impossible to participate in literally, Melville's writing asks us to suspend our disbelief multiple times

throughout *Moby-Dick* and act as if it is possible. As Fruscione claims, there are multiple instances in the novel in which "Melville fuses—both physically and metaphorically—the diverse bodies of *Moby-Dick*'s principals" as represented by the *Pequod* (5–6). The ship is often described "As a 'body' containing virtually all of the text's other bodies" and "is defined by its hybridity and surface darkness," creating "a single body composed of thirty smaller bodies (both white and 'other')" (Fruscione 8–9). Another example is in Ahab's perception of the crew. There are multiple instances where "Ahab sees his crew and ship as physical and figurative extensions of himself" (Fruscione 20). In these instances, bodies *are* permeable and fused together. Operating in the logic of the novel then, the figurative and at times literal fusion of bodies is not impossible but often employed, at least for the sake of narrative and philosophical cohesion.

The function of this literary technique works as the perfect vehicle for Melville to establish an alternative perspective to that of the cultural hegemony that he faced: Ishmael's character arc culminates in an epistemology of a permeable body and self-hood. This epistemology is diametrically opposed to that of the nineteenth-century ethnologists as represented by Ahab. The nineteenth-century obsession with bodies is portrayed through the perspectives of both Ahab and Ishmael. The above section on "A Bosom Friend" demonstrates how Ishmael can be characterized as representing the observational and categorical mindset of ethnologists. For instance, scholars like Samuel Otter suggest "Ishmael's ardor and Ahab's hatred, knowing and killing, will come for a time in the narrative to seem more alike than different in terms of their effects on other bodies" (136–137). Similarly, for Sanborn and Fruscione, the problem of both Ishmael and Ahab is their constant observation of the bodies of "others" (Fruscione 13–14; Sanborn 130). However, while the quests of both Ahab and Ishmael exhibit themselves in similar manners (engaging in whaling, studying the bodies of whales and

non-white characters in the novel obsessively), Ishmael's shifts dynamically (as seen above) while Ahab's remains static as a clear representation of the faulty perceptions of nineteenth-century ethnologists.

It is clear from the outset that Ahab's quest is one fraught with ill tidings. From the reactions of the first mate, Starbuck, who, upon witnessing the swearing in of all the mates to Ahab's quest, "paled, and turned, and shivered" (Melville 181), to Ishmael's own descriptions of the "admonitions and warnings!" (179) that did naught to compel the crew, the reader can see that the hunt for Moby Dick will not end pleasantly. While on the surface it seems to simply be a quest for "vengeance on a dumb brute," the true nature of Ahab's monomania reveals more about his own identity, ego, and selfhood. This monomania becomes a subject of contemplation for the novel itself, in chapters like "Moby Dick" and "The Whiteness of the Whale," and also leads to a long-standing tradition of scholarly writing concerning its parallel to contemporary ethnology.

For scholars like Otter, Ahab is propelled by a "drive to expose the whale" and his own "corrosive vision of forces," that inevitably "distort[s] the features of others," much like the phrenologists and physiognomists of the nineteenth century (Otter 136). In the case of scholars like Doran Larson, the quest is rooted more closely in an epistemology that seeks the breakdown of the philosophical and analogical center. Ahab's quest, then, is "to reclaim that indistinguishably material and figural pre-seventeenth century body… to place man back at Creation's phenomenal, existential center" (20). Larson argues that in his quest to establish himself as the single referent used to make sense of the universe, Ahab does in fact become "the one palpable body" or "the central referent of… the text of *Moby-Dick*" (28).

These two interpretations of Ahab's drive are synthesized when viewed in relation to nineteenth century classification practices. For instance, in Nott's and Gliddon's book, *Types of*

Mankind, the "effort to prove that moral and intellectual character are fused to physical characteristics, and that there are permanent human types" demonstrates the contemporary drive of ethnologists to establish a codified system with which to categorize the world (Otter 119). In other words, they are seeking a single referent with which to judge the rest of mankind. Not surprisingly, they place Caucasians at the pinnacle of this classification, and, in this way, make the race that they belong to the "central referent" from which the rest of humanity can be judged (Larson 28). Therefore, the analogical quest that Larson describes and ethnological quest that Otter studies are married through the incessant narcissism that nineteenth-century ethnologists possessed, and Ahab represents.

This epistemology is the current paradigm that Melville is operating against and, as such, the one that is antithetical to the epistemology that Ishmael comes to represent. To reiterate, Ishmael's development culminates in an epistemology of a permeable body and self-hood. In presenting the reader with these two epistemologies and the fate of the characters who represent them, *Moby-Dick* demonstrates what happens when one is adopted over the other. By presenting Ishmael as the lone survivor of the *Pequod*'s journey the readers are left with the conclusion that in order to survive the ordeal of contemporary racial bias, at least as presented by Melville, they must become like Ishmael and accept that bodies and identities are permeable as opposed to the case of Ahab, whose inclination is to create and shore up boundaries of self-hood and make them "real." How are readers expected to survive and operate in the world that Melville is critiquing? By adopting Ishmael's realization and development of an epistemology that permits permeable bodies and self-hood.

The proposed epistemology is presented through Ishmael's development and the shift in narrative format. However, I propose that one of the reasons the book suffered such

contemporary critical failure is because of this narrative shift. The shifting format of the book encourages readers to look through the lens of Ishmael's epistemology. By diverting from typical and understood plot structures and novel formats, the book emphasizes the shifting and dynamic truth about identity. As Ishmael shifts narrative formats, at times seeming to completely dissolve himself into a state of hyper-sensitivity and omniscient awareness, the readers are taken on this journey with him. Readers who engage with *Moby-Dick* expecting a predictable format are grossly disappointed. They must develop and change their epistemologies as they read, accepting the permeability and change of the body of the text as they engage with it. Either the reader accepts the meandering, discursive manner of the narrator with the simple pleasure of exploring the subject and "survives" the novel, like Ishmael, or they content themselves to race towards an end that will allow them to conquer the novel, like Ahab. In the very *form* and *composition* of the novel itself, *Moby-Dick* offers a critique of nineteenth-century bodily obsession.

The paradoxical activity the novel necessitates from the reader that causes *Moby-Dick* to be received so poorly. By presenting readers with two diametrically opposed epistemologies through Ahab and Ishmael, and by necessitating that the reader adopt an acceptance of the shifting identity of *the text* through its fluid form, Melville is creating an impossible situation. In order to finish the novel and fully realize the proposed epistemology, the reader must, in the very act of reading, accept "meaning [as] inherently unstable and artificial, a product of the perceiver's will or desire projected out upon an ever-changing environment" (Mitchell 13). To even fully see the fault of their inclinations represented through Ahab they would have to engage with Ishmael in accepting the body and the self's permeability. The novel operates under the assumption that a culture that despises the permeability of self and body would engage on good faith with a text that necessitates such a mindset to even get through it. But, while this mindset

and technique might not have sat well with contemporary audiences, it has marginally better success in a post-modern mindset.

The practice that *Moby-Dick* asks readers to undergo while reading is not only comfortable but encouraged by a post-modern audience. As an example, let us look at some of the theories of psycho-analysis as proposed by Jacques Lacan. Lacan's speech, "Some Reflections on the Ego," offers a parallel and an explanation to the actions of ethnologists and characters in *Moby-Dick* as studied by the critics such as Sanborn and Fruscione. First, as Lacan argues that the psychoanalysts "view is that the essential function of the ego is very nearly that systematic refusal to acknowledge reality" so too does *Moby-Dick* (12). According to Sanborn, in reminding readers of some of the "savage" practices that white culture participated in,

Melville calls "out the secret knowledge that whites are as 'savage,' if not more so, than the racial others they define themselves against" (133). In a similar vein, Lacan claim that "the cerebral cortex functions like a mirror," and "the subject" relates "his own body in terms of his identification with an *imago*" (13) or an idealized image of the self, is reminiscent of Fruscione's conclusion that "Ishmael's turning the 'other' into a spectacle implicitly affirms his own 'civilized' whiteness" (15). In these cases, Ishmael and the characters of the novel operate in a way that matches Lacan's conclusions on the ego, utilizing their rationality to deny a truth about culture and society. If the critical conversation surrounding the critique of ethnology is to be believed, some of the content of *Moby-Dick* was anticipating conclusions that would be made in the post-modern period. While I am not arguing that Melville realized philosophical and psychological conclusions a century before his time, or even that *this* is why the novel suffered critical failure in its original publication, I am arguing that contemporary readers are more

comfortable engaging with the novel because it operates in a way that matches more recent philosophical and psychological paradigms.

In operating within such a framework, one that hinges on the proposed epistemology that bodies and identities are permeable, evidenced in multiple instances through Ishmael's character development, *Moby-Dick* offers a critique of the nineteenth-century obsession with the body and need for a solid self. Additionally, the employment of the novel's proposed solution could have contributed to its lack of contemporary success. Lastly, Melville's critique of racial bias and Ishmael's epistemology offered readers an anticipation of more modern ideas about the ego and the self that audiences today can more easily relate to. In a world that seems eager to encourage divisiveness and find any excuse to deem someone as "other," it might do well to revisit an epistemology that emphasizes empathy and champions the importance of dissolving a few of your boundaries in order to understand someone else a bit better.

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Essay

Anna McBane

Reading as Spiritual Discipline:

A Hope for Transformation Amidst Modernity

As Christians find their way through the doors of a church, they are often welcomed by an overwhelming sensation of peace. The moments when bodies kneel and heads bow are marked with a somewhat mysterious reverence. Such feelings, however, are often fleeting, as the human senses are bombarded with the persistent commotion of modernity that lies outside the sanctuary doors. The way that humans live has radically shifted throughout history, and today, the persistent hum of religion and spirituality has been drowned out by the jarring roar of modernity. Since this upheaval, great thinkers have contemplated the plagues of modernity.

Friedrich Schiller, a German playwright and philosopher, in *Letters Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man*, expresses his reservations about modernity and the rise of utility over artistic thinking. He writes,

> Utility is the great idol of the time, to which all powers do homage, and all subjects are subservient. In this great balance of utility, the spiritual service of art has no weight, and, deprived of all encouragement, it vanishes from the noisy Vanity Fair of our time. The very spirit of philosophical inquiry itself robs the imagination of one promise after another, and the frontiers of art are narrowed, in proportion as the limits of science are enlarged. (Schiller 3)

In comparing the landscape of our 21st-century world to that of the medievals, there is a drastic

increase of fast-paced productivity and a downfall in intimate connection and attention. In light of this alarming and deeply saddening epiphany, one may ask what to do about the problem of modernity. The answer has been outlined in scripture and by scholars for years and it is quite simple in nature, but sometimes incredibly difficult to accomplish in our world of productivity. Spiritual disciplines can be a balm for the wounds of modernity.

There are several disciplines such as prayer, solitude, worship, fasting, and studying the Bible, and I believe that the mindset and sanctity behind these practices can be applied to other facets of our everyday life. Reading, for example, can be viewed as a spiritual discipline and likened to practicing adoration. When understood in this light, reading can offer Christians in our 21st-century world of chaos a moment for contemplation, reflection, and communion with Christ.

Some may say that the world we live in today was immensely gifted by modernity and its accompanying technological and supposed societal advancements, but many scholars would refute this by underlining the places where such a movement has left our world in a state of deprivation. Modernity has brought with it a longing for people to "find themselves," while the world of the medievals was rooted in the assurance of where their identity lay, with God. Modernity spurred a man-centered mindset, rather than one focused on the Creator of the universe. A major factor that contributes to the secularization of our modern society is the increased speed of living. In a world that hinges upon efficiency and productivity, there is little room for the type of contemplation and transformation that can emerge from a slower paced society. Sin itself has a higher propensity to slip out of souls when bodies are running too fast to recognize their own depravity. The yearning of a human's heart in the medieval world was perhaps more rightly ordered in comparison to the twisted longings imposed by speed-induced

secularism. Medievals reached for the hand of God amidst their everyday living. The modern influx of innovation and exciting pastimes, however, replaced the slow and consistent rhythms of the Church.

The root of how people, whether modern or medieval, conceive of time can be boiled down to where our attention finds rest. In noticing the troublesome ways that time has been plagued in our modern world, the words of Richard Foster are just as illuminating as they are tragic. He writes, "In contemporary society our Adversary majors in three things: noise, hurry and crowds. If he keeps us engaged in 'muchness' and 'manyness,' he will rest satisfied" (Foster 15).

Although this sentiment contains few words, its weight is suffocating. The pace of modernity and its plethora of items that are vying for our attention serve as conduits for our interior and exterior lives to be stripped of holiness. Wall Street is the devil's playground, and his joyous cackles can be felt reverberating across every corner of our modern world. In order to deaden such a sound, one's attention must be turned towards the hum of heaven. Spiritual disciplines provide aid to those striving to accomplish this.

The purpose of spiritual disciplines is ultimately spiritual growth. This growth can be marked by an increased communion with the Lord and an internal sense of transformation that bleeds out into how one lives as an embodied being. Although growth is possible, humans will never reach a complete sense of understanding. The gift of the spiritual disciplines is that "the process of 'becoming' is the actual goal…The spiritual disciplines are intentional, volitional activities toward that end" (Carr-Chellman and Kroth 25). The spiritual disciplines can in themselves foster growth in one area of life or another and even encourage another discipline to be highlighted or urged. It is in this building upon one another that one might begin to experience transformation, as one's life is being shaped by such practices. Furthermore, the most powerful

conduit for transformation is not merely the practices themselves, but the communion with God that emerges. It is through undeserving grace that the Lord transforms his people. A fundamental part of the spiritual disciplines and the key to their transformative nature, then, is one's ability to learn.

Learning is a key facet of human development, and it encompasses several areas of growth, not only those which are contained within a classroom or seminar. Humans can learn emotionally, relationally and spiritually, among other avenues. Carr-Chellman and Kroth express the connection to spiritual disciplines by stating, "The spiritual disciplines are portals into an area of profound learning, leading to depth of spiritual understanding and living. They open the door for those who want to learn more about their relationship with the divine" (28). These practices require many of the human faculties and they greatly sharpen one's attention and inner dialogue. It is skills like these that can be fashioned to foster communion with the divine and transformation. When examining profound learning in light of the desire to practice spiritual disciplines, an instinctive turn can be made towards the practice of reading.

When exploring how reading can be viewed as a spiritual discipline, the most important aspect to highlight is that it requires attention. Rightly ordered attention is what deems reading a vessel for spiritual transformation; without the correct alignment, it is merely a secular practice. Simone Weil specifically provides her readers with an understanding of how academic practices can foster communion with the Divine. In her words, "Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object" (Weil 111). Attention in light of the noise of modernity, however, can seem almost impossible, and often even if one is able to place their attention on something, it is only a fraction of the attention that is required of spiritual disciplines. Our attention is divided and spread across our never-ending

to-do lists, marked by efficiency and aimed at secular success. Felicia Wu Song sheds light on this disheartening aspect of our modern world when she writes,

We will never have enough time or energy to adequately address and respond to everything that asks for our attention. As such, our consciousness gradually becomes accustomed to being in a state of always catching up, and our attempts to manage our time only serve to amplify our growing sense of constantly living in a state of time poverty. The anxiety that this induces drives us further into the arms of the lie that claims there are no costs to fragmenting our attention through multitasking (94).

In light of this, reading as a spiritual discipline offers those that seek divine communion and transformation an avenue to practice a different type of attention, marked by the luminaries of medievalism. This type of attention is infused with effort. Weil writes, "Every time that a human being succeeds in making an effort of attention with the sole idea of increasing his grasp of truth, he acquires a greater aptitude for grasping it, even if his effort produces no visible fruit" (Weil 107). In continuing to compare reading to other spiritual disciplines, it is crucial to note the importance of joy and its role in transforming these practices from mere academic activities into means for grace and transformation. Weil expands this notion by stating that, "It is the part played by joy in our studies that makes them a preparation for spiritual life, for desire directed toward God is the only power capable of raising the soul" (Weil 110). Although reading may seem like a simple task to engage with, it is capable of fostering the most complex reflections, insightful whispers from the Holy Spirit, and profound moments of transformation. Wu Song echoes this when she writes, "No matter how modest they may seem at first, small commitments can help redirect our loves so that we are more attuned to the hiddenness of God and capable of welcoming his holy interruptions with a self-forgetfulness that makes adoration possible" (Wu

Song 99). It is through this type of effortful attention that one not only becomes aware of the Divine, but also their relation to it as embodied souls housed in a cavern of flesh and bones. From this realization stems embodied theology and the various modes of living that emerge in light of the Eucharist. The spiritual disciplines require a special type of attention that elicits, in most cases, a posture of adoration and confession. Reading, when practiced in the right manner, can produce this type of posture. It can mirror these spiritual practices and serve as a means for transformation even if it is not conducted while kneeling in Mass gazing at a monstrance on the altar. There are altars all around if one knows where to look and what lens to behold them with.

Although reading seems like a mundane activity, the transformational energy that courses through it begs to be attended to. Similar to other ordinary tasks that may be deemed as liturgies, the almost subconscious rhythm of reading that we engage in everyday can be a means for communion with the Divine and, when practiced in the right light, considered a spiritual discipline. However, the grandeur that encompasses literature and the art of reading is better captured in words that aren't limited to its technical skills. Reading serves as a window for humans to peer at life through. By reading stories, our eyes are transformed to see life from a different perspective. C.S. Lewis expresses a desire for this kind of varied vision in his essay "We Demand Windows," stating, "We want to see with others' eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own...We demand windows" (51). It is through the capacity for realigned vision that an encounter with the Divine can emerge. When held in light of this, reading can be described as a spiritual discipline. Jessica Hooten Wilson argues that "Reading is a spiritual discipline akin to fasting and prayer and one that trains you in the virtues, encourages your sanctification, and elicits your love for those noble, admirable and beautiful things of which St. Paul writes in his Letter to the Philippians" (62). Practicing reading

as a spiritual discipline, however, also requires the utmost respect and care, especially in our modern world where so many of the daily activities we engage in have a capacity for profanity rather than sanctity.

If reading is to be considered a spiritual discipline, it must be practiced within a religious worldview. In order to hold such a discipline with respect, the mystery it reveals and the transformative power it holds should be recognized and dwelled upon. Griffiths expands on this idea, saying, "Reading for Christians must be understood as a transformative spiritual discipline if it is to remain Christian, to be properly articulated with the Christian life" (46). The type of transformation that a Christian should be striving for can be spurred through reading when one is willing to hold the worldly reality while still recognizing the divine mystery that lurks within it. In one of her essays regarding the nature and aim of fiction, Flannery O'Connor writes, "The type of mind that can understand good fiction is not necessarily the educated mind, but it is at all times the kind of mind that is willing to have its sense of mystery deepened by contact with reality, and its sense of reality deepened by contact with mystery" (79). The history of Christian thought around reading is filled with echoes of the importance of recognizing the divine and mysterious in our world. When seeking to practice reading as a spiritual discipline, therefore, we must prioritize this search for and recognition of the Divine. Griffiths highlights a specific mode of reading called Victoriane reading, based on the works of Hugh of St. Victor. He states that "Victoriane readers read with the knowledge and love of God always before them as the point and purpose of their reading" (Griffiths 45). Stemming from this, most often the pieces of writing that are of the world are meant to be read in light of the canonical writings. In other words, all literature is meant to be read under the scope of the divine scriptures.

When practiced as a spiritual discipline, reading prepares humans to not only catch

glimmers of the sacred, but also to encounter the divine scriptures themselves. Wilson expands upon this notion of reading's preparatory nature, saying, "We are not self-contained entities with the ability to unpack scripture and all its mysteries. Rather we should look to other books the way that we seek spiritual teachers, models and leaders in our faith to guide us" (27). From here one can glean the purpose behind viewing reading as a spiritual discipline.

From one viewpoint, the most important purpose of practicing reading as a spiritual discipline is to train one how to read the scriptures well by providing Christians with the tools to view each part of the Bible in its respective genre. Erik Hoeke states, "Reading books of history, poetry, rhetoric, and narrative trains us to read and interpret the same genres found in scripture. And by reading scripture, we become more capable of seeing God's beauty revealed in nonreligious texts" (92). Practicing reading in a spiritual manner can foster deeper insights about God and the world as we interact with the Bible and other texts. It is important to practice reading as a spiritual discipline because it provides those who engage in it a more profound understanding of the human experience on earth. In "Why Do We Read Fiction," Robert Penn Warren expands on this, writing, "We are creatures of words, and if we did not have words, we would have no inner life. Only because we have words can we envisage and think about experience. We find our human nature through words" (11). He does not shy away, however, from how difficult the task of unraveling the human experience can be. Dealing with reality is almost never comfortable, and in our modern world it is far too easy to distract ourselves from both our personal and our global realities. Reading, however, "reconciles us with reality" (10) when it is practiced as a spiritual discipline. Warren also notes that fiction gives humans a place to explore the difficult emotions that accompany reality without repercussions. This is illuminated when he says, "And fiction, too, gives us the fresh, uninhibited opportunity to vent

the rich, emotional charge–tears, laughter, tenderness, sympathy, hate, love and irony–that is stored up in and is short-circuited in the drowse of the accustomed" (2). Reading as a spiritual discipline offers people the ability to sit in their human finitude with grace.

In wrapping up the discussion on the purpose behind spiritual reading, it is important to note that reading practiced in this manner not only offers understanding but urges action. Reading "tropologically" aims at searching for the moral purpose in a text and then applying it to one's life. Tropological reading can serve as a way to live in light of the Eucharist, as in consuming the Eucharist, we are called to not only receive, but to participate with Christ in his compassion. Wilson provides insight into tropological reading when she writes, "To imitate what you read is a form of tropological reading. A tropological reader interprets the book in how she lives a text. She does not merely process the words and then forget them, but she becomes in action what she has read" (71). It is here that one can notice the importance of not only having eyes to see words on a page, but the beauty of having a body that can equip humans to come in closer contact with God.

Reading as a spiritual discipline can reveal truth and spur people to behold the wondrous mystery that rests behind every letter written on a page. Like adoration, the effortful attention to the Divine in reading postures humans to behold Him, mirroring the act of communing with Christ in adoration. The Catechism of the Catholic Church provides a definition of adoration which states:

> Adoration is the first attitude of man acknowledging that he is a creature before his Creator. It exalts the greatness of the Lord who made us and the almighty power of the Saviour who sets us free from evil. Adoration is homage of the spirit to the 'King of Glory', respectful silence in the presence of the 'ever greater' God (CCC 2628).

The mindset behind adoration can easily be transferred to reading as a spiritual discipline. Reading aimed at communion with the Divine requires contemplation as well as a recognition of humanity's finitude and brokenness in comparison to the omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent nature of God. In noticing these characteristics of God, a posture of adoration is rightly due. This revelation opens our eyes to see the divine beauty and spurs us to linger and behold what lies before us. Wilson adds to this sentiment by stating, "When we appreciate the beautiful, we are living up to our calling as beholders" (55). The object of our adoration should be none other than Christ, and such a turn of our attention is imperative in our modern world. Aligning our eyes with those of our Savior can be urged through reading. Wilson comments on this when she writes, "In reality, the most lovely stories will show us thousands of reflections of Christ in the faces of dozens of characters" (43). As image bearers, human faces can resemble the face of Jesus. Adoration, contemplation and tropological spiritual reading, however, spur humans to resemble the Divine in more than just image, but in action. Reading as a spiritual disciple urges transformation.

In noticing the reality of the modern world, dismay may blanket all those who are searching for transformation. The task of trying to thoughtfully unravel the intricacies of human existence with the goal of understanding the chief end of man is almost impossible without rightly ordered guidance. Spiritual disciplines, however, can provide relief from this weight. It is through practicing embodied living in light of the Eucharist that one's ordinary actions can be deemed as sacred. Mundane moments can be conduits for spiritual transformation when they are practiced under the right heart posture and when effortful attention is directed at that goal. It is clear that an important aspect of practicing spiritual disciplines is having one's attention directed towards God. It is through our contemplative gazes up at Him that we are given insight into his

true nature. These insights spur our adoration and should influence our daily practices. It is through our actions, words, expression of love and care, and sheer presence that humans illuminate the beauty of the Divine and the work of the Incarnation and atonement.

Through this analysis, it is evident that when reading is practiced as a spiritual discipline, it can be likened to adoration. As Wilson writes, "Just as our prayer life transforms our activities into acts of love, so our tropological reading transfigures the words we've loved into works of love in our lives. By the spiritual practice of reading, we embody the way of Christ" (124). Furthermore, it can serve as a means for slowness of mind amidst the loud chaos of modernity and it can foster communion with the Divine. Wilson also provides further insight by expressing how those practicing spiritual disciplines are drawn into closer communion with the Lord. She states, "Reading begins the journey or ascent to virtue, but the practice of a life well lived must follow… we practice what we read, and this operation of a good life moves us toward the source of virtue, God" (122). The spiritual transformation and personal growth one seeks can only be initiated while in the presence of God. In striving to understand our human existence, we must begin rewriting the narratives that have been spun by secular, modern minds. Through an incarnational lens, we can begin to glean the importance of words and flesh. Jesus was the Word incarnate. As humans, we are living narratives and creative storytellers; our bodies speak even when our voices are inaudible. Engaging in spiritual disciplines, especially reading, can serve as conduits for us to return to a medieval way of thinking and for us to ultimately be transformed.

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Essay

Juliana Mink

“a whiskey priest like you”:

The Grotesque Theology of *The Power and the Glory*

Abstract

Since its release, Graham Greene’s 1940s novel *The Power and the Glory* has generated polarized and extreme responses. The negative reviews mostly react to the novel’s intertwining of the grotesque and the divine. But while it may initially seem that the Whiskey Priest’s imago Christi role and the Bakhtinian grotesque imagery both surrounding him and characterizing him are incongruous, I argue the two are not only coexistent, but fundamentally intertwined to exhibit kenotic theology. I will establish the parallels between the priest and Christ and how the grotesqueness the priest embodies manifests his imago Christi role, demonstrating the emptying of God into human form and all the bodily implications the incarnation entails.

Introduction

Did Jesus Christ defecate? When I had this question growing up in a religiously conservative household, I experienced a simultaneous sense of shame for even wondering if such holiness could include such humanness. I do not think I am alone in this feeling. For some, the mere ideation of Christ defecating produces a visceral, perhaps even adverse reaction. Is that sacrilegious? Is it wrong? Or is not something like defecation a fact of human existence, and subsequently a fact of Christ’s human existence, according to kenotic theology’s implications of the incarnation, (kenosis describing the self-emptying of Christ into human form and the

humbling transferring of divinity into humanity)? Like many others, I react strongly to the conflation of the divine with everything that being human entails. This reaction precisely emulates many of the reactions to Graham Greene's novel *The Power and the Glory*.

Because Greene was a Catholic writer, or rather, in his own words, "a Catholic who happens to write," (Allain 159) Greene happened to write *The Power and the Glory* in 1940, inspired by his travels through Mexico and somewhat adapting his previous auto-biographical book, *The Lawless Roads* (1939). Many critics at the time of *The Power and the Glory*'s publication and since have deemed the work one of Greene's best. Following an outlawed priest journeying through an impoverished Mexican landscape, the novel is "concise, vivid, elegantly structured, sharply intelligent, thematically rich, philosophically and theologically searching, and emotionally moving" (Watts 98). Greene's language describes the priest, the poverty-stricken people, and the desolate setting with "strange vividness", or, as I claim, a strange grotesqueness (Watts 107).

The novel contains two central attentions: the divine and the grotesque. The divine is emulated primarily through the imago Christi of the priest. Imago Christi simply means "in the person of Christ" and as a priest, the protagonist's purpose is to emulate Christ in his mediation between the earthly and heavenly realms. Interwoven throughout this story of an imago Christi priest is the literary form of the grotesque. As defined by Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, the grotesque is that which is gross and bodily, an aesthetic fascination with the ugly or bizarre. Grotesqueness is proliferated throughout the pages of the book, characterizing nearly every aspect of the material world in *The Power and the Glory*. The seemingly opposed forces of the divine and grotesque in the novel are succinctly demonstrated in the other characters' pseudo

name for the protagonist, the "Whiskey Priest", which references the priest's drunken, bodily nature and his priestly occupation.

Greene's tainting of what should be a holy, Christ-reflecting priest with profane grotesqueness predictably produced polarized reactions to the novel. I believe the negative reactions reveal an implied conceptual division between the grotesque and the divine existing in the readers' minds. Furthermore, I claim the negative reactions of the novel lie in the reader's misunderstanding of Greene's theology that not only allows for the intertwining of the profane and the holy but depends on it. In this paper, I argue that while Whiskey Priest's imago Christi role and the grotesque imagery that surrounds him and characterizes him may seem incongruous, the two are not only coexistent but fundamentally intertwined to exhibit kenotic theology. First, I will analyze how the priest's ministry, life, and death mirror Christ's, establishing his imago Christi role. Then I will explicate the priest's grotesqueness as essential to his ministry in and to a grotesque world. Because of his grotesque nature, the priest fully manifests his imago Christi role by reflecting the kenosis of Christ.

Reception

The negative reviews of *The Power and the Glory* demonstrate the perceived incompatibility of the divine and the grotesque in the novel. While the reception of Greene's book was divided between admiration and disgust, extremity and conviction characterize both the good and bad reviews. Reviewing the novel's reception history, Anderson writes, "Nearly all readers use emotionally charged language when responding to Greene's novel. Those who dismiss [*The Power and the Glory*] do so scathingly, those who praise it do so effusively" (27). Most negative criticism concludes that Greene is either a "Catholic propagandist" or a "bad Catholic" (Anderson 31). The "bad Catholic" responses reflected the readers' shock of Greene's

ostensibly sacrilegious religious depictions. Turnell exemplifies this response, claiming *The Power and the Glory* is melodramatic and only uses its religiosity to produce an emotional response (25-27). He concludes that the novel fixated on the "lowliness" of humanity, the "desecration of God's image", and "'squalid' martyrdom" (Turnell 31). Kermode also reflects on Greene's depiction of God, calling it "intolerable" and undermining Greene's religiosity (34). Likewise, Atkins scoffs at the thought of Greene being a propagandist and argues the novel expresses "irremediable human defeat" (184). The negative reactions to Greene's theological presentation pair with the unsettled reactions to *The Power and the Glory*'s setting. Anderson quotes a review that bemoans Greene's "relentless" portrayal of the "world as absurd, grotesque, and deeply disappointing" (Barret qtd. Anderson 75) and another from a Mrs. Kearney, who wrote she felt "scruples" after reading the book and had to go to confession (32). The most infamous reaction to the novel is the Holy Office's censoring of the book post-publication. As Anderson cites, "The official statement that, though the aim of the novel is the elevation of God's glory above "man's wretchedness," it is exactly this wretchedness that "appears to carry the day," doing damage to the priesthood" (32). Many religious readers, including Pope Pius XII, were horrified at Greene's "desecration of the sacraments", "physically and morally wretched world", and the "drunkard priest with an illegitimate child" (Anderson 32). The reactions are either appalled at Greene's desecration of God's image, the grotesqueness of the characters and world, or both. While Anderson concludes the negative responses are characterized by a distaste of *The Power and the Glory*'s obsession with suffering, I argue the responses overall criticize Greene's inappropriate intermingling of religious elements (God, priest, and sacraments) with, in Barret's words, an absurd and grotesque world. However, what these critics perceive as an

inharmonious and even inappropriate conglomeration of divine and grotesque forms is integral for the priest's mirroring of the kenosis of Christ.

Priest

The "bad Catholic" critiques of the novel misunderstand the Bakhtinian elements and their essentiality for the priest's mirroring of Christ's kenotic incarnation. Before analyzing the novel's grotesqueries, I will establish the priest's role as imago Christi. The priest's ministry mirrors Christ's: the necessity and foreshadowing of the priest's death, the decentralized nature of his death, and the allusion to his resurrection from death into heaven all reflect Christ's ministry, life, death, and resurrection as represented in the Judeo-Christian Bible.

The novel abounds with Christian imagery. Subsequently, much of the critical conversation focuses on the priest's representation of Christian themes. Since many of the characters can be read as religious allegories, the priest himself becomes "representative not only his Church but of the cumulative wisdom of the past… a consistent allegory on the theme of the Everyman," an idea that Sampson uses as a catalyst for his analysis of the novel's Catholicism (Devitis 77). Greene himself described *The Power and the Glory* as "more like a seventeenth-century play in which the actors symbolize a virtue of a vice, pride, pity, etc. The priest and the lieutenant remained themselves to the end; the priest, for all his recollection of periods of his life when he was different, never changed" (Allian 136). However, as both Bergonzi and Valverde note, Greene's comparison of his novel to a Renaissance morality play is reductive. The mixed stylistic levels of *The Power and the Glory* disallow the morality play's one-dimensional figures representing forces of good and evil in formal, stilted verse (Bergonzi 111). Bergonzi pertinently contends that the complexity of the language reflects the emotional complexity of the priest's character, precluding a flattening of the priest into a purely allegorical figure. At the same time,

the Whiskey Priest does represent universal realities through both his imago Christi role and his grotesqueness. His role as a priest necessarily reflects Christ, but his grotesqueness associates him with the material world and the depraved characters within it. Ultimately, this string of relations—Christ to priest, priest to people—connects people to Christ. To do that, the priest must reflect Christ himself.

The foreshadowing of the priest's death parallels him to Christ, as Christ's death was self-prophesied. Like Christ, the priest's sacrificing his life is inevitable and essential for his ministry. Moments of Christ foreshadowing his death frequently propel the plot forward in the Bible's Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Matthew 16:21-28, 17:22, and 20:17-19; Luke 9:22-27; Mark 8:31-33, 9:30-32, and 10:32-34 all exemplify Jesus's prediction of his final sacrifice.[1] The moments of foreshadowing and prophecy intuit the import of Christ's death. While the gospels explicitly foreshadow Christ's death, the foreshadowing of the priest's death is implicitly suggested in the novel.

The prose ominously anticipates the priest's death through symbols of fatality, specifically vultures and coffins. As the priest makes his first appearance in the novel, "A vulture hung there, an observer," watching the priest. A few lines later, "the vulture moved a little, like the black hand of a clock" (Greene 11). The vulture's dietary preference for deceased animals, its careful observance of the priest, and its foreboding reference to time all imply the priest's imminent demise. The vulture's presence during the first encounter with the priest forecloses his future even before chapter two. At the end of the novel, the vultures return to witness the priest's death. An early character, Mr. Tench, "and the vultures looked down together on the little whitewashed courtyard" as the priest is being executed (Greene 220). The vultures here symbolize the fulfillment of their prophecy. Another implicit prediction of the priest's death

occurs as he enters the town where he will be imprisoned and executed. As he travels into the city, the rain "came perpendicularly down, with a sort of measured intensity, as if it were driving nails into a coffin lid" (117). Not only does the rain mirror the nailing of a coffin lid, suggesting the priest's impending demise, but the rhythmic and measured rain signifies the predictability and predetermined nature of his fateful end. The implicit foretelling of the priest's death also signals the significance of the priest's death. Like Christ, the constant reminders of the priest's foreboding execution establish the expectation of a climactic and meaningful end to his life.

However, like Christ's death, the true culmination of the priest's ministry is not at the end of his earthly life, but at his resurrection into the afterlife. The oddly anticlimactic depiction of the priest's death shifts the reader's focus away from his death and towards his rebirth into heaven, establishing his role as imago Christi. Despite the novel primarily being told through the priest's perspective, during his death, the point of view abruptly shifts to Mr. Tench, a minor secondary character from chapter one. Tench watches the execution through a window, noting "a small man" coming out of a side door. Then "there was a single shot…and he saw the officer stuffing his gun back into his holster, and the little man was a routine heap beside the wall—something unimportant which had to be cleared away" (Greene 220). Not only does the odd switch in perspective connote the anticlimactic nature of the priest's death, but the language describing his execution also conveys the mundaneness of the death. The surprisingly cold objectivity with which the death is portrayed depersonalizes the death and undermines the emotional weight of the scene. Consequentially, the scene of the priest's death is "routine," and his body is simply "something to be cleared away"; his death seems wholly unimportant. Despite the foreshadowing of his death building anticipation for his death, the scene of the priest's death is anticlimactic and depersonalized.

The death scene of the priest mirrors Christ's death as it was superseded by his resurrection, the goal of his ministry on earth. Likewise, the priest's death is reduced to a means to the end of ultimate resurrection. The priest's anticlimactic death allows room for his climactic resurrection post-death. A dream he has the night before his execution alludes to his coming rebirth in heaven.

> He had a curious dream. He dreamed he was sitting at a café table in front of the high altar of the cathedral. About six dishes were spread before him, and he was eating hungrily… but he had a sense that when he had finished all of them, he would have the best dish of all. The priest passed to and fro before the altar saying Mass, but he took no notice: the service no longer seemed to concern him… he sat on, just waiting, paying no attention to the God over the alter, as though that were a God for other people and not for him. (210)

The dream depicts the completion of the priest's life and ministry and the incompletion of his spiritual journey. The Mass "no longer seemed to concern him," revealing that for the priest, the practice and performance of religion are no longer necessary. Additionally, the God above the altar is for "other people and not for him" because he no longer needs a replica of God; he is about to encounter God. The priest's neglect of the Mass and the altar God implies the completion of the priest's ministerial duties. However, while the dream alludes to the accomplishment of the priest's earthly occupation, it still embodies a feeling of anticipation for something not yet come. This is best demonstrated in his interaction with Coral Fellows, the little girl whom the priest ministered to earlier on in the novel. The priest tells the child, "I had forgotten the code—what did you call it?' 'Morse' 'That was it. Morse. Three long taps and one short one'" (210). After he remembers the code, "immediately the taps began: the priest by the

alter tapped, a whole invisible congregation tapped along the aisles—three long and one short. He asked, 'What is it?' 'News,' the child said, watching him with a stern, responsible and interested gaze" (210). When the priest sheltered in the Fellows' barn, Coral taught him the Morse code. Before he left, she told him if he came back to tap "Two long taps and one short one" to ask if he can come in (42-43). The code Coral taught the priest symbolizes a question of entrance. The invisible congregation taps the same code in the priest's dream to indicate "news." I suggest this reflects the priest's arrival at heaven's gate, and the congregation's tapping forebodes his entrance into the afterlife. However, the dream ends after the Morse code taps and the priest wakes on the day of his death. The lack of a satisfying conclusion in the dream echoes the absence of a clean conclusion for the novel's protagonist. But the absence of a tidy conclusion in the material realm alludes to an epilogue for the priest's story in the heavenly realm following his death.

The potential climactic nature of the priest's post-death existence mirrors Christ's culminating resurrection from death. The priest's foreshadowing of an anti-climactic death, which serves to point towards resurrection, mirrors the portrayed life, death, and resurrection of Christ. The priest's likeness to Christ establishes his imago Christi figure. However, intermixed with the priest's reflections of Christ are visceral descriptions of his bodily and grotesque nature. Does the priest's grotesqueness contradict his imago Christi? Or rather does the priest's connection with the physical experiences of humanity complete his mirroring of Christ?

Whiskey

To fully symbolize Christ, the priest must emulate Christ's incarnation and kenosis. Because the setting and the other characters around the priest are characterized by grotesque ugliness, the priest must be grotesque too. Through the priest's own bodily nature and his

physical existence in a grotesque world, the priest can relate to the grotesque world. This manifests his imago Christi as he fully inhabits and exhibits grotesqueness, demonstrating divine kenosis. First, I will establish the priest's grotesque settings: the land and the people. I will then explicate the priest's demonstration of the Bakhtinian grotesque and explicate the priest's experience of unworthiness due to his grotesqueness.

To establish the grotesqueness in the setting and characters of *The Power and the Glory*, a thorough foundation conceptualizing the grotesque is necessary. But explicating this term is no small feat. The word 'grotesque' labels the works of Flannery O'Connor, Shakespeare, and Nathanael West, and has characterized countless more texts and authors. The versatility of the grotesque illustrates what Harpham means when he aptly called the term the "slipperiest of aesthetic categories" (461). *Oxford English Dictionary* is a good starting point in defining this slippery term. The earliest use of the word in 1561 describes murals from the Roman Decadence Era picturing animals and humans intermingling with foliage ("Grotesque, n1"). While Harpham asserts the original definition is far removed from the current literary understanding of the grotesque, I contend that while the grotesque has evolved from strictly characterizing murals, the grotesque's intertwining of animal and human forms and the deconstruction of natural boundaries exists in the present conception of the grotesque. The term has since expanded to include both visual and linguistic mediums. The grotesque also describes a "comic distortion or exaggeration" or a genre "characterized by unnatural combinations" ("Grotesque", n1b, n2a). The grotesque flourished during the Renaissance, at which point "the grotesque was regarded as a creation of the unruly imagination: fantastic, unnatural, bizarre" (Harpham 467). While the contemporary perspective of the grotesque still encapsulates its earlier application of the bizarre

and absurd, the definition now designates general ugly depictions of the individual's interaction with their body and the world.

Current versions of the grotesque's definition encapsulate its fascination with the ugly or bizarre and its universality through interlocking humans with the material world. In *Rabelais and His World*, Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin describes grotesque realism and bodily images; these elements of the grotesque are the most prevalent in *The Power and the Glory.* He contends this form of grotesqueness does not exist in a "private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. As such it is opposed to the severance from the material and bodily roots of the world; it makes no pretense to renunciation of the earthy, or independence of the earth and the body" (19). The interconnected and universal grotesque body that Bakhtin postulates seems antithetical to Steig's definition of the grotesque. Steig writes that the genre evokes within the reader a radical alienness, an "estrangement," and an essential absurdity (1). This literary form seems paradoxical. The grotesque illustrates the human's relationship with their body, which, through alienating the individual from the world, produces a universalizing effect. However, paradox is essential to the function of the grotesque. After all, the grotesque is "most congruent to irony which… undercuts and subverts language itself" (Harpham 467). Furthermore, while a formal focus on beauty admires order and harmony and represents the "essential man, shorn of his imperfections," the grotesque reckons with the very imperfections of which humanity longs to rid itself (467). In this metaphysical way, the grotesque forces the reader to reckon with their estrangement between mind and body. While the individual may long for perfection, they are trapped within the naturalistic and bodily constraints of human existence. The grotesque produces feelings of

repulsion and separation in the reader but also manifests the universal experience of existing in an imperfect, ugly, and bizarre body and world.

Grotesque imagery abounds in *The Power and the Glory.* First, the blurring of human and animal boundaries through the humanizing of animals and the dehumanizing of humans demonstrates the natural setting's grotesqueness. The novel's anthropomorphizing of the vultures equivocates them to the citizens in the town, deconstructing the formal boundaries between human and animal. The first few pages of the book introduce Mr. Tench, along with "A few vultures" who "looked down from the roof with shabby indifference: he wasn't a carrion yet" (Greene 9). The vultures are personified through their descriptions. With characteristics like "shabby" and "indifferent", and later "observer" (11), they appear more like another townsperson than an animal. Two pages later, Greene describes a "small man" in a "shabby dark city suit" (11). The repetition of the word "shabby" compares the dress of the man to the stare of the vultures, conflating citizen and vulture, human and animal. The amalgamation of animal and human is further emulated in the parallel sentence structure in these passages. Tench first walks past the vultures who watched him with "shabby indifference," and then notes a man who "stared malevolently up" at Tench (9). The syntactical structure mirrors the vultures looking down with indifference and the man who "stared up" with malevolence, confusing the boundaries between human and animal, an emulation of the grotesque.

While the text anthropomorphizes the animal, it dehumanizes the human. This deconstructs the expected hierarchical order of humans above animals and instead produces a grotesque blending of human and animal. Referencing the vultures again, Greene writes, "One rose and flapped across the town: over the tiny plaza, over the bust of an ex-president, ex-general, ex-human being, over the two stalls which sold mineral water, toward the river and the

sea. It wouldn't find anything there: the sharks looked after the carrion on that side" (9). This passage degrades the human in two ways. Through describing a dead human with negations, the human is dehumanized. A corpse is imaged on the ground of the plaza: an "ex-president, ex-general, ex-human being." Not only is the human disembodied ("over the bust" of the corpse) but the corpse is described as a series of "exes." The three negations strip away the personhood of the dead body, dehumanizing the former living president and general. The dehumanizing of the human corpse encapsulates *The Power and the Glory*, a world in which animal is human and human is animal.

Not only is the natural world grotesque, but the characters around the priest are grotesque as well. The bodily, grotesque images of these characters will eventually act as a mirror for the Whiskey Priest as he reckons with his own depravity and assimilates himself with the world, grotesque nature and all. Padre Jose is one of the first secondary characters described through grotesque imagery. Though he is a renounced priest, he still lives in a church. There, Greene describes him lifting "little pink eyes like those of a pig conscious of the slaughter-room" (32). This grotesque image evokes thoughts of pigs being slaughtered, and depicts the fleshiness of Jose, referencing pig meat. The text once again dehumanizes the person by likening him to an animal, blurring the lines between animal and human.

Another secondary character that aptly embodies the grotesque is the Mestizo, the archetypal Judas character who eventually betrays the priest to the Lieutenant. The onslaught of grotesque imagery characterizing the Mestizo links his ugliness to his sin. The interrelatedness between the Mestizo's grotesqueness and his sin reflects the priest's first encounter with the Mestizo, there is special descriptive attention on two of his body parts: his toe and his teeth. Greene describes the Mestizo wearing "gym shoes through which one big toe showed—plump

and yellow like something which lives underground" (89). The priest notices the toe again "moving like a grub along the ground" (90). The imagery in both passages is exaggeratedly gross, bodily, and fleshy; the likening of a toe to a plump, yellow underground worm makes both reader and priest recoil. The text repeatedly references another part of the Mestizo: his teeth. He only has two teeth, "canines which stuck yellowly out at either end of his mouth like the teeth you find enclosed in clay which have belonged to long-extinct animals" (87). The two yellow teeth become in themselves a characteristic of the man. This grotesque bodily imagery begins to define the Mestizo as the teeth are continually noted, sometimes in association with his moral depravity. Despite the priest's unwillingness to listen, the Mestizo makes a confession, saying "Shall I tell you what I've done?—It's your business to listen. I've taken money from women to do you know what, and I've given money to boys…you know what I mean. And I've eaten meat on Fridays" (100). His confession is linked to his body as an "awful jumble of the gross, the trivial, and the grotesque shot up between the two yellow fangs" (100). The gross, grotesqueness of Mestizo's body confessing bodily sins, such as prostitution and gluttony, make it more arduous for the priest to empathize with him. Furthermore, the association of the grotesque depictions of Mestizo's body with his moral sins epitomizes the question of the novel: does human grotesqueness imply a separation from God? The priest's experience of his own grotesqueness also intuits this question.

Mirroring the characters around him, the priest also embodies the grotesque. This is illustrated through his drunkenness and his physical descriptions. The priest's grotesque body and his connection with the depraved world around him produce his feelings of unworthiness, implying his initial belief that his grotesqueness refutes his priestliness. The priest's drunkenness characterizes his intrinsic tie to his flesh. Other characters' critics of the priest's drunkenness

imply his failure as a priest because of his consumption and bodily impulses. At the Fellows plantation, the priest asks Captain Fellows "with a rather repulsive humility, 'If you would do me a favor… A little brandy?' (39). To this, Captain Fellows responds, "Begging for brandy. Shameless" (40). Not only does the text describe the priest's "repulsive humility", but it also depicts him as unable to control his bodily desire for liquor. Captain Fellows calls the priest's bodily impulse "shameless" implying his dismissive attitude towards the priest. This indicates that in Fellows' mind the priest's bodily nature "shamelessly" opposes his priestly role.

Indeed, the priest himself is ashamed of his drunken, bodily characteristics. From the priest's perspective, his grotesqueness juxtaposes his divine imago Christi calling. The perceived incongruity of these elements produces feelings of utter unworthiness in the priest. In the first chapter, the priest gets drunk with a dentist and then begrudgingly follows a young boy to pray over the boy's dying mother. But as he attends to his duties, he feels "unworthy of what he carried" (21). He began to pray "with his brandied tongue: 'Let me caught soon… Let me be caught'" (21). The priest prays with a "brandied," tongue, emphasizing his drunkenness; his prayer to be caught emulates his wish for death because of his self-perceived unworthiness. In the priest's mind, his drunken and bodily nature contradicts his ministry, and he subsequently feels unfit for his ministry.

Alongside his drunkenness, the priest's smell exemplifies his grotesque body. When Coral Fellows talks with the priest, "She could smell his breath: it was disagreeable, like something which has lain about too long in the heat" (42). The likening of his breath to something rotting in the heat is a gross sensory image and alludes to death. The living priest's smell of decay and death embodies the grotesque as it reflects the unfinished metamorphosis of death and birth, for in this grotesque image, "we find both poles of transformation… the dying

and the procreating" (Bakhtin 24). The priest's breath is not only grotesque in its grossness, but in the way his rotten smell blurs the boundaries between past and present, death and life.

It is the priest's grotesqueness, specifically his smell, that seemingly degrades his role as a priest and imago Christi. When he gives a homily to townspeople, Greene describes the priest, "talking about heaven, standing between them and the candles in the ragged trousers and the torn shirt" as the "smell of unwashed human beings warred with the wax" (72--73). The physical layout of this scene reflects the grotesque degradation of a highly spiritual act when transferred to the material body level (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 309). The priest's material, grotesque body—unwashed, drunk, and ragged—stands before the people, mediating between heaven and earth. As he performs Mass, the priest embodies his imago Christi role, reflecting Christ's mediation. However, while the priest speaks of heaven, he is reminded of his grotesqueness. After smelling his own unwashed body and the bodies around him, "he felt his own unworthiness like a weight at the back of his tongue" (73). The smell reminds the priest of his bodily impurities, and he feels unworthy of his divine ministry. His feeling of unworthiness weighs down his tongue, interfering with his ability to speak of heaven. The priest's inner dichotomizing of his grotesqueness and divinity produces feelings of unworthiness and hinders his performance as a priest.

The unworthiness the priest feels when met with the reality of his grotesque existence indicates a deeper insecurity than just his bad breath. The priest is wrestling with whether he can or does reflect what he believes in: Christ. When the priest doubts whether he is "made in the image of god" he begins to "reflect on distortion and perversity. In a state of doubt, the grotesque may offer a reflection of higher truths" (Harpham 467). Reflecting on his grotesqueness, the priest questions how he, a drunk and foul whiskey priest, can be imago Christi. However, though

the priest initially believed his bodily impurities invalidate his imago Christi, through his recognition of his grotesqueness in a grotesque world, the priest best reflects Christ's kenosis, and Christ's emptying himself into a bodily and grotesque state.

Whiskey Priest

During the jail scene, the most pertinent example of the communal grotesque, the priest acknowledges and accepts the grotesque characters around him. In doing so, he simultaneously receives his own grotesqueness and distinguishes himself as a priest, demonstrating Christ's portrayed kenosis and fully manifesting his imago Christi identity. In this section, I will first explicate kenotic theology. Then, I will demonstrate the scene's communal grotesque and the priest's acceptance of that grotesqueness. Finally, I will exhibit how the priest's accepting of the grotesque, both in and outside himself, is the pinnacle of his ministry as it reflects Christ's kenosis.

Kenosis defines the essential emptying of God's divinity into human form through Christ's incarnation: holiness embodied in human flesh. Much like the grotesque form, kenotic theology theorizes the deconstruction of traditional conceptual compartments. Kenosis displays divine love, transcends the constraints of linear time, and eliminates barriers between divine and human. Masao Abe, a Japanese Buddhist philosopher and foundational developer of the kenotic Christ, introduces his theory of kenosis by demonstrating the theology in canonical biblical texts, such as Philippians 2 that says, "Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus, who, existing in the form of God, counted not the being on an equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of man; and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross" (Abe 9). Through Christ's kenosis, he humbled himself into servanthood and

death, displaying self-sacrificial love. Abe argues it is Christ's kenosis, the emptying of himself, that permits this love.

Abe writes that Christ's kenosis "should not be understood to mean that Christ was *originally* the Son of God and *then* emptied himself and became identical with humans. Such a view in the temporal order, or the sequential order, is nothing but a conceptual and objectified understanding of the issue, not an experimental and religious understanding" (10). Abe rejects the linear perception of God's nature as divine first and human second. Rather, Abe contends that God, being outside human conceptions of time, has always been fundamentally self-emptying and incarnated, abolishing the linear conception of time. Subsequently, Christ's humiliation through kenosis has always been a foundational quality of God.

Lastly, kenosis deconstructs a compartmentalized understanding of humanity and divinity. When discussing Christ's "full divinity and full humanity, it must not simply indicate a consubstantiality of two substances—divine and human. But rather a nontraditional understanding of one function of self-emptying" (Abe 15). The self-emptying of Christ indicates the hypostatic union of Christ, or the complete unification of Christ's divinity and humanity into a singular body, the fully human Christ (Hellend 312). The kenotic self-emptying of Christ into a singular body outside of time and binary boundaries, fully reflects love and, in Sallie King's words, what makes Christ, Christ (256).

What divinity is emptied into is precisely illustrated in the grotesque jail scene. The cell provides a microcosmic example of *The Power and the Glory*'s grotesque world that the priest himself is a member of, and the material, bodily world Christ empties himself into. The priest is caught for alcohol possession and thrown into a communal jail cell for the night. The cell is completely dark. Just as smell embodies the priest's grotesqueness throughout the novel, the

stench of the cell the first forceful reminder of the grossness. There was a "heavy smell" that "poured up his nostrils and he retched" (Greene 123–124). The smell, the priest learns, is coming from a bucket of human excrement. As he is pushed into the cell, the priest says, "There's no room. I can't see. Who are these people?" (124). With this line, the priest enters the dark, crowded, filthy world of this jail. A series of questions posed to him emulate the crowdedness of the cell:

> A voice near his foot said, "Got a cigarette?"
>
> He drew back quickly and trod on an arm… "Got a cigarette?...
>
> "Got something to eat?' a voice asked, and when he didn't answer, "Got something to eat?"
>
> "No."
>
> "Got any money?" another voice said.
>
> "No." (124)

The tight proximity of these questions mirrors the physical closeness of the crowd. Furthermore, the darkness equalizes the people: this is a place without physical appearance or even time itself. The priest notes, "The darkness was always the same and there were no clocks—there was nothing to indicate time passing. The only punctuation of the night was the sound of urination" (135). There is no time in the cell, just as there are no moral or socio-economic hierarchies. The deconstruction of temporal and social boundaries in the cell emulates the individual's experience of a warped "flow of time" as they come "into contact other bodies of varying age and social caste" in a grotesque context (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 92). This grotesque setting excludes societal structures; there are only voices and bodies, doing what bodies do, as demonstrated by the frequent reminders of the relief bucket. In this communal grotesque scene, there is also no

privacy to go to the bathroom, or even fornicate. When the priest first enters the cell, he notes, "the muffled painless cries. He realized that pleasure was going on even in this crowded darkness" (125). The lack of privacy, the fornicating couple, the smells, and the unseeable bodies pressed against each other all oppose the implications of a "private and psychological" grotesque form (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 321) and display instead the "interdependence of bodies" (Emerson 444). The communal grotesque in the cell eliminates privacy, and social and moral hierarchical structures, and renders all the inhabitance of this microcosmic world an unseeable grotesque body.

In this critical example of the communal grotesque, the priest realizes his place within the grotesque world. Joining the priest and other criminals in the cell is a pious woman. She adamantly expresses her expectation for the priest to separate himself from the bodily and profane aspects of humanity. Repulsed by the sound of fornication she says, "the ugliness" to which the priest says, "Don't believe that. It's dangerous. Because suddenly we discover that our sin has so much beauty" (Greene 133). The woman responds, "Beauty… Here. In this cell. With strangers all round", to which the priest calmly replies, "Such a lot of beauty" (133). The priest's acknowledgment of beauty where the pious woman perceives only ugliness demonstrates how Christ's kenosis blurred the separation between the flesh and the spiritual, profane and sacred, ugly and beautiful. Disappointed, the woman says, "Now… I can see you're a bad priest. . . I wouldn't believe It before. I do now. You sympathize with these animals." (133). But in sympathizing with "these animals", the priest demonstrates the emptying of divinity into the most grotesque of places.

Despite the pious woman's condemnation of the priest's commiseration with such grotesque people, the priest felt he "was just one criminal among a herd of criminals… He had a

sense of companionship which he had never experienced in the old days when pious people came kissing his black glove" (131). The companionship he feels for the criminals in the cell mimics the companionship he feels for the rest of the world. Greene notes in the very next line, "This place was very like the world: overcrowded with lust and crime and unhappy love, it stank to heaven; but he realized that after all it was possible to find peace there, when you knew for certain that the time was short" (127). Through recognizing that he too was "one criminal among a heard of criminals", the priest recognizes his priestly occupation is intrinsically tied to his grotesque body and the grotesque world around him. This association marks "the apex of the whiskey priest's ministry. It surrounds him with the downtrodden, the forgotten, in all their humanity" (Miller 65). The priest enters the space with fully human characters, who are "overcrowded with lust and crime", and recognizes himself. Much like the kenotic Christ, the priest's ministry is to simultaneously embody humanity and all its grotesque implications and reflect divinity through his imago Christi identity. This is reflected in the priest's first and final declaration of his identity. As the priest recognizes himself in the grotesque world he says, "I am a priest" (127). The exemplifies the culmination of the priest's ministry as he demonstrates kenosis. As the priest proclaims his most holy declaration in the most worldly of places, overtop sounds of fornication and the stench of human feces, the text suggests the moment of the greatest grotesqueness is the moment of greatest divinity. The priest makes his most holy declaration in the most worldly of places. Through the priest's perceiving beauty in the grotesque world and people around him, he accepts his own grotesqueness, reflecting a Christly kenotic self-emptying and demonstrating the full conflation of divinity and humanity.

Conclusion

Through the Priest's association with the grotesque world around him and the grotesqueness within him, he reflects Christly kenosis and fully embraces his priestly calling. While the grotesque elements of the novel may appear to oppose the theological themes and the priest's occupation, his grotesqueness only deepens his reflection of Christ. At one point in the novel, a character asks the priest "Do you think God wants you to stay and die—a whiskey priest like you?" (82)—staying and dying implying the priest's fulfillment of martyrdom and possible assentation into sainthood. This rhetorical questioning implies the inquirer's preconceived answer: no. Divinity does not seek sainthood from the sexual, the drunkard, the bodily, the grotesque. Furthermore, as the question attacks the priest's grotesqueness, it reminds the reader of their own depraved shortcomings. We are left to wonder, what could God or anyone want from a whiskey priest like me? However, as Masao Abe demonstrates in his theory of kenosis, the grotesque is not separate from divinity. Likely, as Christ is presented in religious texts, standing, "talking about heaven" in front of the people, he also was in "ragged trousers and the torn shirt" (Greene 70). But the smell of Christ the priest's body does not contradict the sermons of heaven, nor does it negate their respective identities. Rather, their smells indicate the essential emptying of divinity into the grotesque realities of humanity. Therefore, understanding and embracing the grotesque in the priest's character and its essential role in his reflection of Christ can help religious and non-religious readers alike to grapple with their own grotesqueness as not only a fundamental aspect of their human nature but as a possible reflection of divinity.

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Essay

Megan Crowe

Circles and the Cyclical Nature of Authoritarianism in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*

In the shadow of its defeat in World War I, a sense of gloom and unease fell over the nation of Germany. Shattered morally and economically, the anxious and hostile atmosphere that characterized the Weimar Republic became the breeding ground for an increasingly authoritarian government. However, the turbulent early postwar period would have an unprecedented effect on Weimar cinema and facilitate the rise of the German Expressionism. The quintessential film of this movement was Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, which David A. Cook identifies as "the progenitor and exemplar of German Expressionist cinema" (75). While criticisms of *Dr. Caligari* largely concentrate on the more obvious Expressionist elements in the film, namely the stylized production design and expressive chiaroscuro lighting, the overlooked reoccurrence of circles is another visual feature in the film that is worth further examination. By analyzing scenes from the film which demonstrate the use of circles, I will argue that the circular motif is representative of the cyclical nature of authoritarian power and the continual unrest felt by citizens living in postwar Germany.

Under the direction of Wiene, *Dr. Caligari* was a highly experimental film for 1920. A landmark of German Expressionist cinema, the film rejected realistic depictions of reality and instead reflected the mental and emotional states of the characters. According to Cook, German Expressionism "attempted to express the interior realities through the means of exterior realities" (75). *Dr. Caligari* achieved this through its set design, creating a nightmarish world composed of jagged patterns and geometric shapes, haphazard buildings and structures, painted landscapes

and backgrounds, and exaggerated dimensions. The film's disorienting set design is both emblematic of the narrator's tortured psyche and the collective mood of German society in the early 1920's.

These characteristic Expressionist features are not only the visual techniques used in *Dr. Caligari* to reflect postwar attitudes. Critics have focused so long on the "archetypically Expressionistic, angular nature of the imagery in *Caligari*, that they have failed to identify the role of any other visual elements within the film" (Roberts 182). Surprisingly, for a film famous for its stylistic elements, little attention has been paid to its use of circles. Turning our attention away from the more "angular" imagery featured in the film, we can reassess *Dr. Caligari* through the lens of the circular and cyclical motif. The consistent use of the circular motif that appears throughout the film emphasizes the inward fears experienced by Germans living under the Weimar regime.

Most prominently, we see one of the first circular cues during the Holstenwall fair sequence, such as the opening iris shot, which lingers on a spinning carousel amid a static two-dimensional artificial backdrop depicting the landscape (00:10:57). When the iris shot expands and reveals the whole frame, another smaller carousel can be seen spinning round and round in the middle distance. As the two carousels spin wildly and ceaselessly, the unsuspecting citizens of Holstenwall wander around the fair in a scene bustling with human activity and life. But the moment Dr. Caligari walks into the frame at (00:11:31), he seems to dominate and assert his control over the scene, foreshadowing the cycle of mayhem and death that will be inflicted upon the town at Caligari's command. In his seminal work on the psychological history of German film, *From Caligari to Hitler*, Siegfried Kracauer described the Holstenwall fair scene as "an enclave of anarchy in the sphere of entertainment," and the visual of the carousel or circle

"becomes a symbol of chaos" (Kracauer 73-74). The ever-whirling carousel represents a chaotic antithesis to Dr. Caligari's authority.

The set design of the city of Holstenwall is another area in which the circular motif manifests. While the painted backdrop of the town was both thematically suited to *Dr. Caligari's* Expressionist aesthetic and pragmatic due to economic constrictions during the film's production, the characters are constantly returning to the same winding streets and buildings throughout the story. This creates a claustrophobic, maze-like environment. Ian Roberts describes the characters as "condemned to scuttle around the labyrinth, seemingly incapable of escape" (184). Cesare feels this sense of confinement and is caught not in a physical, but a mental trap, becoming perpetually struck in a hypnotic trance by Dr. Caligari. Holstenwall's labyrinthine streets, which seem to always circle back to the same place, is a visual rendition of the spiraling cycle of anxieties faced by the German public living under the Weimar government. Another interesting visual device is a series of circular, eye-like designs can also be seen along the walls as Dr. Caligari walks through the town as shown in the shot at (00:08:10). One could view these symbols as the "watchful eyes" of Caligari, tying into the cyclical theme which forewarns the inevitability of authoritarian rule.

The circular motif appears again during the sequence in which Cesare enters Jane's bedroom and attempts to abduct her. In this particular scene, circles play the role of a false sense of safety to juxtapose the grotesque world of Holstenwall. This theme is communicated through the scene's purposeful set design. For instance, the first shot of Jane's room shows a significant contrast of circular and angular designs (00:44:58). The painted shadows and swirls on the walls, the shape of the bed and canopy framing Jane's sleeping figure, and the artificial chairs in the background are all circular or rounded in design. The way her home is portrayed with soft curves

and comforting symmetry is representative of Jane's role in the film as a sole figure of purity and femininity.

It is notable that Jane's bedroom is one of only locations in the film that is relatively devoid of harsh shapes except for the windows. The crooked asymmetry of the windows visually foreshadows the danger lingering on the other side. In a long shot of Cesare peering through the window, geometric patterns on the walls form sharp points that resemble arrows, signaling his entry into the bedroom as he unsheathes a dagger (00:45:40). Showing Jane's home is a rare moment in the film where comfort and normality preside until it is threatened by the outside world. The circular nature of Jane's bedroom evokes a false sense of comfort and safety, whereas the slanted lines of the window frame cutting across Cesare's figure make him the embodiment of a threat from the outside.

Another interpretation of the circular motif is a sign of change or revolution. This theme is underscored in the mise en scène of the insane asylum. The main room of the asylum is a large circular room with a series of doors, which can be seen in the shots at (00:55:00) and (01:11:40). Three arched doorways in the background each frame a set of stairs leading up to a dark, undisclosed part of the asylum. A sharp spiral pattern painted on the floor resembling the design of a carousel draws the viewer's eye toward the central, circular point of the room where Francis stands as he enters the asylum to confront Dr. Caligari. The patterns on the floor, which all lead to the various doors in the background, suggest that various perspectives exist in the story and that the narrative is fracturing.

Two of the most critical scenes of the film take place within the asylum, a setting defined by its centrality both visually and narratively. The first is when Dr. Caligari is exposed and then imprisoned in his own asylum. The second is the twist ending in which Francis is revealed to be

a patient of the asylum, having been the insane one all along while Dr. Caligari is really the asylum's doctor. Because Francis is revealed to be an unreliable narrator, Dr. Caligari's loss of authority was all an illusion and he was really in control the entire time. The asylum is the focal point in the film where Dr. Caligari gains control, is overthrown from his position of authority, and is restored to power once more.

The circle also functions in a symbolic sense through the film's structure. *Dr. Caligari* utilizes a frame story to circle back to where the narrative begins. The main body of the film is revealed as a flashback by the prologue and epilogue. Everything comes full circle when the film opens with Francis recounting his tale to a fellow inmate in the courtyard of the asylum and ends in the same location as he concludes his story. The film's use of a frame narrative illustrates the inevitable loop of authoritarian rule.

The film's ending also serves to disorient the audience as we are returned to the asylum, only to find out the story of Dr. Caligari was a fabrication of Francis's madness. The circular motif is a narrative foreshadowing that the story is unfolding within the mind of Francis. After Francis is taken to the very cell where Caligari is imprisoned in the central narrative, our perception of the mad doctor presented throughout the film is subverted when we discover he is the asylum's doctor who is trying to cure Francis's condition. A new cycle of authoritarianism can begin anew and Dr. Caligari can continue to resume control. The restoration of Caligari's authority is a direct allusion to the inexorable force of authoritarian culture that came to govern postwar Germany.

Finally, it is worth devoting attention to Wiene's frequent usage of the iris shot throughout the film. Circular iris shots are used often to link scenes and highlight key moments. An iris opens in darkness before a circular image slowly expands to fill the frame or contracts to

isolate an area of the frame. While the iris shot was not a new or uncommon technique in silent films, the ways in which Wiene incorporated it in his storytelling were not random but purposeful. A tight, circular focus, leaving most of the frame in blackness with a circle of light in the center, is most often used in scenes involving Dr. Caligari and Cesare, as if Wiene meant to shine a spotlight on the eerie nature of their characters.

For example, when Caligari goes to apply for a permit to present his spectacle at the fair and is mocked by the town clerk, there are moments where a cropped circle focuses on him, such as the shot at (00:09:42). Likewise, when Cesare is first roused from his sleep in Caligari's tent, the shot is tightly focused on his face as he awakens at (00:19:36). At the film's conclusion, a chilling circular iris-in shot lingers around Caligari's face long enough to fill the viewer with a sense of doubt and foreboding, similar to the feeling induced when Caligari first staggers into frame at the opening of the fair scene and when we are brought into his tent. This heightens the horrible realization that Caligari has prevailed, and his authority has been restored so that he may continue his cycle of corruption.

Studying the use of circles in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* demonstrates the powerful role set design plays in conveying a film's themes. While the film is a testament to the dangers of unchecked authoritarian power, the use of circular imagery offers a more sinister implication of the film. The circular motif not only stresses the never-ending specter of uncertainty felt by citizens living in postwar Germany, but it also darkly hints at the cyclical nature and inevitability of authoritarian power. The film's unsatisfying conclusion dashes the viewer's expectations of good triumphing over evil, giving viewers an ending where Caligari is toppled from his position of authority, only to be restored to power once more. The film offers an ominous prediction of what would ultimately become of Germany with the rise of Nazism, and when the cycle of

authoritarianism is left unbroken. *Dr. Caligari* serves as a grim reminder of how tyrannical rule continues to cycle back into power.

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Creative Nonfiction

Clay Birchfield

On the Other Side of the Glass

The windows that overlook the tarmac at the Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport are enormous and spotless. They shine with a sparkling radiance when daylight strikes the glass, granting an otherworldly quality to the reflection, akin to seeing a white dawn shimmer across clear water in a perfectly still pond. The reflections attempt to distract the drivers stuck in the stop-and-start traffic of I-20 westbound and entertain the young passengers in the backseats on their way to school and daycare.

This drive was familiar to me. It usually led to my grandparents' house or to the McWane Center. Even though I had seen the windows on countless drives, they never ceased to take hold of my imagination. I saw warped planes soar across the surface of a world that began and ended with a silver-tinged sky. I wondered what else was in this sparkling world and where those planes flew to.

There have only been a few times in my life when the windows became not just a passing landmark but a destination. When I was six, my brother, Ian, and I were riding in the backseat of my mom's Kia Sorento. It was around Ian's naptime and, as was standard for toddlers of his age, he was making up for it during the ride by quietly sleeping behind the driver's seat. My father was driving, and my mom sat silently beside him. We didn't listen to the radio, and no one was talking. As I stared at the airport windows, musing to myself, the only sound I recognized was the soft breath of Ian's light snoring. My father held my mom's hand.

The windows loomed closer as we drove up the winding road leading to the parking lot. The dull grey of the brutalist buildings around us clashed with the manicured flower beds and trimmed hedges that bordered the walls. I focused intently on these discrepancies instead of the heaviness that weighed down each breath and asked, “Where are Grandma and Mawmaw? You said they were going to meet us here.”

My father let go of my mom’s hand as he turned into the parking deck and, clearing her throat, she replied, “They are already at the doors. We are running a bit late. You will see them in just a second.”

We parked in a space near the crosswalk that led to my father’s terminal. My mom got out of the car, walked to Ian’s door, and began unbuckling him. My father took his time gathering his belongings from the front. He grabbed his wallet and his phone and then looked ahead, breathing deeply. He grabbed a pack of cigarettes from the console, put it in his breast pocket, and sighed, stepping out of the car. I took this as my cue to get out as well.

I stretched my legs and closed my door before noticing that my father’s parents, Mawmaw and Pawpaw, were walking across the road to our car. Something about the way they were walking, the way that their faces were set, kept me from sprinting across the parking lot to give them a hug. Instead, I watched my father wave them over as he began unloading the trunk.

“Hey, son,” Pawpaw said as he grabbed a duffel bag from my father’s arms.

My father hugged his dad before turning to Mawmaw and smiling at her. She greeted him with a hug and a kiss before lifting Ian out of my mom’s arms. Somehow, throughout all the jostling, he remained unperturbed. My mom then shouldered my father’s backpack and grabbed his hand. He was loaded down with a fatigue green rucksack and another duffel bag. Both of

them were marked in black paint with his name and rank to avoid confusion with the other pieces of standard issue equipment that had been doled out to countless other soldiers.

Mawmaw was holding Ian, my father his bags, my mom a backpack, and Pawpaw a duffel; I was unburdened. We walked across the parking lot and the crosswalk to meet my mother's parents, Grandma and Pop, at the terminal. They were standing just inside the foyer and, as they saw us, Pop extended his arms to me for a hug. He squeezed me tightly, tousling my hair as I squeezed his legs. Grandma met my mom as she was coming through the door and put an arm around her waist, supporting her. When I finally let Pop's legs go, I stood by silently as the rest of the adults exchanged greetings and pleasantries to one another. I knew that they all loved each other deeply, but, in this moment, their words lacked warmth. Even more startling was the fact that they all wore smiles that did not touch their eyes.

When the conversation dulled, we began making our way through the foyer and into the airport proper. Birmingham-Shuttlesworth is a small airport and is never crowded. As we marched through the hallways and made our way to security, we passed a few attendants and bleary-eyed travelers. The attendants gave us courteous smiles and nods while the travelers failed to recognize our existence. We walked past obligatory murals and artwork that demonstrated the history and culture of Birmingham, but most of it passed by in a blur; my attention was focused on the travelers we passed. Like my father, all of them were laden with the accoutrements of travel, the evidence of displacement and recent separation. Their backs were hunched with packs stuffed to the brim, and the rolling suitcases that rumbled behind them looked less like luggage and more like extra appendages attached to their hands. I noted that, unlike the rest of these passersby, and unlike my father, the rest of my family were not burdened with these carry-ons.

Approaching the security terminals without baggage felt like I was entering a temple without an offering.

Pop must have sensed my apprehension and assumed I was frightened of the large metal detectors and winding conveyor belts. He leaned down and whispered, “Don’t worry. They are just going to check to see if you have anything bad on you.”

I looked up at him and said, “I know. But I don’t have anything for them to check. Dad does, but I don’t have a bag. I’m not getting on a plane. Why are they checking me, too?”

Pop paused for a moment and took a look around. Then he smiled and said, “Well, there are some extenuating circumstances. These people are being very nice, so make sure to tell them ‘Thank you.’”

I nodded and walked through the beeping arch of the metal detector. However, the apprehension I felt did not dissipate. I felt like an interloper as the plastic, chirping metal detectors rang loudly in my ears. Ian was awake at this point and blearily looked round at the strange scene basked in fluorescent lighting. The security guards waved us through the process with gloved hands and strained smiles, the same ones that my parents and grandparents wore. They knew why we were here, just like Pop said, and were letting us pass through to the heart of the airport.

Each step we took echoed down a long hallway scuffed with the ruts made by travel-worn shoes and wheeled suitcases. I was holding Pop’s hand. Grandma was still walking with my mom; Mawmaw had linked arms with my father, and Pawpaw was laden with bags. We rounded a corner and entered the gate my father was flying out of. It was a standard airport gate, fitted with parallel rows of back-to-back chairs. There were a few stalls selling travel goods: neck pillows, magazines, and snacks. But, replacing the outfacing wall of the airport were the

massive windows I had seen countless times before from the interstate. This time, though, I was on the inside of them.

It was impossible to take them in all at once, so I scanned them in awe. They were enormous, sprawling from the floor to the ceiling and across the entire length of the room, broken intermittently by brushed metallic frames and possessing the slightly muted tint of outwardly reflective glass. Gray railing spanned the length of the windows and kept people from leaning on them directly, dirtying them with fingerprints. Natural light flooded the room, rendering the fluorescent lights hanging from the ceiling useless, unless it was night. The windows dominated the room. From everywhere in the room the travelers had at least a periphery view of the glass.

I was led to the windows by my family. I stood and observed them with a quiet placidity. The apprehension I had felt until this point was undercut by an almost reverence for the windows that I had already seen so many times. The adults formed a wide semicircle before the glass, and Ian, still in Mawmaw's arms, attempted to wriggle free and join me on the ground. Mawmaw's arms held firm. As my parents and grandparents stood resolutely, looking at each other expectantly, searching for the right words to say, my attention was drawn to the windows, and the world that I had been a part of just moments before.

They offered a clear view of the tarmac below, and through them I could see all the activity on the runway. I watched as a jet bridge detached from the body of a passenger plane. It began to slowly move along the length of the runway, lumbering forward under the weight of its cargo. I saw the wheels supporting the hulking machine and was shocked that such a small object could hold such a large burden. There was an inconsistency there, a lack of believability that puzzled me. There was also a sense of foreboding, and my apprehension returned. On some level

I recognized those wheels, or at least the situation they were in. No matter how incredulous I might have been, though, the wheels held up, and the plane began the drive up the runway.

Behind me, Mawmaw handed a squirming Ian to my mom and walked nervously back and forth from her husband to my father. She kept fixing his uniform, a pattern of amorphous greens and tans, seeing faults in it that only a mother could see. She wanted to ensure that her son was presentable. My father watched her do this with a somber smile before stopping her pacing with a tight embrace. The hug lasted a long time. When they separated, she held him at arm's length, smiling, and then adjusted the alignment of his lapel. My father met her gaze with a set jaw and a reassuring smile. Mawmaw wiped tears from her cheek and stepped away. My father then took Pawpaw's hand. They looked each other in the eyes long enough to say something without speaking a word. As they embraced, Pawpaw whispered something in my father's ear that made him smile somberly. However, the assuredness in his eyes never wavered.

The plane reached the end of the runway at this point and made a wide turn to prepare for lift off. The passengers on the plane must have been holding their breath in anticipation as they began their journeys. They were leaving the world I watched from, the in-between that contained the goodbyes and held onto them until the reunions that were to come. I waited expectantly for the moment the plane would lurch forward and shoot across the tarmac, but as it made an about face, it stopped and sat motionless. I rose on the tips of my toes, gripped the middle of the railing, and leaned forward. My own anticipation joined the travelers and pilots as I waited to see them off, knowing that once I saw them take off I could step out from behind the glass, out of the in-between and rejoin the realm of certainty, the one where the plane was gone and that was okay.

My mom shifted Ian's weight from one hip to the other and then back again. He frowned at the constant, anxious movements but made no protest. She absentmindedly listened to something Grandma was telling her, but all the while her eyes never left my father as he crossed the distance to his in-laws. He gave Grandma and Pop the same self-assured smile he had given his own parents just moments before, the one that attempted to put their minds at ease. My father gave each of them a hug. My mom watched.

The plane shook as it jerked forward. It crawled towards the grass at the end of the runway, the fuselage vibrating under the pressure of the power growing in its jet engines. My heart raced as it built up speed, the front tire lifting, the weight no longer bearing down so harshly on it. The nose began to rise and point upward and away to somewhere else, somewhere not here, and just as the back tires were lifting off the ground a clutching feeling began to build in my throat. Suddenly, in this world of in-between, I was unsure of its safety, unsure that it would reach its destination. I was unsure that it would return. Part of me wanted to reach out, and, with some latent power of will, hold it here, to keep it here.

Just as the plane's landing gear began to recede into its body, I was shaken out of my observational trance by my father. He placed his hand on my shoulder and kneeled before me. He had just given Ian back to my mom after hugging him tightly; I could still smell the lotion from my brother on his collar. When he bent down his knees cracked and he grunted slightly. I glanced once more out at the other world, the one I was now an observer of rather than a participant in. The plane was screeching towards the sky.

My father whispered my name, dragging my attention from the plane and the world outside the windows. As I turned toward him, I saw that his face was set, stonelike. He was trying to provide me with the certainty that I was searching for in ensuring that the plane had left.

While it intimidated most with the fierce conviction it wielded and the inherent self-confidence he possessed, his face held a deep warmth. It was waiting readily in the earthen browns and rich greens of his hazel eyes. Those who bore the initial stare were suffused with the assurance that they were respected, that they were loved. Beneath the familiarity of his gaze, my apprehension vanished completely. My reverence for the windows was replaced by a complete fixation on my father. I smiled. He did the same. His smile spread all the way to his warm eyes and wrinkled the crows' feet that nestled in their corners, evidence of his inclination to gaiety and laughter. He pulled me into a hug and held me tighter than he ever had before.

Over the next thirteen months, I would often revisit that hug. I would revel in the security of his thick arms that wrapped themselves around my lithe form and held it there, unmoving and resolute. At night I would breathe deeply and fill my lungs with the distant smells of his uniform, fresh cotton and nylon, stale sweat and menthol cigarettes as I drifted to sleep imagining that he had prayed with me that night, that he had knelt by my bed even though I knew he was thousands of miles and an ocean away. When the house was quiet in the evenings, I could just barely convince myself I heard the clinking of dog tags that hung perpetually from his neck and the deep, oaken rumble of his voice.

He told me something in that hug. I do not remember what it was, but I know that I was comforted by the words. They put me at ease.

When he let me go, Grandma took my hand and led me away from the windows and my parents. Pop took Ian from my mom, and the four of us walked toward a kiosk selling magazines and cheap paperbacks. Grandma knew that I loved books and was young enough not to care that they were mostly trashy romances and predictable mysteries. She let me flip through the pages for a moment, and when I realized that the words were too cramped and small for me to read, I

turned to the magazines and looked at the pictures instead. Our backs were turned to the windows. Pop was walking back and forth, quietly keeping Ian entertained with a story of some kind.

I looked up after closing a copy of *People* magazine and saw that Grandma was watching my parents. I followed her gaze and saw them in the tightest embrace I had ever seen, tighter than the one my father had given me. It was difficult to distinguish where one of them began and the other ended. Their tears mingled as they held each other there, oblivious to observers.

I quickly shifted my gaze to the vibrant covers on the magazine rack, my heart racing. The apprehension had returned. Pressure accumulated in the lower part of my chest and was choked down by rapid swallowing. I felt tears come to my eyes, but they would not fall as I grappled to keep breathing and remain calm. I directed all of my attention to a picture of an erupting volcano on the cover of *National Geographic*.

Grandma roused me from my empty study of the pyroclastic cloud on the cover of the magazine. She led me back to my mom. My father was gone. He had taken his duffel bags and rucksack and boarded the next flight to Iraq, away from here.

My grandparents assumed the semicircle once more and began exchanging consolations, unique intonations in soft tones that try in vain to ease the unique pang of temporary separation that could just as easily become a permanent loss. Ian, finally placed on the ground, was running unsteadily and headstrong between the legs of the grown-ups. Nobody seemed to mind; I believe they were content with the fact that he was too young to understand what was going on, young enough that when my father returned in a year, he would not recognize him, would cry at the sight of a person who, to him, seemed to be a stranger. I did not know what to do or say. I

watched my grandparents talk and laugh and try, in vain, to return to a sense of normalcy. I did not yet recognize the benefit or the comfort of this kind of community.

My eyes wandered back to the windows. My mom stood in front of them, gripping the railing and gazing out at the tarmac. I joined her, standing quietly by her side. There was another plane that was just rounding the bend at the end of the runway. This one did not stop or wait before it began its race down the runway. It simply sped out of the turn, getting faster and faster as it tore down the tarmac. The wing flaps engaged, the plane skipped once, and then it took off. It soared through the air. My mom and I watched until it shrank away, until we could no longer see it, no longer feel it. We watched until distance turned detail into obscurity.

Creative Nonfiction

Anna McBane

The Living and Breathing Stations of the Cross

The streets of Jerusalem, Israel, were never a place that I had dreamed of my feet traipsing through, but like many places in life, I found myself there after various twists and turns that I never could have seen coming. During my trip with other students and professors, we walked the Via Dolorosa, the traditional route in the Old City of Jerusalem that Jesus is believed to have walked while carrying his cross to the crucifixion. The processional route is marked by 14 stations and traditionally has 14 prayers to accompany them and memorialize the steps that Jesus took.

We walked solemnly throughout the city to the various stations, and I found myself looking at plaques outside of buildings and gazing up at ornate ceilings of churches riddled with reverence. Through this pilgrimage, I was transfixed by the events that occurred at each station and, for a moment, saw them faintly touch the moments of my own life which were marked by seasons of grief. It is this internal connection that is present in the Christian and human experiences that can make prayer so powerful. The prayer that lies before you seeks to honor the original steps of Jesus and document my encounter with them as I walked through each station in Jerusalem and remembered my own encounter with grief throughout the years of my life.

<u>Opening Prayer: Act of Contrition</u>

God, I come with open hands and tears streaming. The weight of my sins is one only you can bear. I am deeply sorry for my sins and humbly repent. I stand on one side of the chasm,

recognizing the distance that has grown between us, and I remember the bridge that has formed beneath us.

First Station: Jesus is Condemned to Death

Leader: We adore Thee, O Christ, and bless Thee.

All: Because by Thy holy cross Thou hast redeemed the world.

Alone. Jesus, you stand alone before Pilate. I kneel alone staring at this image trying to transport myself back in time. Alone is what I wish I could say about my experience standing amidst a crowd of people at Lion's Gate. I catch quick glances up at the bronze statue and inscribed plaque above the pale blue doors in between the shuffling of feet and nervous glances of people traveling through. Old City Jerusalem is not as solemn as I thought it would be.

Abandoned. Jesus, you were abandoned by the people who were shouting "Hosanna" days before. No one defended you and across every heart was a bolted, closed door. Abandoned was the word that echoed in my mind when I tried to define myself at the ripe age of four. As I stand in sweaty clothes with my fellow classmates beneath this marker of this first station, assure me that they aren't going to leave.

Help me now to be grateful. Help me pray for those who have wronged me or have woven injustices into my story. So often I deserve the ungodly heat of my summers spent at home. But by your death, I have been saved from this Hell or any others where the Devil may roam.

Recite the Following Prayers: Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory Be to the Father...

Leader: Jesus Christ Crucified.

All: Have mercy on Us.

Leader: May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, Rest in peace.

All: Amen.

Second Station: Jesus Carries His Cross

Leader: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

All: Because by your holy cross You have redeemed the world.

Jesus, I come to you from this simple wooden pew. Surrounded by the dust-encased sandstone, my eyes reluctantly can't be drawn away from the towering image of you carrying the cross on your body, the picture framed with a vibrant blue. I pace back and forth between the first statue of your condemnation and the second one depicting the imposition of the cross. Looking deep in your eyes and feeling the sensation of distress, but, alas, there is nothing I can do.

Jesus, you accepted your cross knowing that it would be the very vehicle of your death. You had the courage to carry the thing that would ultimately kill you. God, give me the courage to carry my own cross. Even if, at the end of the day, it only brings me loss. For four long years I have been carrying the caregiver's cross. I pray you show me even the crest of Calvary's Hill.

Jesus, you bear the sins of the world, and I'm deeply sorry for my contribution to that burden. Let me feel their heavy weight and let me weep until I can't see straight.

Recite the Following Prayers: Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory Be to the Father...

Leader: Jesus Christ Crucified.

All: Have mercy on Us.

Leader: May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, Rest in peace.

All: Amen.

Third Station: Jesus Falls the First Time

Leader: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

All: Because by your holy cross You have redeemed the world.

Jesus, as you weave through the corridors of the ancient city, each step is marked with excruciating pain. Life is seeping out from each pore, your vision is blurred, and, sooner rather than later, your chest hits the floor. No one comes to help you, and the soldiers do nothing but abhor. For us, you rose and pressed on.

Please forgive me for almost missing this station. It's not as grand as the ones before, and I could have walked right past it if my body didn't suddenly become sore. I'm no mystic like Julian of Norwich, but I pray you would keep giving me these moments where the physical meets the spiritual.

Recite the Following Prayers: Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory Be to the Father...

Leader: Jesus Christ Crucified.

All: Have mercy on Us.

Leader: May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, Rest in peace.

All: Amen.

Fourth Station: Jesus Meets his Mother

Leader: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

All: Because by your holy cross You have redeemed the world.

Jesus, amidst the sea of chaos and streams of blood from the thorny crown clouding your eyes, the sight of your mother transfixes you. She looks at you with motherly love and rests in the crowd like a mourning dove. Her eyes are written with grief. She is powerless to stop it, but she is suffering right alongside you. She sees you. She loves you. She cares for you.

I take a few steps under the archway and find a Church built in your mother's honor. I try to peer in through the doors left ajar but, unfortunately, am left to observe from afar. Jesus, help me to see my own mother's kind face mirrored in the moments of love I am witnessing in this city. For I am in desperate need of her love and help, and it is a constant reminder of where that help truly comes from. For dismissing her love is like turning away the love from your heart. God, help me to love deeply and ask for help.

Recite the Following Prayers: Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be to the Father...

Leader: Jesus Christ Crucified.

All: Have mercy on Us.

Leader: May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, Rest in peace.

All: Amen.

Fifth Station: Simon of Cyrene Helps Jesus to Carry his Cross

Leader: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

All: Because by your holy cross You have redeemed the world.

Jesus, as you stagger along, the eyes of the soldiers must feel like a dagger. Impatiently realizing that your weak and worn body won't make it up the hill, they snatch an innocent man from the crowd, and under the end of your cross he stands bowed.

It's not hard to imagine the crowd of people that would have been bustling about on this street. I am almost nauseous with the sight of the street vendors and smell of the trash. For, even in your city, modernity takes her blow and the profane invades the sacred marked from years ago.

There is a place in the wall marked off where you were said to have placed your hand. I touch it with eyes closed, desperate to feel your touch. Jesus, help me to be a more cognizant Simon. Let me bear others' crosses intentionally and with your heart in mind.

Continually draw my inward glance upwards and outwards. Remind me to stoop down and bow low. As Flannery O'Connor once prayed, "Lord, give me the courage to get deep down under things, to where you are."

Recite the Following Prayers: Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be to the Father...

Leader: Jesus Christ Crucified.

All: Have mercy on Us.

Leader: May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, Rest in peace.

All: Amen.

Sixth Station: Veronica Wipes the Face of Jesus

Leader: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

All: Because by your holy cross You have redeemed the world.

Jesus, around the corner emerges a face soft and kind. Veronica, unafraid of what the soldiers might do to her, catches your tears with a simple cloth and wipes the sweat and blood from your unrecognizable brow. As you are dragged along, she stands behind you in a wake of grief, and almost instinctively the cloth catches her own tears, desperate for relief.

As I stand in the street where you painstakingly walked, I can imagine her standing next to me and handing me the cloth. For my own tears fall more often than those around me, and for you know I am deeply acquainted with grief. As I stand with my white, dust-covered shoes, there is a sadness that swarms my heart. Grief and I have slowly gotten comfortable with one another over the past couple of months, but his old friend Fear is the most unbearable of guests.

Jesus, make me like Veronica; don't ever let Fear stop me from doing your will or inviting Grief in. Give me the strength to wipe the tears of others even when I am weary and worn. Don't ever let me forget your own tears shed for me.

Recite the Following Prayers: Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be to the Father...

Leader: Jesus Christ Crucified.

All: Have mercy on Us.

Leader: May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, Rest in peace.

All: Amen.

Seventh Station: Jesus Falls for the Second Time

Leader: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

All: Because by your holy cross You have redeemed the world.

Jesus, as you continued down this long street, you couldn't bear that weight much longer. Struggling to see straight and gasping for relief, eventually your eyes could only see astonished onlookers' dirty feet. Your skin, already blotched with red and white, skids roughly across the stoney path, but to the soldiers' dismay you avoided wrath. For us you rose and, for even me, you kept walking.

Already so lost and deprived of the small sense of direction I had gained in the days before, I found myself peering at a column, a supposed marker for the Gate of Judgment. Through those gates, you left the Old City, and the burdensome steps to Calvary must have been many. Outside these street walls lies a busy intersection, and I can barely hear myself think, no less pray with the sounds of eager vendors, swindlers and street cars.

Even though I am finding it impossible to calm my inner mind, help me to keep trying. Don't make my heart blind.

Recite the Following Prayers: Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be to the Father...

Leader: Jesus Christ Crucified.

All: Have Mercy on Us.

Leader: May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, Rest in peace.

All: Amen.

Eighth Station: Jesus Meets the Women of Jerusalem

Leader: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

All: Because by your holy cross You have redeemed the world.

Jesus, you were engulfed by your own sorrow but still managed to think of the people of tomorrow. You spent time with the women who stood by the busy street, with uneasy eyes and tears of grief. Moments in time are sacred, and you knew that. Thank you for choosing to comfort the women even though all the nerves in your body were screaming of discomfort.

Up the dozens of dainty stairs I climb, distracted by the metal doors of cobalt blue. The locks on the handles remind me of my own heart and the daily knocking of your loving hand that begs for them to be made loose. A man emerges from a verdant green door and points confidently at the station, nodding and assuring our arrival.

Perhaps there should be a station of the cross right outside my door. Then, perhaps, I would remember your sorrowful passion all the more. I don't remember it as I should, and I am deeply sorry.

Recite the Following Prayers: Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be to the Father...

Leader: Jesus Christ Crucified.

All: Have Mercy on Us.

Leader: May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, Rest in peace.

All: Amen.

Ninth Station: Jesus Falls a Third Time

Leader: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

All: Because by your holy cross You have redeemed the world.

Jesus, you have come so far, but the journey is not done. The incline of the hill strains your tearing muscles, and once again you fall. Each time you find it harder to rise, but triumphantly you continue and walk humbly to your own demise.

As we near the end, I can see the shine of the Church's dome glaring in my eyes. Although it is supposed to be a holy place, I can't help but feel dismayed at what happened under its very foundation. What seems to be graffiti rests right below the bronze statue. I see beautiful wire sculptures adorning the doorway leading to the Church. Why mark such a dreadful place with such beauty and art?

I continually fall beneath the weight of my sins. I am consumed with shame and find it hard to emerge from the pit of despair. Help me rise again.

Recite the Following Prayers: Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be to the Father...

Leader: Jesus Christ Crucified.

All: Have mercy on Us.

Leader: May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, Rest in Peace.

All: Amen.

Tenth Station: Jesus's Clothes are Taken Away

Leader: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

All: Because by your holy cross You have redeemed the world.

Jesus, if you were not already humiliated enough, the soldiers took your seemingly last ounce of dignity by removing your cloak and stripping you of all coverings. They taunted and jeered at who would win such a glorious prize. With each garment stripped, you winced from the exposed wound tainted with dripping sweat and made brittle by the whipping wind.

Help me to build others up rather than tear them down. The anger that is fueling my vile actions or veiled words is rooted far deeper. Anger is something that often festers. Anger lives in a box that is sealed shut.

I remember my own clothes being stripped. When rough hands attached to a drunken mind found their way around my neck and down every inch of me. Humiliation, horror and shame were my new garments, pinned into place and stitched directly into my skin.

Recite the Following Prayers: Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be to the Father...

Leader: Jesus Christ Crucified.

All: Have mercy on Us.

Leader: May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, Rest in peace.

All: Amen.

Eleventh Station: Jesus is Nailed to the Cross

Leader: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

All: Because by your holy cross You have redeemed the world.

Jesus, you were stretched across the cypress as a hateful criminal. Nails were driven into places that made it impossible for your body to be at ease. There you hung, abandoned by the people around you. The ninth hour passed and amidst the darkness you cried about, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

As I climbed the circling staircase, I tried my best not to step on the heels of those in front of me. We all seemed eager to get a glimpse of something marvelous. The loft of sorts beckoned me inside its chambers. Each wall and ceiling were adorned with sparkling cyan tiles painted with rich reds and glorious golds. Icons lined every wall, almost demanding adoration. I tried to gaze at the image of you on the cross, but impatient glances and whispers put my feet in motion.

Recite the Following Prayers: Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be to the Father...

Leader: Jesus Christ Crucified.

All: Have mercy on Us.

Leader: May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, Rest in peace.

All: Amen.

Twelfth Station: Jesus Dies on the Cross

Leader: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

All: Because by your holy cross You have redeemed the world.

Jesus, you hung, you forgave, and you prayed. You cried out in a loud voice and yielded up your spirit. Death breathed on you. Although creation is always groaning, in this moment it screamed. The curtain of the temple was torn and the two halves landed triumphantly on the floor. The earth trembled, and the rocks were left quaking. Saintly souls slipped out of dirt-encased tombs. My knees touch the cold tile of the chapel as I kneel before the crucifix. I duck my head under the altar and feel like a child playing hide-and-seek and taking refuge under my mother's desk. A circular hole lies before me, and inside it rests the stone of Calvary. I reach in and let my fingertips graze the top of the cold stone where the end of your cross could have been placed. Death. It still comes for us even though it was defeated. It slinks its way down into memories. It invades plans for the future. He occasionally sits on the windowsill of my sister's hospital room that she and I find ourselves in every few times a year. I wish he wouldn't be sitting on the windowsill of my sister's hospital room. He glares at her and smirks at me. I am not the savior. I can't conquer Death. The wiping of tears, the carrying of burdens, walking her to and from the bathroom and the washing of hair in metal hospital sinks alone will never stop Death's untimely arrival. She's too young, I'm too young. Are we ever ready for death? Even if it is coming, do we live like we are on borrowed time?

Recite the Following Prayers: Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be to the Father….

Leader: Jesus Christ Crucified.

All: Have mercy on Us.

Leader: May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, Rest in peace.

All: Amen.

Thirteenth Station: The Body of Jesus is Taken Down from the Cross

Leader: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

All: Because by your holy cross You have redeemed the world.

A wave of grief clouded the hill. Jesus, you were taken off the wretched cedar and wrapped in delicate linens. Mary Magdalene and Mary, your mother, watched the tomb as your body was laid inside, their eyes a sea of tears.

I descend to the first floor and take slow steps around the curve of the building. The end is drawing near, and I am growing anxious. I am praying for tears, desperate to be cured of this gnawing numbness. Why are you hiding yourself from me even here?

Recite the Following Prayers: Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be to the Father...

Leader: Jesus Christ Crucified.

All: Have mercy on Us.

Leader: May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, Rest in peace.

All: Amen.

Fourteenth Station: Jesus is Laid in the Tomb

Leader: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

All: Because by your holy cross You have redeemed the world.

Jesus, your precious body is prepared for burial. The stone is placed in front of your tomb with sighs of sorrow, not simply resignation.

This way of sorrows ends at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. I watch as countless people stand in line waiting to walk into your grave. The familiar smell of incense creeps into my nostrils as an army of priests emerge. Out of the six denominations that stake claim in this church, I am unsure about where these men belong. Tension lingers in the air like smoke, and I can see the reverent, yet territorial, looks in their eyes.

Please draw near amidst the uneasiness and chaos of murmuring tongues. Remind me that you died not for power or gain, but simply for love.

Recite the Following Prayers: Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be to the Father...

Leader: Jesus Christ Crucified.

All: Have mercy on Us.

Leader: May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, Rest in peace.

All: Amen.

Creative Nonfiction

Avery Risner

Dear Creator

To force yourself to create is to fight. It is the feeling of staring down at rushing, turbulent waters and beginning to question whether you know how to swim. It is the harsh glare of the sun that evaporates the wisps of brilliant morning fog. Nothing is so fantastic when it must be done. It is better when it *can* be done. There is no pressure or necessity crouching behind *can*, threatening to weave its way into your brain and tell you that you must be perfect *or else.*

But *to* create. To create is to be struck by the warm sunbeam of magic. Of a shimmery, swirling, ethereal something that is simply too good to be true. Such as an ancient well you are sure has run dry yet always has more to give. You don't know where it comes from, but you don't question it. Without the rushing flood of currents wrapping about your mouth, you are able to breathe. You sprint through the wildflower field of your own mind, unburdened by the worldly weight of expectations, and are amazed with what you are able to discover. To create is to want and wish and dream and laugh and pour out your heart on a page you do not care if anyone sees. The crushing pressure of timelines, of due dates, of the piercing eyes and lips of critics work only to leech the overwhelming magic out of creation. If you create for them, you create for naught, for you do not create. You only pound out a necessary rhythm to impress everyone but yourself.

If you wish to create, then you must work to drown out the universe while falling deeper into it. You must create from the world, but never for the world. What castles you construct and turbulent waters you traverse must be for you, and only you. And when you create only for you, a bright, sparkling touch of magic, its glow shall permeate around you, and you will find that, while it wasn't created for the world, the world always finds a place for magic.

To create in the world, you must *fight* to thrust your head above the turbulent waters so you *can* feel the warm sunbeam of magic across your face. You must continue to draw from the well even as the harsh glare threatens to evaporate your work. To force yourself to create is to fight against yourself. But to create. To create is to fight for yourself.

Poetry

Dora Baca

Incomprehensive Guide to Gremlins

I. In Case of Caring

Why must I befriend these needy greedy gremlins?
Why must my head hurt from all their childish ramblings?

They're hard to hold—for long periods of time, and it feels like my health is on the decline—simply from staying by their side!

In the rare times that I feel fine, caring hurls me into their sticky plights!

Though I fight to hold a sparkle in my eyes, to keep my words mirthy, quirky, and light, it's hard to express delight when pushed to emphasize.

But it's even scarier sometimes when my life remains undimmed by their cries…

Have I given up the fight?
How can I feel alright when they're breaking and demanding motherly lies?
Have I been desensitized?
It doesn't feel right... to be steady in these times, but I can't afford to sigh, else I breathe my last and die.

It can't be right to feel just fine when at my brink guilt washes me over and their cries run in my mind, they splinter my feeble "alrights" until there's nothing but cold and shivering demise...

So I will go forth and seek this fine (surely this will heal their trying times).

Yes, I'll gather supplies and find a land of joy amok.
I'll trek to find the ever-distant Fine and meet the distant imps and their trials.

Because these gremlins need this heart and mind, and for them I'll stay together,

(I shall not fall apart).

II. Imps of Fine

These icky-sticky imps gather branches, mud, and rocks; many remains from their endeavors, for they love to run amok, scattered and strewn; however, they must not entrap nor lock.

Time is nigh, I gather my strength and ne'er sigh, for I cannot stay at Fine forever– though I may be shielded, safe, and dry.

So, I'll forge a walking stick from their twiglets and their vines– it shall help me stay upright.
I'll thread in strands of lemongrass and ward away goodbyes.

Foraged berries will keep me sound.
Elderflowers, burdock root, and dandelions are around. The imps gave me wild yarrow and yaupon holly–more than enough abounds. Yes, with them I'll make a most medicinal soup!

I'll weave daisies, moss, and lichen, into luxurious armored jewelry. A ring of tweed, Queen Anne's finest string, tickles my chest and neck, and I won't rest until the roses and hemlock they fancy trickle down my heart and hands.

A lucky rock will never weigh too much.
Yes, these imps have been around, and though they oft inter me with silly flowers and weeds, their mirthful tricks will not deter. They gnaw and steal my homesick heart and will. So I sit with bittersweet content and temporary chagrin.

I love the imps so much it smarts, and I feel home at Fine. But sometimes, when it's night, I'll think of my needy greedy gremlins, and I'll sigh.

Poetry

Clay Birchfield

The Antique Mirror

An “antique” mirror above our mantle

reflects a green-silvered glare across the
knit couch and crowded coffee table in
the living room of the only house I
have ever known.

The pewter rivets that border the glass
are dusted with cheap grey paint, suggesting
the mirror remembers more than it has
reflected. Eyes,

tired, hang above the dirt-filled bags, heavy
purple, and filled up with red-clay taken
from the irises that saw premature
goodbyes. I hoped

the dirt would nurture the roots I planted
when I was handed these new boughs to bare.
The glass is scratched from when my folks moved it
in. It cuts right

through my face, separating the eyes I
own from the rest of what you’ve given me:
the strong nose, set mouth, and wide brow that are
carved into the

bark of a white oak grown in haste to hold
together the old, loose earth that remains.
Some days the creaking of my branches bring
back the worries

that I will hear the deep groaning of wood
that cries before I break and leave all of
the earth beneath me loose once more. But it
never comes.

Instead I watch this reflection of you

hold firm, shouldering the weight and standing with
this burden I keep in your stead, until
you take it back.

For now I'll watch your hand
wipe away a tear, one
that would water
the soil you tilled for me before you left.

Poetry

Abi Doremus

The Proffering

"For it is true we can seldom help those closest to us. Either we don't know what part of ourselves to give or, more often than not, the part we have to give is not wanted. And so it is those we live with and should know who elude us. But we can still love them - we can love completely, without complete understanding." —Norman Maclean, A River Runs Through It and Other Stories

I am no bear, tight muscled and terrible,
and I do not thrash like the swirling kings of the sea—
I cannot strike, pummel, scar, or stampede.
Sometimes I would like to, but it has never been my way.
Rather, I am a bird.

Resident of open doorways, soft-feathered and breakable,
Comfortable in quiet spaces, and happiest outside.
Flappable, ironically, and often hesitant.
But I am present seen or unseen,
And always a short flight away.

In this winter, let me perch near you a moment longer,
though I do not know what song would help.
If no song of mine is called for, I will settle quietly beside you,
And we can listen to the wind together.
Birds can be silent creatures, too.

I will love you this way,
In the way that birds know how.
Bringing to your side silver buttons of my attention,
Acorns of my listening ear,
and the short, snapped twigs of comfort and provision.

These things I have for you will not always be the right fit.
But while you labor, hunt, scrap, and weaken,
I will piece together a nest—a safe place above the world.
This is what birds do!
And when your dusk darkens, come rest in a space prepared for you.

Sometimes you will need a fighting friend
To provide all the wild roaring that I cannot render.

But at some point in everyone's life, they need a bird.
And I am a bird!
And when you need a bird, I will be myself for you.

Poetry

Caroline Ingraham

Women She Has Never Seen Before

I like to remember
Each Fourth of July that
We spent together. A grandma
Reunited with her girls after far too much time;
A grandpa next to her with a matching smile. When
Can I go swimming with her like all those summers before?

I want to take her to the pool before
It's too late. I want to remember
How I saw her floral swimsuit underwater when
I squinted my eyes open against that
Harsh sting from the nasty chlorine. I lost track of time
Floating beside her, just me and my grandma.

She is the only grandma
I have now, and before
That fact can worsen my worry, I want to freeze time
And appreciate how she made sure I will always remember
My other grandmother. She has always told me stories that
Included both of them from way back when,

Back when
I had to specify either "Grandma Judy" or simply "Grandma."
It's been a while since I've had to do that.
Grandma Judy passed before
I realized what passing meant. Now all Grandma and I do is remember
Our time with her, our brief but precious time.

But I am starting to feel that I'm running out of time
With her, too. When
I heard about her diagnosis, all I could do was remember
All the instances when Grandma
Couldn't. She began to repeat stories I've heard before;

I told myself that was normal, though. Everyone does that.

But it all makes sense now with that
Stupid diagnosis. It reminds me that time
Is running out, and it might not be long before
She forgets things entirely, when
My sisters and I will have to beg, “Grandma,
Please remember.”

A time may come when she can’t remember
The names of those who call her “grandma,” but I know that
We’ll still be by her side, even if we look like women she has never seen before.

Short Fiction

Will Cairns

Pop Pop's Pond

This looks like a good place to fish, I thought to myself as I walked down the dock. There was no one else around, and the wall of trees hid the pond from the road perfectly. If the sun had come up, the clouds made sure I couldn't tell. The sound of birds, bugs, and frogs filled the atmosphere. They somehow made it feel more silent than it would have been if they were quiet.

I opened my tackle box and tied on a hook. The nightcrawlers I had bought an hour before were extra lively today. It took me a second, but I got one and hooked it three times before casting into the middle of the pond, sending ripples to every edge of it.

I felt a bite. I set the hook. It was gone. I cast again. Another bite. I set the hook again. Nothing.

Getting frustrated, I tied on a lure and cast as far as I could, landing it just under an elegant weeping willow on the other side of the pond. I reeled like my dad taught me: two quick reels, one slow, jerk it forward, repeat. I didn't feel a single bite for what felt like hours, changing lures every so often. I must have used all of them.

My heart lurched as I heard a gunshot. A duck fell from the sky and landed right in front of me on the dock. Stunned, startled, and starting to worry, I looked behind me to where the shot came from.

"My apologies," an old man said in a gruff voice. "Can't eat fish every day."

"Yeah." I laughed nervously. "Is this your dock?"

"It's my grandfather's. I'm just watching it for him." He was wearing jeans, a flannel shirt, and sandals, all of which had seen better days. He had his shotgun open, balancing over his right shoulder.

"I didn't mean to trespass," I said, trying my best not to sound scared. "I'll just grab my stuff and get out of your hair."

He furrowed his brow and squinted. He looked like he wanted to kill me. "I don't take kindly to trespassers."

He must have seen the fear in my eyes, because after a few seconds his glare began to morph into a warm smile. "I'm just messin' with you," he said, chuckling. "Pop Pop always loved visitors. I haven't gotten any for a while. Any luck with the fish?"

I laughed awkwardly in relief. "Not exactly. They either steal my worms or I pull the hook right out of their mouths. And they don't want anything to do with my lures."

"Store-bought worms?" he asked, looking at the container.

"Yeah." I held the container out to him.

He closed the shotgun and rested it on the side of the dock. He reached into the dark, moist dirt, and pulled out a handful of worms.

"Use these," he said.

I held out my nightcrawler cup. The kind old man added about three handfuls of worms straight from the dirt.

I removed my lure and replaced it with a hook, then hooked one of the worms. I cast over to the left where I had been getting the most bites, and the old man watched me intently. I sat for about thirty seconds, and then my rod bent forward. I pulled it towards me, but the fish came off, and I reeled in an empty hook.

As I did this, the old man stepped onto the dock, walked past me, and picked up the ill-fated duck by its feet. He began to walk away. Without turning his head, the man said, “Hook it through the head, push the worm up the hook, and leave just the tail hangin’ off.”

I did what he said and cast again in the same spot.

Bite, set, gone.

I tried again. I tried four more times. No good.

This vicious cycle must have lasted thirty minutes. I tried again, hooking it the way he said. I cast as far as I could. After thirty seconds, the line jumped ever so slightly. I let the fish take it. I had him. I reeled quickly and steadily. My forearms were beginning to hurt from the tension. He wasn’t making it easy. As I brought him closer to the dock, I caught a glimpse of the monster of a fish. When he was right under the dock, I lay on my stomach and readied the net with my left hand. Just as I got his tail in it, he jumped out of the water. When he landed back in the net, I went with him headfirst.

I frantically searched for the dock with my right hand. I found something, but it wasn’t the dock. I still had the fish, and the kind old man pulled me slowly back onto the dock and up to my feet.

“Careful, now,” he said, catching his breath

“Thank you.” I coughed, my shirt dripping water everywhere.

“That’s a real nice carp. I didn’t know they got this big here.”

I strained to lift the fish by its gills, and the old man measured it with his arms.

“Four feet, probably about fifty pounds. No wonder he took you with him,” he said, impressed.

I admired the fish for a moment, and then kneeled down to release him.

"Wait, let me get a picture." There was a subtle innocence in his voice.

I hoisted the fish up with both hands. The old man took a Polaroid camera from his backpack, snapped a picture, and slid it into his shirt pocket.

Relieved, I rested the fish's tail on the dock. I could barely feel my arms.

"Come down here," the old man called over his shoulder, walking around the dock to the edge of the water. "Let's give him a proper release."

I followed him. We released the fish and went back to the end of the dock. There, a cooler sat where the duck landed earlier.

"Sandwich?" he asked.

"Absolutely."

I had never had duck before, but it was certainly fresh. It may have been better than chicken, though I felt a little bad for the guy. We sat on the edge of the dock, watching the fish feed as we ate.

"What's your name?" I asked after a minute or two.

"Theo."

"I'm Wesley. Thomas. Thanks for letting me fish here. And for catching me." I took another bite. "And for the sandwich," I said with a full mouth.

"Happy to share the pond with someone else for a change, Wesley Thomas," Theo said.

I finished my sandwich, and Theo pulled a thermos from his backpack. He poured two cups of black coffee, and we sipped it as the sun peeked through the clouds. The morning light made everything in sight more vibrant than anything I'd ever seen before.

"It's great coffee," I said.

"Hmm? Oh, yeah. Thanks. I roast my own beans," he said. Whatever he was thinking about as he gazed at the pond, it wasn't coffee.

I took another sip.

Theo remembered something. He reached into his backpack again. "Sorry—meant to give you this earlier," he said, holding out a t-shirt. "Figured I'd bring you one, since yours is wet and all."

I smiled. "Thank you."

He turned his head the other way so I could change my shirt.

"How long have you lived here?" I asked when I was finished.

"As long as I can remember. My parents died before I knew them, and I lived with Pop Pop until he died when I was not much younger than you are now." There was a hint of pain in his voice.

"I'm sorry you lost them." I took a sip of coffee and debated if I should say anything else. "Have you been on your own since then?"

"Not my whole life." He took a long, deep breath. "I loved someone once, but nothing lasts forever."

"Yeah. I know what you mean."

Theo ripped off a piece of his sandwich bread and tossed it to a duck waiting patiently by his dangling feet.

"My dad loved fishing," I said.

"Fishing makes you feel closer to him, doesn't it?"

I nodded subtly. Theo looked at me with sorry eyes. "You're welcome to fish here any time," he said warmly.

"Thank you. It's a beautiful place." I took it in again. It was as if this pond were the entire world; the trees a barrier with nothing beyond.

We finished the coffee, and Theo went back to his house to get his fishing rod.

When he came back, we fished for hours. The pond was not exactly small, but we must have caught every fish that swam in it. We didn't see the record-setting carp again; I guessed it was tired after its big fight. We mostly fished in silence (normal fishing etiquette), but every once in a while, Theo taught me something I didn't know. This included about twenty new knots, which I hoped to remember a few of.

As the sun was setting, Theo taught me to tie a fly.

"I've never fly fished before. It's cool you can just make your own," I said.

"That's the beauty of it. You gotta know what the fish want, and give it to 'em."

We finished tying our flies. His looked like it was ready to fly away. Mine just looked like a ball of yarn.

"That's a good start," he said encouragingly. "Gotta get it tighter next time."

"I also need to learn how to fly fish."

He chuckled. "I have two rods; maybe sometime next week I could take you to Moss Creek and teach you."

"I'd like that."

The sun was almost invisible, but the remnants of its light ignited the weeping willow. The choir of cicadas was competing with the frogs, and I couldn't tell who was winning.

"I'd better head home," I said. "It really is beautiful here."

"I meant it when I said you can come here any time." I could tell he genuinely wanted me to. "It's what Pop Pop would want."

"I will. He'd be proud of how you've kept it."

"Thank you." He smiled warmly. For a moment, I thought I saw a small tear in his eye.

"I'm sure I'll see you soon." I turned to walk away, tackle box and rod in my hands.

"See you, Wesley," he spoke softly.

"See you, Theo."

As I walked home, I couldn't have been happier about the best day of my life since I lost my parents.

I came back to the pond four days later, and I fished for about an hour, no sign of Theo. I heard a commotion from the direction of his house and followed the dirt path that led there. I ended up at a relatively small, but well-kept house. A thin, middle-aged man walked out of it.

"Is this Theo's house?" I asked, approaching him.

"Let me see..." He looked at a clipboard. My heart sank as I expected the worst. "The owner of this house is Theodore Poppin," he said. "It seems he passed away last night. I'm here to get his affairs in order." He looked at me, "Who are you?"

My throat started to ache. "Friend. He was my friend," was all I could manage to say.

I started to walk toward the door. "I'm sorry, I can't let you go inside if you're not a family member," he said.

"Right. I understand."

I turned to walk away. As soon as he wasn't watching, I went around the back to try to get inside. I tried the back door, and it opened.

The house looked like it hadn't changed since the fifties. Everything looked old, but it was so well-kept that it almost looked new.

There was a fishing rod in every corner of the forest-green walls, and right next to the entrance was a huge case of fishing lures. I looked in. In the center was a small fly made of black and red thread. Under it was a label that read, “Pop pop’s first fly.” Next to his was a black and yellow one labeled, “Theo’s first fly.” Another one was titled “Ella’s first fly.”

My throat started to burn. I wished so badly that I could have known Theo longer.

I tried to find Theo’s room. I went up the red-carpeted stairs to the second floor, and there were two rooms. On the left was a bedroom with a single queen bed and a dresser, and on the right was a small office. I went into the office.

Everything was very organized. It was full of books, though about half of them were about fishing. On top of one of the shelves, there were about fifteen trophies for bass fishing and fly-fishing competitions.

On his desk was a worn, black leather journal. I couldn’t help my curiosity. When I picked it up, an old photo of a beautiful young blonde woman fell out. I opened to the most recent entry. It read:

5 April

Dear Ella,

Today was probably my favorite day since you passed. I met the kindest young man named Wesley. We fished together and got to know each other. He reminded me of myself at his age. Remember when we were so young that we had no idea how things would turn out, but we already knew what loss felt like? I just hope it’s easier for him. I want to share his burden—I can tell it’s heavy. I really hope I see him again. I think I’m going to teach him to fly fish.

I miss you, dear.

Love, Theo

"Hey," said a voice from behind me. "I thought I told you—."

He cut himself off when he saw the tears in my eyes.

"Sorry," I said, rubbing my eyes.

He tried to speak delicately. "I am truly sorry for your loss. Unfortunately—."

"You leave that poor young man alone, Mr. Wilkes," said a woman's voice from the stairs.

I peered out the door to see who she was. She wore scrubs and looked like she was about fifty.

"Hello, Mrs. Holland," said Mr. Wilkes, his voice heavy with disappointment.

"It's okay, I'll just go," I said quietly.

"Are you Wesley?" asked Mrs. Holland.

"I am…" I said with confusion.

"Come here," she said to Mr. Wilkes. "Wait in there for a minute, Wesley."

She grabbed his wrist and took him into the bedroom, closing the door. I stayed just outside the door. Mrs. Holland whispered just loudly enough that I caught nearly everything.

"He wrote a will," she said.

"What?"

"Theo, last night—on his deathbed. I witnessed it."

"Even with a witness, it could take a court case to transfer ownership."

"Court case it is, then," she said forcefully.

"Who could he possibly leave his property to? You?"

"He left it to Wesley."

"What?" I whispered, heart thudding.

"Keep your voice down," said Mr. Wilkes.

At that point, I decided it was time for me to leave. I went downstairs to get a glass of water and process what I had just heard. Something on the fridge caught my eye. My Polaroid photo sat in the very center. Below it, the words "Pop pop's pond record" were written in permanent marker. I smiled and got myself a glass of water from the sink. My throat burned again.

I peered out the window. There was a shed just outside the kitchen door. I drank my water, took a deep breath, and went in. Inside were all kinds of fishing gear, tools, and a small pile of wood. I had an idea.

After about fifteen minutes, I was finished. I walked back down to the pond and put it right next to the dock. It was perfect.

The pond finally had a proper sign. On it were the words:

Pop Pop's Pond

For Theo

The kindest man I ever met

I sat on the edge of the dock. The pink sunset reflected beautifully on the still water of the pond.

Commentary

Maddie Benton

From Pen to Paper:

An Examination of the Power of Writing to Cultivate Attention

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As the opening guitar strings of my alarm song pluck me out of sleep, I throw my hand over the side of my bed, reaching for my notebook. Did I leave it in my purse again or take the time to dutifully place it back in the top drawer of my nightside table? After I find it, I pull the cord to my lamp which emits a satisfying metallic *ching!* and click my black gel pen. I sit up and open to the next blank page. A sliver of sunlight escapes my curtains, slicing a diagonal bar across the creamy pages of my journal that I gently smooth just to feel the softness of the parchment. I inhale and begin putting pen to paper.

Part of the reason I begin each day with writing is because there is no better way to cultivate my attention. Attention is simply concentrated thought, effort, and focus directed toward a particular object, task, or idea. It is the process of being completely involved in something and is required to do any difficult thing well. But in a world where everything and everyone seems busier and more frantic than ever before, attention is often in short supply. Still, writing remains one of the few tasks that requires undivided attention. Other interactions with language such as hearing, speaking, and copying words can be done with partial attention, but we cannot craft anything out of language without our full attention. Perhaps this is what makes writing so difficult: it is incredibly costly, demanding a sacrifice not only of our time but of our focus, our mind-space. But this is also what makes writing so valuable. Even though good

writing demands our attention, it also strengthens it, enabling us to effectively communicate via the written word and to be more attentive in other areas of our lives.

Attention to Discovery in Writing

Staring at my bullet-pointed outline on my "Brainstorm" page, I reread my points one more time before I open a blank document. Enough planning, it's time to write. My cursor blinks at me mockingly, daring me to start. I take a small comfort in typing my heading, knowing that at least here I know what to say. But now comes a major feat of attention: crafting the first draft. My fingers clatter across the keyboard as I type as quickly as I can to get ideas down before I forget them or second-guess myself to the point of oblivion. I try to focus on crafting each paragraph individually, taking each idea one at a time. A few hours of intense attention later, I have several pages and the satisfying feeling that comes from creating something out of nothing. But as I begin arguing my next point, the click-clack of the keys becomes less frantic. I reference my outline. Is this *really* what I planned to argue? Suddenly, my fingers stop typing altogether, and I realize that I no longer believe this part of my argument. The first few paragraphs have changed my mind. I hesitate as I stare at the draft before me, two words buzzing in my brain: what next?

This scene specifically comes from my experience writing my most recent essay, but it's a fairly common part of my drafting process. I almost always change my mind about what I want to say and often completely reorient at least one of my central points. Perhaps rather obviously, prewriting requires attention as we brainstorm the argument we want to make or the story we want to tell and make a plan for how to do so. But my writing rarely goes according to plan. Usually, I change my mind once I start writing or think of a new point I want to include alongside my original ones, but this, too, is an act of attention, a process that writing scholar

Peter Elbow calls a "major mess": when an "opposing argument" suddenly "blows up your whole draft in your hands." But like Elbow, I have come to accept such moments as opportunities to make "progress in [my] thinking" (Elbow 131).

Writing often generates new ideas, a process called writing as discovery. This is because as we write, we give our ideas a different and more concentrated form of attention than brainstorming as we confront our opinions and thoughts and distill them into something easily communicable to others. This unique kind of attention often leads us to change our minds or come up with a better way to make our point or tell our story. When writing the essay described above, I realized that things were more complicated than I had planned for in my outline, and this was a good thing; it enabled me to make a more complex argument. When writing, we must pay attention to the texture of every sentence we craft, but we also must be aware of what our sentences are building to; perhaps they are giving us the words to articulate a point that hadn't been clear to us before.

This type of attention is not just for crafting arguments in academic writing but also generating new plot points in creative writing. I recently wrote a short story in which I had a clear character and theme in mind but struggled with my plot. I just kept putting my character in new situations until I found one that fit. Every time I wrote a new draft, my character became better developed and my theme became more apparent as I discovered what plot points best characterized my protagonist and communicated my theme. At first, a social security worker came to the main character's house, but in the final draft, it became a story about her CVS run. Even though I began the story with a general idea I wanted to explore, it wasn't until I began writing that I could see where I wanted the piece to go. It is only by paying attention to our

writing that we can listen to our own words to discover new ideas and consider arguments or plot points we may have never thought about before. Paying attention to writing, of course, makes us better writers. The more we write about a topic, the more we explore it and the better we understand it. As we change our piece to match this new understanding, we strengthen it. But paying attention to writing to generate ideas allows us to be more attentive and better critical thinkers in other aspects of our lives as well, challenging us to consider problems from multiple angles and craft well-informed arguments instead of just following our initial reactions. When we learn to be writers who change our minds, we learn to be people who change our minds. Writing does not magically make us more attentive humans, but practicing the skills good writing requires trains us to think critically in other parts of our lives as well.

Attention to Re-see our Writing

I let the door close behind me with a frustrated huff and begin my trek toward the small hill beside my dorm room. Walking at my average frustrated pace, it takes about five minutes to reach the small, peeling tree surrounded by the semicircle of a short brick wall where I sit, feet dangling over the edge. I come here when I simply can't work on the same assignment anymore, and typically this assignment is fixing a paper. I know that it needs improvement and that there is something wrong with it, but I just can't figure out what that is. This stage of the writing process is revision, re-seeing your piece and transforming it. Revision requires a different type of attention than drafting. We must switch methods of contemplation and see our piece from an outsider's perspective and read it like a critic or like our audience. Elbow notes that writing "calls on the two opposite skills of creativity and critical thinking" (Elbow 8), and the best way to deal with this tension is to "be loose and accepting as you do fast early writing; then be

critically toughminded as you revise what you have produced" (9). Separating the creative and critical into drafting and revising allows us to craft both creative and well-polished ideas. Admittedly, the critical aspect of attention is the most difficult for me to cultivate in my own writing process, as you probably guessed by my rage walks. When I draft a piece, I often lose myself, moving quickly and generating ideas. Revision, on the other hand, requires attention to examine my writing and note my flaws, to be courageous enough to admit that my ideas could be presented better or even changed entirely.

So, let's say I've come back from my tree walk. I'm feeling a little refreshed, but I still don't know how to "solve" the draft. I stare at it, highlighting different sentences and hovering my finger over the delete key before ultimately chickening out. How could I delete that paragraph? I *love* that paragraph. I hate the idea of ripping my draft to shreds, even if I know it needs work; somehow it feels too much like destroying my creation. To combat my revising-phobia, if I feel a piece needs major edits, I make a copy of my original document and alter the copy, promising myself I can always go back to the original if it's better. It's rarely better, but I like the security that if I delete something from my copy, it still exists in my original. Sometimes I merge the two pieces, taking sentences or even whole paragraphs from one and inserting them into the other, and this freedom often allows me to create something new. Thus, the attention needed to revise a piece is totally different from that of drafting. Instead of listening to ideas, now you're on the hunt for the weak parts of your piece and how to strengthen them. Revision, too, cultivates attention in other areas of our lives. It teaches us that our first attempt often isn't our best work and grows humility as we carefully analyze our work with an eye toward improvement, teaching us the attention critical to refining.

But it is possible to over revise. Part of attentiveness to writing is knowing when it's time to stop revising either to share your piece and then return to revision or to let it go. When revising a recent essay, I read it to myself over and over again. I got to the point where I had nearly every sentence memorized and could practically recite the piece without looking at the text. I could no longer see the paper through a critic's eyes; I only saw it through my own. Usually, for me, this means one of two things. The first is that perhaps it's time to invite someone else into my revision process. When I am struggling to examine my piece as a reader and not as the writer, then sometimes the best thing to do is to share it with a true reader. I recently shared a story I had written in my creative writing class for a workshop, basically a group revision session. Several of my classmates asked questions about parts of the story I hadn't thought about or had assumed were self-explanatory. As obvious as it may sound, allowing others to read the piece helped me to see my own blind spots and make necessary changes. My attention alone was insufficient to bring the piece to its full potential, but when many people fixed their focus on it, I saw a clear path toward improvement. But other times, such as with the paper I had memorized, getting stuck on a piece means it's time to let it go. It's difficult to know when to release a piece, and there is no definite marker, but eventually, we have to surrender it, admitting that no matter how much time we spend on our writing, we'll never be able to refine it to perfection. Sometimes paying attention to our writing means to stop revising, hear its plea for release, and to trust that it is capable of doing the work we have crafted it to do. Perhaps this form of attentiveness connects most obviously to the non-writing world. Writing teaches us the importance of relying on others' input and the impossibility of perfection in all our work.

Attention to the Form of Our Writing

I felt a pleasing sense of completion and satisfaction as I reread the latest draft of my poem. After several complete overhauls, I had finally come to a piece that I was satisfied with. I read over my original draft, shocked that it only had a few lines in common with the newest version. In the original I struggled to justify why it was a poem instead of a narrative. Though I was passionate about the topic, the original read like a story with line breaks. Eventually I recognized that while I had given the poem's content the attention it deserved, I had not given the same level of attention to the form. In my new draft I changed the poem from free verse to a syllabic form, which enabled me to communicate both the idea and tone I wanted. This reveals yet another type of attention writing requires: attention to the way form and content marry. This is perhaps most obvious in poetry where the form often does the same amount of work as the words themselves, but it is also true in other genres of writing. Sometimes creative pieces end up being much shorter or longer than we intended, or they move into different genres entirely. When I write academic papers, I often rearrange my paragraphs to more clearly convey my thesis. Writing requires not just focus on what we are communicating but also on the way that we communicate it.

This is also a crucial issue in creative nonfiction. This genre, which may initially sound like a contradiction of terms, involves telling true stories in a narrative format, an unusual combination of form and style that requires attention to execute. One of my favorite pieces of creative nonfiction that I've written was a piece about memory. It blended personal stories about my own memories, history about my great-grandmother and the memories she left behind when she died, and research about the scientific process of remembering and forgetting. This piece

required attention as I concentrated on developing the various "strands" of the essay, ensuring that I explained each one in depth but also clarifying how they tied to the larger theme of memory. This attentiveness to the link between form and content once again has applications beyond enabling us to execute sophisticated writing. As we learn to match our medium and our message, we can more effectively present our ideas to communicate with others and notice when form and content clash.

Writing to Cultivate our Attention

As I put pen to paper for the first time of the day, I blink through sleep, dragging my pen across the page, leaving my tall, loopy letters in its wake. I start with the same few sentences every morning and then plunge in. My journaling cultivates a different kind of attention from any other kind of writing I will do throughout the day ahead. This is partially because no one will ever read it–even I rarely reread my own journal entries, and I certainly don't revise them. But the most radical difference comes in their content. I begin each day by writing out my prayers, by transcribing my communication with God. Instead of attentiveness to places the piece needs improvement or the effectiveness of my medium, this type of writing requires attentiveness to the Divine. When journaling each morning I seek to focus my thoughts on God as I speak to Him and listen to discern His response. Since writing already requires and grows so many different forms of attention, I find it the perfect tool to generate a posture of spiritual attention, articulating things I struggle to do without a pen and paper. My coming day will demand attentiveness as I engage in various types of writing and live in a distracted world, so before I start, I write, giving attention to the Author of Life.

Attention in Action

As I finish this piece, I think about how it has demanded my attention every step of the way. It took attention to generate an idea that I was passionate about and to connect it to the theme of the journal. It took attention to craft the first draft and craft new ideas as I kept writing. As per usual for my writing, most of the attention it took came in revision. It took attention to go through the piece as a critic and to share it with people who provided comments that helped me improve it. It took attention to completely restructure the piece around the new ideas I had discovered in my drafting and to change the form and tone of my piece to match the new ideas. (Let's just say there were a lot of frustrated walks involved.) And now, after many, many rereads, it takes attention (and perhaps a little courage) for me to hear my paper's plea for release and trust that it is capable of doing the work I have crafted it to do.

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Commentary

Alaina Boyer

Reception as the Highest Form of Attention:

Nietzsche, the Spanish Mystics, and Writing as the Path to Spiritual Receptivity

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I came to college as an agnostic Christian ministry major. My faith had collapsed two years prior in one of the back rooms of my home church during a prayer meeting. It was there that I realized I had never questioned the narrative I was given as a child raised in a tight-knit Baptist church in Alabama. I had not considered a reality where Jesus Christ was not the God of the universe – I had never considered a reality where there was not a God at all. This unforeseen spiritual torment was not an invitation for a joyous exit from the confines of religion for me. Rather, I despaired to the point of wanting to take my own life for years on end. I concluded that if the universe showed itself to be untouched by a divine hand, and I was merely a mass of atoms, then the endless cycle of trials and fleeing joys was not worth suffering through. How's that for a theodicy?

For some undeterminable reason - even to this day - I could not let go of this pursuit of faith. I decided that if I could not believe myself, then at least I could be sent to give the gift of faith I once had to others all around the world. Call it intellectual dishonesty or cognitive dissonance, but I think at the very core of my being I knew that there was some truth to be found in the tradition that I grew up with. Perhaps I thought that if I only saw the light come on in others' eyes, maybe it would return to me, too. There was a tangible void in my soul where my faith once resided, and I refused to fill it with fanciful delusions. I didn't want comfort; I wanted truth. For it was only in ascertaining the truth that I could truly find comfort. Throughout this

time of spiritual desolation, I continually resorted to writing as an attempt to externalize the noise of the doubts that were consuming me. What I could not bring myself to pray—or expose to devout family and friends—I wrote on countless notebook pages and scraps of paper, which I pinned to the wall of my closet like a manifesto of faith, trying to piece together what I could actually believe. I did this, not yet knowing that writing would be my way back—not as a means of analysis, but as a means of reception.

In the ruins of my belief, I stumbled into philosophy. Friedrich Nietzsche became my reluctant companion, grim and magnetic in all the ways the Christian faith had ceased to be. At this point, I didn't find solace in prayer or poetry, but rather his articulation of all that I found to be empty about the doctrines of my upbringing. One declaration from his work entitled *The Anti-Christ* captivated me in particular. He states:

> It is false to the point of absurdity to see in a 'belief,' perchance the belief in redemption through Christ, the distinguishing characteristic of the Christian: only Christian practice, a life such as he who died on the cross lived, is Christian . . . To reduce being a Christian, Christianness, to a holding of something to be true, to a mere phenomenality of consciousness, means to negate Christianness (Nietzsche 163).

Nietzsche put into words the frustration I felt with the modern understanding of soteriology as a singular moment—an ephemeral declaration that saved one from eternal hellfire. I wondered how mere epistemic belief could usher in the kingdom of God in the present moment in a meaningful way. It seemed that all the goodness of Christianity was to be continuously postponed to some disembodied reality that could only be attained after death.

And yet, even as Nietzsche gave voice to my disillusionment, something beyond the reach of critique began to compel me—something not merely doctrinal, but alive. The "true

myth" of Jesus Christ, to borrow C.S. Lewis's term, was drawing me in, beckoning me to enter the kingdom with all of myself: body and soul. I began to see him everywhere: in art, in literature, in unexpected moments of beauty that cracked open my hardened mind. Slowly, I started to experience glimmers of a beatific vision in daily life. And yet, I resisted. Beneath the surface of that spiritual awakening was still an abyss of unbelief. I couldn't cognitively ascend to the truths I had been told were "necessary" for salvation. I couldn't will my doubt into resurrection. I tried apologetics. I even threw myself wholeheartedly into Cartesian philosophy for a time, hoping certainty could rescue me— but both left me stranded in skepticism: of the world, of truth itself, and of my ability to know anything with confidence.

Next, I turned inward. I tried the path of self-modification—or rather, self-mortification—only to find myself wondering how many times I could metaphorically gouge out my eyes or dismantle parts of myself before I had done enough penance to move forward spiritually. I had confused suffering with sanctification. At times, it felt as though I had to tear myself apart to prove I was worthy of grace. I had come to believe that it was God who was my accuser and that it was only the repetition of outward religious practice that could set me into motion once again. I embraced what I've come to call the gospel of "Quiet Time Christianity," convinced that the pinnacle of faith was sitting in the corner of my room, candle lit, reading a few passages of scripture before moving on with the rest of my day.

Every path I tried seemed to lead me further into confusion. Instead, I became even more entrenched in the felt sense that the Christian life was meaningless and monochromatic. There was no path for true progress, only a means to temper the reluctant love of God which was somehow attained by the intellectual ascent to the right beliefs and the "not-doing" of that which he abhorred. The Christian faith became a life of doing less, or rather, becoming less. However, I

began to feel something stir—something that wanted to respond, not with argument, but with presence. I wasn't yet sure what form that response would take, but eventually, it found its form in writing.

That small act of expression became a thread I followed, even as I remained committed to the task of quarrying whatever was good out of Christianity. I began to seek something ancient, a gem that time could not erode. It was in the fall of this past year that my once-Baptist informed ignorance gave way, allowing me to discover the pearl of antiquity—the saints. This came about in a seminar on T.S. Eliot when I became acquainted with the Spanish mystics. As I read his *Four Quartets* I felt a noticeable shift in my spirit. I remember feeling as though I had found something I could truly live and die for and a way that did not require me to set myself right in order to move forward. The sheer humility of my human condition was not an obstacle – it was the way. In "East Coker" Eliot practically paraphrases the notable Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross's *Dark Night of the Soul*. He writes:

> To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
> You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.
> In order to arrive at what you do not know
> You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
> In order to possess what you do not possess
> You must go by the way of dispossession.
> In order to arrive at what you are not
> You must go through the way in which you are not.
> And what you do not know is the only thing you know
> And what you own is what you do not own

And where you are is where you are not. (Eliot lines 87-96)

In these few short lines, I was introduced to a new kind of faith—a faith not grounded in certainty, mastery, or self-modification, but in surrender, mystery, and paradox. It was a faith that did not demand that I become like God in his omnipotence or omniscience, but rather by joining with Christ in his kenotic, self-emptying, way. Eliot's words, and by extension St. John of the Cross's, offered a vision of the spiritual life where emptiness was not a failure but the means by which I could be entirely receptive to the fullness of God. This was the opposite of the faith I tried to live for so long: it did not begin with willpower or theological correctness, but with a relinquishing of both. The week I discovered this, I committed to silence. I abstained from all noise, both informative and entertaining– and I listened. Then something strange began to happen. Like a dam giving way after years of silent buildup, the words began to flow. I was writing again. At first, this writing was hesitant and cerebral, a continuation of the thinking that could only divide and never produce any sort of new life. But something shifted. Simone Weil in her work *Waiting for God* captures this experience in her description of attention as "the greatest of all efforts perhaps, but . . . a negative effort" (Weil 61). Over time, writing stopped feeling like an exercise in effort and began to feel like surrender.

And then I encountered the perfect antithesis to that faith of resignation I had grown so accustomed – the one which Nietzsche had rightly criticized in his arguments against Christianity. I turned to a contemporary and friend of St. John of the Cross: Teresa of Avila. In the Fourth Mansion of her work *The Interior Castle*, I found this antithesis. She professes, "If you want to make progress on the path and ascend the places you have longed for, the important thing is not to think much but to love much, and to do whatever best awakens you to love" (Teresa 91). It struck me: I was not going to make progress by thinking, but by loving. I had

spent years trying to find the right argument to truly envelop me in the living narrative of Christianity. I wanted to truly believe it, not just a layer or two deep in my mind, but to my very core. I tried and tried again to reconstruct the evidence in my mind in a way that made the story convincing to me. However, St. Teresa's words awakened something dormant in me—not an idea, for once, but rather a desire. If love was truly the path, I needed to find a way of love that came from my heart. And for me, that love was writing. Not writing as argument or apologetics, but as prayer. As liturgy. As attention. Writing became the posture through which I could both receive and return love.

I had spent years trapped in my mind. Looking back, I realize now that the method I had clung to for so long—gathering arguments, refining beliefs—mirrored my entire understanding of faith. But St. Teresa's words broke that illusion. Her call to love was a call to incarnation—to a faith that involved the body, the senses, the ordinary acts of daily life. It was the beginning of a faith that required not more evidence, but more presence.

In *The Interior Castle,* St. Teresa describes a stage of contemplative prayer called "The Prayer of Quiet" where the individual seeking God experiences a deep stillness and absorption in the presence of God and the soul's will is captivated by love, even if the intellect and memory remain active. To explain this, she gives a powerful metaphor of two fountains that each fill up a basin in a different way. She explains:

> The water from one comes from far away, carried through many aqueducts requiring much ingenuity. [...] I think that the water that comes through the aqueducts is like spiritual consolations in meditation. We draw these consolations through our thoughts. We meditate on created forms to help us, and we fatigue our minds. Finally, through our

> own efforts, comforting feelings come splashing in, making noise as they fill up the basin (Teresa 97).

This first fountain reflects my experience of relying on thought alone to bring me to the depths of faith. Thinking is a beautiful expression of the human *ratio.* It is the sensibility that separates humankind from the beasts. However, thought alone in the pursuit of faith is often treated as an end in itself, but it can only rearrange the content which it itself has consumed. The mind is often fast-paced, ever-branching, and is at its best when it is analyzing by dissecting and reconfiguring. But when the mind is so swamped with content, it can quickly become a cesspool of stagnant ideas with nowhere to go. At least, this was my experience. There was no forward movement through thought alone. I was merely trapped in this sinking cycle of building up momentarily and tearing down repeatedly.

Writing, on the other hand, as an act of generative love, looked a lot more like the second fountain. It was in my pursuit of love beyond understanding that this practice of writing emerged. What once served as a tool for argument and analysis became, instead, a quiet vessel for presence. It was a way of being with God, receiving God, rather than proving him. St. Teresa describes the second fountain saying, “The source of water for the other one is right beside it and the basin fills soundlessly. The spring is abundant and so the basin spills over and a large stream flows from it. This requires no engineering skills or the construction of conduits” (Teresa 97). Writing for me became an act of devotion that flowed from something beyond my will and intellect. It was a unique grace that enraptured me, a grace that God used to draw me into himself. I learned that the utmost I could offer to God was my attention, not as an act of labor or strain, but as an act of openness and stillness before the Divine. Simone Weil concretizes this concept by describing this attention as “suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and

ready to be penetrated by the object . . . our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it" (Weil 62). Unlike thought, writing is slow. My hand will always give out before my mind does and in the space between thought and expression on paper there is a moment, a spark for receiving the "naked truth."

In the purely mental sense, writing is an act of unifying and establishing my thoughts that enables the self-reflection needed to correct my vision of the world and myself, nearing me to truth. But more importantly, in writing I was not dismantling; I was offering. And in that offering, love began to grow again. St. Teresa continues her description of this fountain: "With the other fountain, the water springs directly from its own source: God . . . Later, once the spiritual delight has filled every vessel in the soul, overflowing into all the faculties and each of the dwellings, it reaches the body. That's why I say it starts in God and ends in ourselves" (Teresa 97). Through the profound graces that God was giving me through writing, I began to learn that it is not the engagement of my own will to know and love him that is most meritorious in the spiritual life, but rather my capacity for receptivity that granted me progress toward being unified with Christ. Weil explains it this way "every time that a human being succeeds in an effort of attention with the sole idea of increasing his grasp of truth, he acquires a greater aptitude for grasping it, even if his effort produces no visible fruit" (Weil 59). This act of offering is not my attempt to produce a pleasing product before God, rather it is the offering of my attention – a willingness for my sight to be corrected.

Each morning now, I sit down, and I write, not with the goal of merely putting a wise thought on a page, but in a posture of receptivity. In this daily practice of writing, I am not producing, rather, I am attending to the quiet and yet abundant voice of the Spirit. My attention is

not focused on what I can make of the fractured pieces of my inner life but instead is intent on using writing as a means of honest reflection of what is within my heart. I mean reflection in a very literal sense. I do not interpret, defend, or psychoanalyze the thoughts or stirrings that arise. I simply record them with the aim of writing what *is.* And in this space of quiet availability, I have found the words of Christ to be mysteriously and profoundly true: "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (ESV, Matthew 7:7). What I find is not always insight or resolution to unanswered questions, but presence. A nearness to reality. Writing in this way becomes less about expression and more about communion. It is not a performative act, but a place I return to, a place where I seek with openness and often, quietly, find.

Nietzsche wrote in *The Anti-Christ*, "The 'kingdom of God' is not something one waits for; it has no yesterday or tomorrow, it does not come 'in a thousand years'- it is an experience within the heart; it is everywhere, it is nowhere" (Nietzsche 159). For all his rage against Christianity, there is a sliver of clarity in this line. He caught a glimpse of something real: a way of being that is *present*, vital, and alive with meaning. He adds a deeply truthful, and I believe, literal interpretation of John's words, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (ESV, Matthew 3:12). As I return to Nietzsche's works and my own religious disillusionment with this nascent understanding of the power of humility, receptivity, and attention I am beginning to find that presence is the means of ushering in the Kingdom. And ironically, it was his critiques that helped me to "deconstruct" those beliefs which never belonged in the Kingdom of God in the first place.

The Kingdom is *at hand;* therefore, any act that can awaken us to the present will give Truth, Goodness, and Beauty the chance to show Himself. I no longer look elsewhere to find

God. Writing is where I find the dispensation of God's gift of presence to flow most freely that enables me to engage in His Kingdom must fully –with my undivided attention. The act of writing enables me to be present to the never-ceasing work of God in creation and in my own heart. Writing not as an act of striving, but as surrender. Now I write to be present—to listen, to wait, to let God arrive on His own terms. Perhaps this is how we begin to enter the kingdom: not by grasping, but by receiving. Not by longing for a disembodied heaven, but by being still. Writing, then, becomes a doorway—not to intellectual ascent or moral perfection, but to presence. A presence in which all of the Truth, Goodness, and Beauty that exists is already here, freely given and awaiting our attention.

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Commentary

Sarah Chew

The Wide Fresh Air of the Mind: Reading Love and Attentiveness in *Middlemarch*

I.

In the past few years, we have come face-to-face with a mass reckoning about our ever-growing screen-time reports and compulsive itching for our phones. Suddenly "distraction," "the attention economy," and "focus" are buzzwords, issuing dire warnings that we may be losing our humanity for a price we can hardly justify or even articulate to ourselves. English majors everywhere are wringing our hands about the shortsightedness of Silicon Valley philistines, and maybe, when we're honest, about our own reluctance to bunker down in a novel without leaving an exit route to a less demanding kind of stimulation.

But maybe we risk the opposite tendency too, which is to dig ourselves into a cavern where we think "learning" is to be found, if only we force ourselves to sit still and stay long enough to let our eyes adjust to the dark. When we forget to pay attention, we damage our capacity to appreciate literature, to learn, and to love, but there may be even more danger in treating it just as a duty to fulfill. Louise Rosenblatt may have known something of these twin perils when she wrote *Literature as Exploration*, the 1938 book that became the flagship of reader response theory. In her preface, Rosenblatt says this:

> The word exploration is designed to suggest primarily that the experience of literature, far from being for the reader a passive process of absorption, is a form of intense personal activity. The reader counts for at least as much as the book or poem itself; he responds to some of its aspects and not others; he finds it refreshing and stimulating, or barren and unrewarding. Literature is thus for him a medium of exploration.

In this journey of response, literature is like daily living, but it gives us terrains to explore that we could never access in our usual ecosystems. Literature is not just a simulation of normal experience, however. Later in her book, Rosenblatt explains that in "in our everyday lives, preoccupied as we are with accomplishing some task or attaining some goal, we must often ignore the quality of the moment as it passes," and we focus our attention on the task above all else (39-40). But when we experience art, "our attention is centered precisely on the nature and quality of what is offered us…because the literary work is organized and self-contained, it concentrates our attention and regulates what will enter into our consciousness" (Rosenblatt 40). Real life is jammed chock-full with the confusing, the trivial, the irrelevant, and the incomplete; eventually, we tune out what we cannot comprehend or do not need. We focus on the details of literature because we trust that they are coherent and meaningful, however, and we find it possible to enter into an author's experience because we recognize in their writing glimpses of our own humanity. The kind of attention we employ when we read is better described as wandering rather than marching along an idea—that is, reading as exploration.

Just below, Rosenblatt describes reading as one "consummate experience" (41). The word is no accident. Reading is an intercourse, a dialogue alternately with the author, the characters, the book itself, or even with the reader's own hidden thoughts. Keen readers learn something about the people around them, and keen observers of people bring to reading a heightened sensibility to understand characters. Rosenblatt goes so far as to say that a precursor to literary appreciation for the reader is "a sharpening of his senses" and "a greater knowledge of himself" (64-65). Careful observation of ourselves and of others makes love possible, and clear vision strips us of faulty preconceptions, selfish fantasies, and uncharitable assumptions. But focused attention does not come naturally—Aldous Huxley's warning about our "almost infinite

appetite for distractions" comes to mind, modern technology aside—and even when we know that it offers us a richer experience of life, delusions can be easier to swallow. So how is it possible to learn the art of attention?

II.

I have been thinking about *Middlemarch*, off and on, since I read it over the course of two summers. Two summers, because its length surpasses 800 pages, and its style is intricate enough to require the reader to follow the contours of each sentence to the end in order to map out its beginning. But since then, I have found that even the length of time it took me to clamber from the first page to the last was not enough to unfold its characters and ideas to me. At first, I read Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon, as a cautionary tale about ill-matched pairings, a tale that culminates with a sound condemnation of Casaubon when he meanly refuses to allow Dorothea to remarry Ladislaw after his death. Casaubon is easy to despise, and it would be easier to do so if Dorothea herself were not so persistent in forgiving him.

But as I revisited the book, it occurred to me that the reader who glibly concludes that Dorothea should never have married him in the first place commits the same mistake as Celia, Mr. Brooke, Lydgate, and Will Ladislaw. Because the marriage is unconventional and difficult to justify on Dorothea's behalf, each of these characters fails to accept the fact that she freely chose to marry Casaubon. While talking to Dorothea, Ladislaw thinks to himself: "Casaubon had done a wrong to Dorothea in marrying her. A man was bound to know himself better than that, and if he chose to grow grey crunching bones in a cavern, he had no business to be luring a girl into his companionship" (Eliot 225). Ladislaw thinks to absolve Dorothea of blame for a mistaken match, but with the word "luring," he removes her agency from the picture entirely—and this, as the reader knows, is inaccurate. He throws spiteful jibes at the futility of Casaubon's academic

work, assuming to find Dorothea in secret agreement, and is surprised when she is wounded. The continual mystery of the book is why Dorothea chooses to be faithful to her husband—not only externally, but in the way she thinks and speaks about him—as he ages, withers, ignores her, and resents her. But all the same, the reader who refuses to see that Dorothea loves him is willfully blind.

So when I recently returned to *Middlemarch*, I began to read their marriage not as a one-time mistake committed by Dorothea, Casaubon, or both, but as a launching point for their characters into the practice of seeing each other. Both, in some way, change their preconception of marriage and of each other, and both abandon expectations that they had for the other person. But while Dorothea allows her experience of marriage to sharpen her understanding of Casaubon and refine her love without changing its essence, Casaubon sinks deeper into blindness, refusing to see himself or her clearly. If anything, it is a more damning critique to see Casaubon's failure as gradual, the accumulation of certain habits of mind that stem from his overall vantage on art, learning, and life.

The first crisis in Dorothea and Casaubon's marriage arises during their honeymoon in Rome. Casaubon uses the location as an opportunity to conduct research for his book, an increasingly sprawling and irrelevant project on the mythologies of the world. Although he goes sightseeing with Dorothea, he plays the part of pedantic schoolteacher rather than doting husband. The reader might expect Dorothea's disappointment to center on the fact that he is occupied with his never-ending academic work rather than his new wife (which is itself a failure to see what a honeymoon is). She is beginning the process of post-nuptial unveiling, where, as the narrator remarks, you discover your spouse "as something better or worse than what you have preconceived, but [who] will certainly not appear altogether the same" (Eliot 125). But her

chief fear is that "the large vistas and wide fresh air which she had dreamed of finding in her husband's mind were replaced by anterooms and winding passages that seemed to lead nowhither" (Eliot 125). What she is forced to confront is not about how he treats her: it is about how he views learning itself. Dorothea assumed that Casaubon's academic knowledge would put him in contact with the mysteries of life, and her first thought on receiving his marriage proposal was that she would "be allowed to live continually in the light of a mind that she could reverence" (Eliot 28-29). Instead, she begins to understand that he has lapsed into a "lifeless embalmment of knowledge" (Eliot 126). His problem is not lack of learning, it is that he has "lost sight of any purpose which had prompted him to these labors…in bitter manuscript remarks on other men's notions about the solar deities, he had become indifferent to the sunlight" (Eliot 126). But in her hurry to claim her place as Casaubon's neophyte, Dorothea had not considered him as a human with his own anxieties, needs, and disappointments. She does not understand that the jaded, dry way in which he shows her "the glories of the Eternal City" is a product of his own nagging fear that his project is futile (Eliot 126).

As a result, Dorothea and Casaubon do not understand each other, although they are both determined to fulfill what they perceive as their duty to each other. Casaubon sees that Rome is a city justly regarded as a trove of culture, and he intends to show it to his wife so that she can be "as happy as she deserved to be" (Eliot 127). Dorothea sees that Casaubon cares about a project that she thinks will illuminate both herself and the rest of the world, and she is aggrieved because she feels that she is shut out of it. But "she was as blind to his inward troubles as he to hers: she had not yet learned those hidden conflicts in her husband which claim our pity" (Eliot 128). As a result, they have their first squabble. Casaubon projects onto his unoffending wife the specter of all his critics, who latch onto "the ill-appreciated or desponding author," and she in turn has no

idea how to express her real disappointment, which is in being isolated from him (Eliot 129). At this crisis point, as they privately reflect on the aftermath of the argument, they must each rely on formerly acquired habits of mind in order to move towards or away from clearer insight.

At this moment, it is Dorothea's disposition towards learning that becomes crucial. While Casaubon's mind is a windowless room, bones in a cavern, or a series of winding passages that lead nowhere, Dorothea's is more like the vista of "wide fresh air" that she imagines in him (Eliot 125). Dorothea's disappointments in Rome threaten to enclose her in "inward fits of anger or repulsion, or…forlorn weariness," (Eliot 126) but her mind contains an open current, "the reaching forward of the whole consciousness towards the fullest truth, the least partial good," and she decides that "there was clearly something better than anger and despondency" (Eliot 130). Dorothea's openness allows her to weather a second blow to her misconception of Casaubon, and this is Ladislaw's suggestion that "the labor of her husband's life might be void" (Eliot 133). If Dorothea had boxed Casaubon into one function—or if she had valued him only for the knowledge he could give to her—the realization that he failed to meet this standard might lead her to resent or abandon him. Instead, she identifies her prior idea of Casaubon as illusory, finds in him "a sad consciousness in his life which made as great a need on his side as on her own," and moves towards his "center of self" with her heart softened by pity (Eliot 135). Meanwhile, she views Ladislaw not as a competitive alternative to Casaubon (as he hopes she will see him), but rather as a source of light, someone "likely to understand everything" and able to assist her in gaining clear vision (Eliot 134). Dorothea wants to understand the truth, a habit she carries over from before her marriage, and this makes her receptive to changing her idea of Casaubon while continuing to love him.

Meanwhile, Casaubon has a corresponding duty to see Dorothea's true self, but his mind is as narrow as Dorothea's is open. His mind "shrinks from pity" and indulges in "proud narrow sensitiveness which has not mass enough to spare for transformation into sympathy, and quivers thread-like in small currents of self-preoccupation" (Eliot 176). It is impossible to miss how Eliot recurs to spatial metaphors to make sense of the mind, and Casaubon is constantly closing in on himself. He entered marriage never once dreaming that "a man should think as much about his own qualifications for making a charming girl happy as he thinks of hers for making himself happy," and he cannot adjust his view because of widespread failures in the architecture of his thoughts (Eliot 176). His character is revealed in this decisive and unflinching analysis:

> It is an uneasy lot at best, to be what we call highly taught and yet not to enjoy: to be present at this great spectacle of life and never to be liberated from a small hungry shivering self—never to be fully possessed by the glory we behold, never to have our consciousness rapturously transformed into the vividness of a thought, the ardor of a passion, the energy of an action, but always to be scholarly and uninspired, ambitious and timid, scrupulous and dim-sighted (Eliot 176-77).

The last word of this ringing litany of failures is "dim-sighted." Casaubon has lost the foundation of knowledge. He no longer cares to see, and he hopes to secure his scholarly reputation more than he expects to find what is true or meaningful. While clinging to the scruples that may have once made him a model scholar, he has lost his grasp on curiosity, and now all that remains are hollowed-out scruples that cannot make him a model husband. What knowledge should do for us is to "liberate us" and "possess us," making us aware of a consciousness greater than ourselves—and this, Eliot suggests, is true of scholarship just as it is of love.

From here on, Dorothea and Casaubon travel in opposite directions. Each time Dorothea wavers on the edge of resentment or anger against her husband, she moves towards a closer understanding of his real self. When Lydgate warns her how dire Casaubon's health may be, the pain she feels is on her husband's behalf, based on her knowledge of him: "He has been laboring all his life and looking forward. He minds about nothing else. And I mind about nothing else—" (Eliot 182). Even as Dorothea continues to become acquainted with Ladislaw, who provides her with a "glimpse of the sunny air" in her mind, she never allows her appreciation for him to overshadow her loyalty to Casaubon (Eliot 225). When Ladislaw gives vent to another sharp criticism of Casaubon—that he dislikes Ladislaw purely due to prejudice—Dorothea is quiet, but not alarmed, as she was in Rome. She is "no longer struggling against the perception of facts, but adjusting herself to their clearest perception; and now when she looked steadily at her husband's failure, still more at his possible consciousness of failure, she seemed to be looking along the one track where duty became tenderness" (Eliot 228). And love, it seems, covers a multitude of sins.

Meanwhile, Casaubon moves farther from Dorothea's real self, poisoned by suspicion and jealousy, and he shies away from letting her see him. The imagined specter of Dorothea as adversary and critic replaces her true presence as helpmate and friend: "To his suspicious interpretation Dorothea's silence was now a suppressed rebellion; a remark from her which he had not in any way anticipated was an assertion of conscious superiority; her gentle answers had an irritating cautiousness in them; and when she acquiesced it was a self-approved effort of forbearance" (Eliot 260). The narrator points out the "tiny speck" in his vision, which once again "blot[s] out the glory of the world," and reiterates (in case we are unclear what that speck is), that "I know no speck so troublesome as self" (Eliot 261). Part of the reason why he cannot see Dorothea is because he also will not see himself. He refuses to admit the knot of insecurity that

makes him fallibly human, and he hopes Dorothea will soothe him without ever "find[ing] it out" (Eliot 261). The final frosting on this layer cake of pretense is when Casaubon decides to change his will, convincing himself that Ladislaw is an unprincipled con-man with designs on Dorothea that would ruin her. In his new will, he stipulates that Dorothea cannot be remarried to Ladislaw, or she will lose her inheritance rights to his estate. Knowing that he is about to die, Casaubon could do his best to provide for Dorothea, recognizing that as a young widow she will be vulnerable, or he could allow her the dignity of choosing for herself whether to remarry. Instead, he ties the prospect of her future happiness and financial security into a contract meant to soothe his ego and jealousy—even after he will no longer be sensible of the fact. Meanwhile, "he knew little of Dorothea's sensations," that is, her own feelings (Eliot 265). This is a cruelty that stems not from willful malice, but from intentional and cultivated blindness.

The narrator of *Middlemarch* tells us that "We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves" (135). The antidote to this stupidity is not knowledge, exactly; it is closer to Ladislaw's description of a poet: "a soul in which knowledge passes instantaneously into feeling, and feeling flashes back as a new organ of knowledge" (Eliot 143). Dorothea's strengths emerge from her relationship to learning, the experience of wonder born of great art, literature, or poetry. As Dorothea and Ladislaw discuss art in Rome, the reader has the chance to reflect on his on the flash of knowledge that comes from feelings explored by *Middlemarch*. The novel is challenging enough to demand full engagement with its syntax, or the inattentive reader will miss Eliot's meaning. Likewise, its character studies are complex, resisting the quick categorization of hero or villain archetypes. Perhaps Eliot knew that our real-life patience for characters like Casaubon is limited, so it takes a work of literature to enable us to see and understand them. After all, this is her conclusion: true insight—in love, learning, or

poetry—occurs in consummation with glory, and it requires a mind of wide fresh air and a willingness to see the Other precisely as they are. Even Dorothea learns this over the course of the novel. By the time of her second marriage to Ladislaw, her naïve hopes have been grounded and her moral sensibilities have been strengthened. But maybe her marriage to Casaubon is not a failure, but an opportunity for paying attention.

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Commentary

Reese Doner

Leading the Blind: How the Narrative Podcast *Malevolent* Cultivates Attention

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The 2020's boasts arguably the vastest variety of story-based entertainment forms that consumers have ever had access to: books (spanning prosaic, graphic, and audio), video games, music, TV, film, all forms of social media, and more. With so many outlets constantly vying for our attention, it's understandable, perhaps natural, to find it difficult to sit down with something for long periods of time. There's always something else pawing at your peripheral vision, a productive task you've been putting off that needs tending to, the next interest to invest yourself in before you run out of free time. Take music, for example: a perfect medium for background listening and multitasking if you don't have much time or attention to spare. No song will take up more than an average of three-and-a-half minutes of your time, so it's no struggle to unplug yourself from the activity on a whim. But what about something in between that embodies some of the best aspects of these mediums: something that is also technically background noise—inherently less demanding on the senses—but one that nonetheless grips your attention? That is where the podcast comes in, more specifically the narrative kind.

Narrative podcasts are not unlike audiobooks, except they don't have prose: they're almost entirely dialogue, coupled with heavy audio editing for immersion, making them akin to a show or film without visuals. This purely audible nature allows for flexibility when enjoying a narrative podcast; you can consume the story while doing nothing, giving the story your undivided attention, or alongside another task without worrying about missing any subtle, crucial details. If this concept sounds familiar, that may be because of its predecessor, the radio drama.

The two share a format foundation, but their amenities are not one-for-one. There are two major differences—advantages, especially by today's standards—that the podcast has from the radio: the pause button and being uploaded to the Internet for audiences to listen at their leisure. As a college student with a perpetually rigid schedule for classes or working on homework, I likely would not have been able to start or keep up with episodes of my latest, favorite podcast if I had to catch them at the exact moment they first aired (or, in my case, were posted to Spotify). Being able to choose when to give the podcast my attention has been key for my upkeeping and consistent enjoyment of the series.

It is also important to note, however, that many people already treat other forms of media, including those mentioned earlier, like background noise to cultivate focus or motivation while doing another task. But what sets narrative podcasts apart from those is how dialogue is the crux, the beating heart, of its story communication. I will be the first to admit that I have found myself, not infrequently, fallen victim to skipping chunks of text while reading to get to the juicy, pace-pushing dialogue, and I have friends that are just as guilty. Such significance uniquely placed on dialogue in narrative podcasts may allow for a streamlined, intensified attention-grabbing experience for many listeners, while being less stimulating due to its lack of visuals, that other forms of media may fall short of. And, boy, did *Malevolent* swipe the carpet of my attention out from under my feet with its captivating levels of immersion.

Created by Harlan Guthrie, *Malevolent* follows the story of Arthur Lester, a 1930's New English private investigator who finds himself stricken blind upon opening a mysterious book, and with a foreign, shifty voice in his head that has access to his sight. Something to note before we dive into the world of *Malevolent* is that Guthrie has meticulously handcrafted nearly every

single aspect of the series himself, from the scriptwriting to the voice acting to the audio editing[1]. He's practically a one-man show. This fact may not intrigue everyone who learns it, but it enthralls me, and it affects how I give my attention to the story.

Inevitably, the first thing most listeners will notice upon starting the podcast is the voice acting. Guthrie voices everyone (even the female characters), so the series is essentially him talking to himself. After I learned this about halfway through my listening of the series, I found myself concentrating on the voice acting itself more, listening for similarities between the characters and imagining the process of achieving such a wide range of vocal skill. Despite performing impressive accents, including British, North American, Irish, Scottish, and one Werner Herzog-inspired curveball, I take a covert joy in noticing that Guthrie can't quite hammer out the Canadian from his *sorry*s, no matter the character or accent. In the story, the panicky brit and the suave eldritch voice in his head serve listeners immediate tension from the first episode and, I believe, give the story a very compelling and convincing start. I can't recall where I read this, but I think one fan encapsulated the idea of the characters' appeal and believability very concisely: Guthrie has fantastic chemistry with himself as an actor. This chemistry, which naturally extends to his characters, only improves as the series goes on, as his acting and the characters themselves grow more mature and nuanced.

However, voice acting on its own is not very noteworthy; it can be found to some degree in almost every digital media form, and it can be quite bland on its own. Podcast creators are aware of this. To bump the entertainment factor to the next level and further hook listeners' attention, the second most important creative choice lies in audio engineering. Music, vocal effects, and foley (sound effects) are the fixings between the voice-acting bread that make up the

[1] *Malevolent*. "Season 4 Discussion: Questions, Thoughts & More," 0:52–0:56. https://www.malevolent.ca/season-4-discussion-questions-thoughts-more/

narrative podcast sandwich. For *Malevolent*, this refers to details like vocal distortion and monstrous sounds for otherworldly creatures and characters, the slashing and clashing of weapons, gunshots, various sounds of blood, moving vehicles, and background music (mostly written and composed by Guthrie as well[2]). Tandem to this, of course, is the troubled, slippery voice in Arthur's head describing his surroundings (that is, when he's willing to: an additional immersive layer that places listeners even deeper in Arthur's shoes. Not only are we blind like him, but we too only have the voice's narration to trust for Arthur's well-being, including such things as noting other peoples' facial expressions, giving quick directions in a fight, telling him where to run in a hurry, and reading). All these voices and sounds culminate into a three-dimensional, visceral auditory experience, like wearing glasses with slightly too strong a prescription. Listeners can all but see Arthur rowing the pitch-dark waters in his creaky stolen boat, smell the blood on the piano keys as an ominous figure somehow performs the music that has played in the background of every episode, feel Arthur's bone-heavy exhaustion as he collapses into an old, cozy bed for the first time in ages. Each detail matters, nothing is added by accident—everything is carefully crafted to lure listeners in, seize their attention by the wrist without letting go.

For some fans, *Malevolent* takes up even more real estate of their attention due to a unique factor. Patreon is a monetization platform that serves as a "way to connect people making incredible things to the people who want to pay for them" (Patreon). By subscribing to the Patreon behind *Malevolent* and Guthrie's other projects, fans gain access to exclusive content for the series. From what I, a non-subscriber, can gather from the site, it seems that Guthrie hosts a poll between episode releases (every 1–2 months or so during a season) for fans to vote on

[2] Guthrie's catalogue can be found on his Spotify: https://open.spotify.com/artist/4CUvHPKukbuNjlpL2oB1HL?si=XqcbeLZ7SIWL5ytQYsc7Ag

something to happen in the next episode—perhaps a situational outcome or a decision a character makes—while he is actively writing its script. Subscribers also gain access to the official *Malevolent* Discord server, where members can engage in several forms of interaction pertaining to the series, including discussion about the latest poll. Much to my dismay, my budget does not allow for this subscription, but community interaction is crucial to me for my full enjoyment of a story. Because of this, I went on a rabbit hole seeking a substitute outlet for *Malevolent*'s official Discord server. Scouring the Internet using every possible combination of key terms I could, I followed the breadcrumbs to Tumblr and ended up private messaging someone asking for access to their original, fan-run *Malevolent* Discord server. Two hours later I was in, and I can say for certain that engaging with other *Malevolent* fans has entrenched my investment in the series, helping me look toward new episodes even more so that I can discuss them with my fellow fans.

As far as the method of enjoyment for the podcast goes, for me it depended on the intensity of the story at any given moment—waxing or waning, boiling or simmering. During calmer moments, I would home in my attention on it by multitasking with simple chores or things I enjoy, like drawing and messaging friends. During tense, thriller moments, I would often stop whatever I was doing and sit or stand still to absorb all the action, sharpening my ear for every detail so I wouldn't miss a thing. A couple weeks ago, I had started listening to the two-part season four finale as I was winding down for the night, and by the end of the first part I was tucked into bed, lights out, my roommate sleeping six feet away from me, my headphones on, gripping my layers of blankets out of pure enthrallment and suspense. I forwent an hour of sleep that night to finish the next episode and did not regret it.

In all, narrative podcasts are a unique form of storytelling due to their audible nature and lack of non-dialogic prose. In an increasingly visual world of entertainment due to simplified

access to things like television, film, the Internet, and social media, the podcast finds itself in a rocky position, needing to work harder to grab and retain the attention of listeners. I cannot speak for everyone who dips their toes into the realm of narrative podcasts, but in recounting my experience of *Malevolent*, I am confident that this art form has its place among media secured thanks to its devotees. As podcasts ensnare us with their thorough levels of listening immersion, we truly are in a similar circumstance as Arthur: unable to see where our journey will take us, but having faith by what we hear that it will be an exhilarating adventure.

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Commentary

Cooper Pitts

"Why would you watch that?":

A Christian View of Transgressive Cinema

Ever since I can remember, cinema has deeply moved me. The first time I ever went to the movies it was 2006, I was two years old, and *Cars* was the hit movie of the summer. My mom bought two tickets to an afternoon screening, and I sat in her lap perplexed at the wonder of the silver screen. From the moment the trailers started, I was completely transfixed on what happened in front of me. For years, every time I would go to the movie theater, I would cry. No matter what I was seeing, the experience would overwhelm me every single time. The stakes were always high, the characters always relatable, the form always beautiful. As I grew older and began watching different types of films, this relationship evolved. My appreciation of film slowly matured, and I began bringing a level of contemplation to what I was watching which didn't exist when I was a kid. I started to understand there was a voice behind what I was watching, communicating values and beliefs to me, the viewer. The characters on screen weren't always put in front of me to simply amuse. Sometimes, they were written as filmic expressions of societal, philosophical, and emotional anxieties. I understood filmmakers as auteurs who, when operating at their highest, were able to expose truth and express what it means to be human in beautiful ways. Now, I understand cinema as something which shapes me and the way I think. The medium has just as much power to help me discover as it does to entertain.

I was recently in a seminar about Christian living. The speaker encouraged everyone in the room to upstanding lives and to be pure in heart so Jesus' love can shine in us. To a certain extent, I understand and agree with him. It is right and good for Christians to strive to live right, live well, and follow the example of Jesus Christ given to us in the Bible. At one point though, he talked about movies, telling us to be wary of them. He declared "The pollution of the world, it's just entertainment. We pollute our minds with the things of the world." Hesitancy around art which does not explicitly uphold or engage with Christian values seems to be common in many Christian circles, especially in the South. There is some reason to be hesitant within the Christian belief system. The book of James tells us "pure and undefiled religion is this:… to keep oneself unstained by the world" (*New American Standard Bible*, Jas. 1:27) and Paul's first letter to the Corinthians warns us "the wisdom of this world is foolishness in the sight of God" (1 Cor. 3:19). We are called to abide in the truth of the Gospel and to allow it to transform not only the way we behave, but also how we view the temporal. However, I found myself taken aback by the conclusiveness of his rhetoric. I have always found the challenge of art and cinema to be enriching and enlivening, so the dismissiveness of his statement felt discouraging to hear and lacking in depth.

In an increasingly divided and confusing world, it seems to be important now more than ever for Christians to be engaged with the arts. Moreover, I believe it is especially important for Christians to be challenged by what we encounter in film. Not to deconstruct our faith or to begin subscribing to unbiblical beliefs, but rather to learn more about ourselves, our neighbor, and our God. To me, cinema which transgresses social norms or preconceived notions of what should or shouldn't be shown does this particularly well. If the world is truly in a fallen state, and if Jesus truly came and poured out His blood for many for the forgiveness of sins, then why would

Christians not engage with art wrestling with the very brokenness in need of saving? By displaying the breadth of human behavior and the universal condition of brokenness, cinema of transgression showcases the universal and scandalous love of God to the eyeing Christian.

Cinema of Transgression

Author Flannery O'Connor was not afraid of challenging characters. She frequently wrote stories about reprehensible people doing heinous things and purposefully drove them into places where she could wrestle with her own Catholic faith. She wrote in 1957:

> My own feeling is that writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable. In some cases, these writers may be unconsciously infected with the Manichean spirit of the times and suffer the much-discussed disjunction between sensibility and belief, but I think that more often the reason for this attention to the perverse is the difference between their beliefs and the beliefs of their audience. Redemption is meaningless unless there is cause for it in the actual life we live, and for the last few centuries there has been operating in our culture the secular belief that there is no such cause. (O'Connor 33)

The Christian writer is O'Connor's audience here, but the same logic can be applied to readers who see by the light of their Christian faith. Readers have agency in meaning-making within the artist-receiver relationship and can bring their beliefs to the table in approaching art. Christians are free to look for evidence of redemption in the art they engage, especially in that which is grotesque, perverse, and unacceptable.

The term "transgressive" is admittedly broad, but it generally is associated with art which shocks the viewer. The concept was coined by Nick Zedd in the late 1970s with his piece "The

Cinema of Transgression Manifesto." In the piece, Zedd pushes back on any notion of how cinema should work and focuses on the power of cinema to shock audiences into new ways of thinking. When describing his and his peers' goals, he declares "intellectual growth demands that risks be taken and changes occur in political, sexual and aesthetic alignments no matter who disapproves" (Zedd). I find his assertion to be true, not only for intellectual growth, but also for growing in understanding of my Christian faith. By having my beliefs challenged in my own life, I have been invited into a deeper understanding of truth. I have never been daunted by this invitation because the journey of discovering truth can be embarked on rooted in faith. In fact, I have found the realest, most attractive truth is arrived at through faith. To avoid becoming overly ethereal, it may hard to have deep Christian growth without reckoning with the actual problems the Gospel has an answer for. The faith I've encountered through Scripture and community is not afraid to approach political, sexual, and aesthetic politics because the Christian faith does not require us to be stagnant intellects, unconcerned with the quandaries of the world. The question, however, is how you are growing. Are you growing into a deeper appreciation for the truth of the Gospel, or are you finding something else more attractive?

Zedd's manifesto pushes for growth from the old into an undefined, unexplored "new". I believe the same can be true for growing into Christian faith. By surveying the world and witnessing the breadth of human experience, we are challenged with the "new". This challenge can lead to deconstruction of faith for some who are disillusioned with Christianity or the church. The "new" itself may become attractive. However, for some with a lens of rooted curiosity, faith can be reignited continuously through encountering the need the Gospel answers. The very "old" Zedd's manifesto pushes for us to grow out of itself becomes renewed. This admittedly requires

one to add readings and layers onto films which may not be intended by the artist, but I believe this way of watching these films is just as valid as the filmmakers' intent.

To showcase how I believe transgressive, shocking cinema can be used to help one grow into a deeper understanding of Christian faith, I am going to examine a couple of examples which have shaped my personal faith in the filmography of John Waters. His films have challenged me to see the inherent humanity in the people they depict.

John Waters: Defiant, Messy Self-Love

John Waters is colloquially known as the "Pope of Trash." His films are unabashedly anti-establishment, unashamedly free, and truly shocking. I first remember being told about his films in early high school from a family friend who told me to check him out one day. When I looked him up and started to figure out who this guy was, a certain amount of mystery and dirtiness became quickly associated with his films. Film critic Rex Reed once infamously asked in a negative review of one film, "Where do these people come from? Where do they go when the sun goes down? Isn't there a law or something?" I was intrigued. Who was this man who directed *Hairspray* and a trio of films dubbed the "Trash Trilogy?" What was so great about his films? They appeared to be pure shock with no substance at first glance. However, my family friend was Christian who was not shy about his faith. What did he gain from watching these films? How did he square this with his faith?

To understand what the draw to these films was, I began watching through Waters's filmography. The first film I watched was 1971's *Multiple Maniacs.* The film is his earliest widely available film and is a ludicrous exercise in debauchery. It follows the "Cavalcade of Perversion" as Divine, a regular in Waters' early work, goes on a rampage of revenge after finding out about her lover's affair. Almost any type of transgression you can think of exists in

the film. Nudity is nearly constant, a man is cannibalized, and drug use is pervasive. As Mr. David, Divine's boyfriend, puts it in the opening scene of the film, these characters have truly "…committed acts against God and nature, acts that by their mere existence would make any decent person recoil in disgust!" (*Multiple Maniacs*, 00:02:46) All of this was a lot for me to grapple with, and yet there was something drawing me to the film and I didn't think it was simple pleasure at seeing something wild on screen. The film was made for under $10,000 and relied on stolen equipment and costuming to be produced. This shows in the technical quality. The editing is rough, the sound mixing is terrible, and the on-location shooting showcases the renegade mode of filmmaking. It feels almost intangible, but the DIY, low-budget independent sensibilities of the film turn it into something uniquely brazen and unfiltered. *Multiple Maniacs* was revolutionary to me precisely because of its camp and collective contrariness, attitudes which are only understood in the context of the culture *Maniacs* is responding to. One where the LGBTQ+ community is reeling in the wake of the Stonewall riots. One where disillusionment with suburbia is prevalent among America's youth. But in this response, Waters maintained something fascinating about community, uniqueness, and self-love not entirely opposed to the faith I was simultaneously growing into on my first viewing. These actors playing these roles in an independent film like *Maniacs* suggests a comfortability with themselves and what makes them different than the status quo.

I then watched his next film, the infamous *Pink Flamingos* (1972), an even more shocking entry to his filmography. The same ensemble cast (nicknamed the Dreamlanders) returns for this entry into Waters' body of work and Divine plays Babs Johnson, a woman striving to prove herself to be the "filthiest person alive." In the final scene, Babs famously declares, "Kill everyone now! Condone first degree murder! Advocate cannibalism! Eat shit!

Filth is my politics! Filth is my life!" (*Pink Flamingos*, 01:23:05). Once more, the content of the film was blatantly objectionable. And yet, I found myself drawn to what was happening in the film again. Never had I seen anyone like the people on screen. They were messy, they were filthy, they were materialistic, they were unorthodox, they were "sinful." But they were also unashamed, found some kind of twisted community with each other, and loved one another. The characters have an odd tolerance and acceptance for Miss Edie, an older woman who does nothing but eat eggs. In one scene, a birthday party takes place outside of Babs' camper van and the rough editing of the scene betrays a documentarian sense where you can see the actors having fun with each other and enjoying company together amid filmic revelry. Connie and Raymond Marble, Babs Johnson's archnemeses, declare that their love for one another surpasses even their love of filth and sin itself multiple times throughout the film. The underlying motivations of these characters are covertly revealed in these moments. The facade of filth and degeneracy is shown to simply be a mechanism to find community and to be accepted.

So, I continued with *Female Trouble* (1974) and slowly realized what I was loving. Divine returns once more as the star of this film which follows Dawn Davenport as she pursues beauty at all costs. In this installment, Dreamlander David Lochary "shoots" liquid eyeliner, a woman openly abuses her child, and the camera is not shy around genitals. But once more, the film completely fascinated me, and this time I finally could put my finger on what it was about Waters' films which spoke to me. In these first three films in his career Waters intentionally pursued cultivating creative projects which celebrated his friends, his culture, and his own passions. Contrary to the declarations of Divine and company, the films function in a way which shows they are worth celebrating not because of their actions but because of the very fact that they are human. They have not earned this celebration except by existing. The embrace of the

offensive in these films is a response to being overlooked and pushed to the fringes. Waters' values of radical acceptance and inclusivity shine through in his choice to even portray these characters.

When I was fresh out of high school, I took a gap year and lived in Pristina, Kosovo for a little under a year. I went and served with a mission organization, working with kids and youth in the city. Most of the time though, I spent my time sitting in coffee shops with people. Many of the friends I found during my time there were outsiders and didn't fit into traditional Albanian culture. For some, that was because they were queer, for others because they were Christian, for others because they were bullied. I found myself thinking about John Waters a lot. My friends are wonderful people worthy of celebration and love and are also flawed individuals. But am I not also flawed? Am I not also just as unworthy of divine grace as the "greatest sinner"? How could I act holier than thou, view myself as above my friends, when I am the same as them before a holy God? Should I not take the same approach as Jesus and love everyone for who they are? It's what Jesus did by coming for the sick (Mark 2:17) and it's been shown to me through John Waters.

A Christian Viewing

These films are by no means "Christian." They revel in debauchery and depict truly heinous things. At times they bash the Christian faith and explicitly go against Christian teaching. There is clear tension between the moral framework of the New Testament and that of the filmography of John Waters. Jesus is a figure who calls those who follow Him into a higher standard of living. In His famous Sermon on the Mount, He calls his disciples to radical understandings of Old Testament law. He teaches that those who become angry with someone are guilty of murder (Matt. 5:21), that His followers should not only love their neighbor but their

enemy as well (Matt. 5:43-44), and to give to the poor without expecting acknowledgement (Matt. 6:3-4). The standard of living Jesus lays out for His followers is high and hard to follow. On the other hand, John Waters' filmography celebrates a different understanding of how to live. His characters are selfish, act on impulse, and embrace hedonism.

However, I don't believe this means the films should be written off. In Genesis 9, God establishes His covenant with Noah to never destroy the world because of its sin. He blesses Noah to multiply and fill the Earth. Immediately, Noah becomes drunk on wine and abuses his son (Gen. 9:21-22). The same story happens in the Old Testament time and time again. God establishes His will and love for His creation, and the people of Israel ignore this love and choose other idols. Yet, God did not break His covenant. His attention remained on redemption. Jesus still came for the forgiveness of sins and the love of God remains unbroken.

There is something to be said for attention given to these characters by Waters. He seems to filmically sit in their weirdness and their sin and accepts them for who they are. His very act of paying attention to them is Waters positioning himself like how God sits with us in our own sin and brokenness. Waters loves his characters for who they are despite all their flaws and imperfections, like the Christian doctrine of Jesus coming to save and love all people. Jesus came not to be present only with the people who fit into a certain description of how one "should" live, but for the outcast as well. He invited the tax collector to follow him in his ministry (Luke 5:27-28), he dined with the poor, the cripple and the lame (Luke 14:13), and he criticized the religious elite who will not associate with those they find unworthy of their company (Matt. 21:31-32).

Interestingly, no character ever truly finds fulfillment from their pursuits of filth and fame in Waters' works. The rush to the bottom of degradation can be read as meandering meaning-searching from these characters. I do believe there is beauty and fulfillment which comes from

living by a Christian ethic, and believe Scripture points us towards what it means to live rightly. However, the law of Scripture in the Old Testament is meant to show us our need for a Savior, not as a code we must live by to earn the love of God. The epiphany of Jesus reveals the Triune God of the Christian faith is not as concerned with our behavior as Christians commonly think He is. Jesus shows us the basis of God's love is patient presence with all people in our brokenness as we ultimately search for fulfillment in Him.

John Waters shows us how to do this. His camera sits with Dawn Davenport as she goes on a killing spree in full drag, sits with Divine as she cannibalizes Mr. David, and sits with the Dreamlanders amid their irreverent revelry outside the trailer in *Pink Flamingos*. And if it is true that there is nowhere we can go from the love of the Father (Ps. 137), then *God too* sits with Dawn Davenport as she goes on a killing spree in full drag, sits with Divine as she cannibalizes Mr. David, and sits with the Dreamlanders amid their irreverent revelry outside the trailer in *Pink Flamingos*. He sits with His face towards them in their brokenness, waiting for His love to be received with His arms flung wide.

Conclusion

I understand for many Christians it may be difficult to understand the value in engaging art which openly contradicts what they believe. It can be especially uncomfortable to try and see God's character operate outside the bounds of the church. But the goodness of God is not restricted to church walls or churched people. It is open and evident in every person with a breath because the God of the Universe knit them together and is sustaining them (whether they are aware of it or not). Paying attention to what our neighbor is saying helps us learn more about our own faith and understand God's unconditional love towards us. Additionally, when Christians fail to see the good in their neighbor, they run the risk of "othering" people outside of the faith,

making them out to be people incapable of love, irredeemable facets of creation. I watch transgressive cinema precisely because God can be seen in transgressive cinema. The God of Christianity is the God of creativity. He watches every frame ever shot, listens to every line ever uttered, and undergirds all creative efforts, even the ones which reject Him. In some way, traces of His goodness can be worked back to Him in the most unlikely of places.

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Essay

Ana Wright

Literature and Liturgy: Learning Lenten Attention Through Reading *Moby Dick*

We sheepishly snuck in just as the service was starting, found an open seat in the creaky wooden pews, and turned to the Ash Wednesday liturgy in the small red copies of the *Book of Common Prayer* sitting in front of us. It was the spring semester of my freshman year of college, and I was about to begin my very first experience of Lent, a forty-day liturgical season that begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Easter Sunday, during which the Church fasts, prays, and focuses their attention on the uncomfortable realities of sin, death, and Christ's suffering. I had very little exposure to the liturgical branches of the Church before coming to college, but a friend invited me to an Ash Wednesday service with her, and that served as my introduction. At first, I felt out of place surrounded by strangers who all somehow seemed to know the correct times to stand or kneel. As the service progressed, however, and the *Book of Common Prayer* led us through scripture readings, prayers, and songs, it occurred to me that everyone around me was simply following the same liturgy, directing their attention towards the same things at the same times. Instead of feeling out of place, I began to feel deeply connected. Together, we confessed our sins, accepted forgiveness, and had crosses of ashes drawn on our foreheads to represent the fleeting nature of our lives. By the end of the service, I was well aware of my mortality and moral insufficiency, but also full of gratitude for the power of Christ's resurrection to transform me from the inside out, and for the entire body of Christ that I would get to celebrate it with in forty days. I discovered, in other words, that Lent is

about paying focused attention both to the dark realities of the human condition and to the all-sufficient hope that we have in Christ.

This year, I happened to complete a long and arduous voyage through Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* right around Ash Wednesday, and I could not help but draw parallels between the experience of Lent and the experience of whaling. Allow me to explain. Before beginning the novel, I, like countless unenlightened people, fully expected to encounter an insufferably long whale treatise with an untraceable plot. I discovered, however, that at its core, *Moby Dick* is actually an existential grappling with the implications of mortality, free will, and the human condition. Each crewmate aboard the whaling ship the *Pequod* embodies a totally different worldview, and throughout the story, Melville explores how these worldviews respond to the extreme conditions of life on a whale ship, where they continually come head-to-head with some of the most massive, mysterious creatures on the planet and some of the most powerful raw forces of nature. This forces them to face the same limitations of being a mortal human that the Lenten liturgy reminds us of, and while they cannot change these realities, they can choose what to direct their attention towards. As the novel unfolds, then, we see how the focus of each crewmate's attention influences the way that he lives and interacts with others. Now, while every character in the book is uniquely fascinating, the second mate, Stubb, particularly intrigued me. He responds to his situation by embracing a lifestyle of *inattention* to avoid the discomfort of fully facing the darkness of reality, and in examining my heart in preparation for Lent, I found that I often do the same. As I entered the next forty days of spiritual focus, then, *Moby Dick* became almost a personal liturgy, guiding me to reflect on the Stubb-likeness of my own heart, and how I choose to use my attention.

First of all, Stubb diverts his attention from the darkness of reality by embracing distractions. Indeed, Melville homes in on Stubb's pipe, which, he says, "like his nose...was one of the regular features of his face" (103). Stubb begins and ends his days by smoking and always keeps his pipe close on hand for easy access. As Melville explains, "this continual smoking must have been one cause, at least, of his peculiar disposition...against all mortal tribulations, Stubb's tobacco smoke might have operated as a sort of disinfecting agent" (104). On one occasion, for example, when Stubb and his crew are in the heat of an active battle with a gigantic sperm whale, as soon as there is a lull in the frenzy, Stubb "produces his match and ignites his pipe" (Melville 256). He then puffs away as he gives orders to his men, calmly instructing them to "start her like grim death and buried devils, and raise the buried dead perpendicular out of their graves, boys" (Melville 256). By the end of the fight, when the whale has sprayed its final sputtering spout, Stubb cheerily comments that "both pipes smoked out!" (Melville 257) and he scatters the ashes of his tobacco over the water, displaying his profound indifference to both the brutal death that he has just facilitated, and the great danger that he and his crew have just survived.

Stubb's smoking is a personal ritual of distraction that serves as a shield against the darkness of his own depravity and the brutal nature of reality. He is a prime example of the mindset that the philosopher Blaise Pascal critiques in his *Pensées* when he laments that, "As men are not able to fight against death, misery, ignorance...they have taken it into their heads, in order to be happy, not to think of them at all" (Pascal 34). It is also widely acknowledged from a psychological perspective that avoiding pain and guilt only leads to deeper problems down the line. This by no means, however, implies that it is an easy or simple process to examine our lives and expose ourselves to darkness, and expose our inner darkness to the light. Doing so actually puts us at risk of rejection and great discomfort, but it is precisely what the Lenten liturgy guides

us to do. Through "self-examination and repentance, by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditation upon God's holy Word," we intentionally direct our attention towards darkness, knowing that regardless of what we find, the light is more powerful (Book of Common Prayer 544).

Indeed, the promise of Lent is that we never have to examine our lives alone. We have a savior who not only faces our sin and suffering with us, head-on, but who actively moves towards us, bringing healing, forgiveness, and restoration, even when it brings suffering to Himself. Knowing full well that moving into our broken lives would ultimately bring Him to the cross, He chose to meet us in the midst of our brokenness nonetheless and continues to do so every single day. Unlike Stubb, we can face the darkness of Lent without distraction because we know that "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (*New International Version,* John 1.5).

Stubb also avoids paying attention to anything eternal by planting himself firmly in the present. He is somewhat of an Epicurean, fully embodying the motto "Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die" (Ecc. 8.15). Indeed, he believes that everything that happens is determined by fate, and given that "all is predestinated," he says, "a laugh's the wisest, easiest answer to all that's queer" (Melville 150). After all, if the future is already decided, then there's no use in fretting over it. Rather, he simply seeks to benefit as much as possible from whatever happens to cross his path, never taking responsibility for his past actions or considering the future consequences of his current choices.

In contrast, one of the great gifts of liturgy is that it not only directs our attention to the people directly around us, but also to the global body of Christ that stretches across space and time, orienting us within an eternal timeline. Rather than living moment by moment like Stubb,

we learn through liturgy that we are inextricably linked with those who came before us and those who will come after, and that should instill in us a sense of gratitude and purpose. Lent also orients us in between the past event of Jesus suffering and the future event of our inevitable death, reminding us of the value of our limited time. Indeed, on Ash Wednesday, when each member of the congregation receives a cross of ashes on his or her forehead, the priest says, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Book of Common Prayer 545), and as the ashes fade away throughout the day, it represents the fleeting nature of our own lives. The shape of the cross reminds us, however, that each of our brief moments, even the ones that seem the most dark and empty, like death on a cross, can hold eternal significance if they are surrendered to the eternal God who formed us from dust in first place. Lent helps us to maintain this eternal perspective, which Stubb actively shuns.

Most significantly, however, in his self-absorbed pursuit of personal gain, Stubb fails to pay attention to the inherent value in others. Rather, he values people based merely on what they do and how they make him feel. This is seen most clearly in his tragic interaction with Pip, the cabin boy. When one of the oarsmen in Stubb's hunting crew sprains his hand, Pip steps in as his temporary replacement. He does well at first, but the first time that he feels a whale bump against the bottom of the boat, he leaps into the water in terror (Melville 370). Stubb thoroughly berates him, threatening, "Stick to the boat, Pip, or by the Lord, I won't pick you up if you jump; mind that" (Melville 370). True to his word, when Pip jumps out of the boat a second time, Stubb leaves him behind to flounder helplessly in the vast and lonely ocean and continues on his course in total indifference. Indeed, to Stubb, his crewmates are simply means to reach a desired end, and if they fail to fulfill their purpose, then they are not worthy of his attention.

Lent, however, reminds us that the value of our lives is not rooted in what we do, but in who we are. In fact, we are all flawed in innumerable ways, and certainly none of us can offer God anything that is worth the price of Jesus' life. But He considers our lives worthy of that price nonetheless, simply because He loves us for who we are created to be. In light of this perfect love, it is absurd for us to treat others as though they are not worthy of our imperfect love. Our standard is to love our neighbors as ourselves and to forgive others as we have been forgiven, directing our attention towards the inherent value in each other, rather than the practical value that we may or may not have to offer. While Stubb chooses to distance himself from people who do not benefit him, practicing Lent together reminds us of the importance of inviting imperfect people into our imperfect lives.

As my *Moby Dick*-themed Lenten season is now coming to an end and Easter is on the horizon, the only response that seems appropriate is humility. I can turn my attention towards reality only because of a savior who brings light into the darkness, a body of fellow believers stretching across space and time facing the same reality with me, and the unconditional love of God, who values me simply for who I am, no matter what. I have not earned any of these things, but they are just as much mine as the sinfulness and suffering that I cannot avoid in this life. I rejoice in the midst of darkness not because I make light of reality, like Stubb, but because I know that the most real things are worth rejoicing in, and those are the things that I want to direct my attention towards. Reading *Moby Dick* as liturgy may be unconventional, but for me, it has been transformative.

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Screenplay

Sam Allen

"Election by Combat"

FADE IN:

INT. "CHEERIO, AMERICA!" STUDIO-DAY-1987-ON TV

Through the crackle and grit of a retro TV, a morning news show begins. The backdrop is painted a pale yellow with large orange décor à la the Ed Sullivan Show.

In one chair sits a thin female anchor (30's) with large glasses and a boring blouse.

Across from her is a bookish man (50's) wearing a tweed jacket and clashing pants. He's a classic dorky scholar-type.

ANCHOR

Welcome, once again to "Cheerio, America!" The premier television program for English and American cultural exchange. I'm your host, Laura Livingstone, and today I'm joined by a professor of American History at NYU. Please give a lukewarm British welcome to Dr. Benjamin Anthony.

DR. ANTHONY

Glad to be here, Laura.

JUDY

Now, Dr. Anthony, tell us about this new book you've written. It's already a New York Times best- seller, so clearly it's not a *total* bore, right?

She releases a media-trained, fake-humor LAUGH. The live studio audience chuckles.

DR. ANTHONY

I certainly hope not.

He holds up the book, a large tome with a picture of Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr facing off against each other.

The title is "DUEL OR DON'T: AMERICA'S HISTORY OF LEGALLY JUSTIFIED COMBAT."

DR. ANTHONY (CONT'D)
This is the culmination of a decade's worth of research. When our Founding Fathers established the Bill of Rights and the basic provisions available to all Americans, they wanted to do everything that Britain didn't. That's how we ended up with freedom of speech, freedom of press...freedom to bear arms. And it's the history of the Second Amendment that I find particularly interesting.

He gestures broadly with his arms while Judy picks at a nail.

DR. ANTHONY (CONT'D)
We put the Second Amendment in place primarily to protect ourselves from our own government. However, as time has gone on we have found that that right can also be interpreted as protection from others.

JUDY
You're referring, of course, to duels?

DR. ANTHONY
Exactly. As we all know, Alexander Hamilton was quite a controversial figure in American history. He and Aaron Burr had a *legendary* rivalry. Egos got out of control, and you know how the story goes.

JUDY

Burr challenged Hamilton to a duel and lost.

DR. ANTHONY

Very good! And this was such a landmark moment that the Supreme Court took it upon themselves to rule that henceforth, *dueling is completely legal as long as both parties consent and a government official presides over it!*

JUDY

You Americans and your thirst for bloodshed...do you not find it uncivilized?

DR. ANTHONY

Quite the opposite, actually! It's a very respectful and honorable process. And, it's as much a part of our culture as baseball or apple pie.

JUDY

I have a question. Are there specific instances of duels having major historical ramifications?

DR. ANTHONY

Certainly! During the 1960 presidential election, President Nixon was killed in a duel in the months leading up to the election, allowing a young John F. Kennedy to sweep the White House and serve for two terms! His presidency lead the Civil Rights movement forward at breakneck speed.

JUDY

Fascinating.

DR. ANTHONY
You really think so? Truly, I find this invigorating. There's such a rich history of--

CLICK. The TV turns off.

INT. TYLER'S HOUSE-LIVING ROOM-EARLY MORNING

Sitting in front of the TV is a little boy (7) named TYLER HOLMES with dark hair and an all-camoflauge getup. He was sitting entranced by the TV and turns to see who shut it off.

His father, JONAS HOLMES (40), stands with the remote in his hand, clad in his own camo. He's a thin man with a hairy beard and rugged features.

JONAS
Come on. It's time.

EXT. WOODS

Tyler and his father march through the brush and trees of the Kansas woods. It's cold outside, but not frigid--Tyler almost enjoys the bite at his fingertips.

Jonas walks with a backpack slung over one shoulder and two rifles over the other. One is noticeably smaller.

EXT. WOODS-DEER STAND

They reach a deer stand with a ladder. Jonas stands to the side and grunts to Tyler, signaling for him to climb up.

Tyler makes his way up the ladder with stubby arms and legs. His father gives him a boost with his hand.

INT. WOODS-DEER STAND

Jonas clambers into the deer stand and gently lays his equipment onto the floor. He picks up the larger rifle and checks the chamber twice, ensuring there are no bullets inside.

He loads in a single round. Tyler is silent.

Jonas picks up the smaller rifle, and repeats the same process. He flicks on the safety and turns it sideways to hand to his son.

JONAS
Just like we practiced out at Grandpa's property. Right?

Tyler nods. Jonas hands him the rifle.

With remarkable efficiency, Tyler takes the gun and mounts it on the window in the deer stand. He puts his eye up to the little scope and leans in.

JONAS (CONT'D)
There you go. Snuggle into it. If you don't plant it into your shoulder, the recoil'll kick the hell out of you.

Tyler pulls the gun even closer into his shoulder.

JONAS (CONT'D)
Right.

Jonas equips his own weapon, mounts it on the window, and scopes in.

The landscape before them is a picturesque blend of white trees and orange sunlight. The wind whistles softly as they wait for a target.

Minutes go by.

Finally, a nose pokes out from behind a tree. Attached to that nose is a BUCK, and attached to that buck is an ENORMOUS set of antlers.

JONAS (CONT'D)
There we go. Come on, Tyler.

Tyler snaps to attention and scopes in on the animal. His crosshairs sway to and fro, finally settling in right around the animal's heart.

JONAS (CONT'D)
Deep breath in. Let half out.

Tyler inhales through his nose, holds it for a second, and exhales half of it back out.

The buck, nibbling on a lone patch of grass, is none the wiser. Tyler lines up the shot. His finger rests on the trigger. Just as it curls and begins to squeeze...

With silent footfalls, another deer walks onto the scene. A doe, this time, soon followed by two tiny fawns.

JONAS (CONT'D)
Ignore them. You've still got the shot.

The family munches on the dead grass together. Tyler takes another breath, lets half out, and focuses in...

His crosshairs drift to the fawn. Its big, shimmering eyes. The little spots on its back.

JONAS (CONT'D)
Come on. Take him.

His crosshairs go back to the buck. It glances at its family, then surveys the forest.

Tyler backs off from the rifle and clicks on the safety.

JONAS (CONT'D)
(hissing)
Tyler! What are you doing?

A branch SNAPS in the distance. Four sets of eyes come to the alert. The deer BOLT for the woods, back to where they came.

JONAS (CONT'D)
Dammit, Tyler!

Jonas squeezes off a round, but it goes wide and hits a tree. He puts down his gun and turns to his son.

JONAS (CONT'D)
What the hell was that?

Tyler puts his gun to the side and looks up at his father, ashamed.

TYLER
I didn't wanna kill it.

His voice is squeaky, even for a kid.

JONAS
That was a 12-pointer! You had it right there, and you...ugh!

He throws up his hands in anger.

TYLER
I'm sorry, Dad.

Jonas sees his son's pained expression and stops. He lets out a deep sigh, and puts a hand on Tyler's shoulder.

JONAS
It's...fine. We'll see some more. But next time, when you've got him in your sights...don't hesitate.

Tyler nods and wipes his runny nose. He hangs his head momentarily.

Then, with the sun rising into their blind, he looks up and faces the forest before them.

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. FISERV FORUM-MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN-EVENING

Tyler, now an adult man, faces out into a large crowd with hot white spotlights beaming down onto him. A tinny RINGING drowns out all other sound.

SUPER: 37 YEARS LATER

He's older (44), but his hair is mostly the same. A beard and smile lines convey an age to him, but he still has a youthful charm.

He's in front of a podium with a microphone. Tyler's striking navy suit with a red power tie convey a sense of grandeur-we immediately get the impression that he's a powerful politician.

MODERATOR
(fuzzy)
President Alford, you have two minutes for your closing statement.

The ringing noise subsides as Tyler focuses back in on the scene before him.

Opposite from Tyler is his opponent: a tall, slender, devilishly handsome man with teeth so white they may as well have been brushed with paint.

This is the incumbent president, STANLEY ALFORD (early 50's). He's a Texan with a deep network, deep pockets, and a flair for the dramatic.

He's also a massive douchebag.

STANLEY
Thank you, Mr. Moderator. Now, I've gotta keep it a buck with y'all. I'm not much of a fan of ol' Tyler the Terrible here, in case you haven't noticed.

He grins and gestures towards Tyler, who steels himself for the coming verbal assault.

STANLEY (CONT'D)

He's talked real pretty tonight. Dropped a lotta ten-cent words. But what ol' Tyler there neglected to mention is that none of that is actually gonna happen. He's made a living out of talking a big talk and not followin' through on any of it.

Tyler grimaces.

STANLEY (CONT'D)

Y'all remember when he enacted all that legislation in Kansas to open them parks up? Said it was to get kids more active, right? Well, since he opened those parks, bear maulings have gone up by twelve percent. Is that what y'all want? For your kids to get eaten up by some mangy ol' bear?

Tyler rolls his eyes.

STANLEY (CONT'D)

Or how about that homeless outreach program? Sure, they pulled those folks off the streets. Got 'em good jobs. But now they're rehabilitated members of society! Livin' amongst the sane and normal! Is that what y'all want? To get your groceries bagged by someone whose arms got needle marks in 'em like a crochet pillow?

TYLER

Oh, that is just-

STANLEY
(interrupting)
Whoa there! I've got the talkin' stick, Tyler. Let's keep that mouth shut for a minute, will we?

Tyler scoffs at the disrespect.

STANLEY (CONT'D)
There you go. He's gonna cut me off in my closing remarks. It's a shame. A damn shame.

He shakes his head disdainfully. Tyler throws up his arms in frustration.

STANLEY (CONT'D)
Folks, lemme tell y'all somethin'. We're dying. We're a crumbling country, and it is solely because we have let weak men like Tyler Holmes run things. Well, I say no more. We need some oomph back in the Oval Office. My last four years have shown nothing but strength.
Power. Balls, if you'll pardon my French.

The moderator cringes.

STANLEY (CONT'D)

I'm bringin' back what it really means to be an American! And that's what I promise y'all if you'll do the right thing come this November: I'm putting power back in the hands of the people who deserve it. Not the feeble. Not the needy. But the ones in the country who've earned their share, and it's about damn time they get it. Thank you.

The crowd applauds politely.

MODERATOR

Thank you, President Alford. Governor Holmes, two minutes for your response.

TYLER

Thank you.

He clears his throat and grips the sides of his podium.

TYLER (CONT'D)

What's clear today, ladies and gentlemen, is that policy has no longer become the driving factor of this presidential race. Attacks on character have become the currency of this new age of politics, and frankly, I have to say that it's shameful. My opponent, President Alford here--

Tyler gestures to a previously unseen figure at the opposite podium.

TYLER (CONT'D)

--has treated me rather unkindly throughout this campaign.

Stanley rolls his eyes and grins.

TYLER (CONT'D)
Don't misunderstand me, I get it. There's a lot to make fun of me for. We've all seen my Christmas photos from last year.

The crowd chuckles.

TYLER (CONT'D)
But what Stanley and the collective might of the billionaires and magnates backing him don't get, is that there's a lot more to campaigning than name-calling.

Now Stanley's smirk melts to a glare.

TYLER (CONT'D)
Because at the end of the day, this race isn't about me. Or him. Or any of the faces that flash across your TV while you wait for *Dancing with the Stars* to come back on.

More laughter from the crowd. Tyler is hitting his stride; his body language gets looser and his speech becomes more casual.

TYLER (CONT'D)
It's about the millions of Americans sitting at home, on both sides of the aisle. You don't want division, you want *unity*. You want, and rightfully deserve, someone to look out for the good of the people rather than the good of self.

Ladies and gentlemen, the time for a new America has come. One free of the issues of yesterday. One free to build a stronger path forward. One people. One nation. It is with that I challenge you: can we be that nation? Are we capable of being the ideal republic our Founding Fathers built all those years ago? I think so, no--I *know* so. Thank you.

The crowd applauds voraciously. There are a few whistles and shouts. The moderator signals for everyone to settle down, and they rein it back in.

Stanley scowls, his blood boiling at receiving less than the lion's share of support.

MODERATOR

Thank you, Governor Holmes. This concludes tonight's debate, leaving us just-

Stanley grabs his microphone in a fit of rage.

STANLEY

Y'all fell for that? All it took was some big words about unity and his dumb policies, and you're head over heels for him! What kind of strategy is--what do you even call that?

Tyler smiles and grabs his own mic in response.

TYLER

It's called "leadership," Stanley. You should try it some time.

He walks away from the podium to his campaign team waiting in the wings with high-fives.

Stanley's face is flush with anger and embarrassment. He is practically *growling* with rage. He SLAMS the podium with a fist.

INT. FISERV FORUM-STANLEY'S SIDE STAGE

Stanley walks backstage, where a collection of his cronies and advisors is waiting for him. They're all old, rich, and painfully out of touch--perfect for a power-hungry egomaniac.

ADVISOR 1
Not bad, Stanley. You only made half an ass of yourself.

STANLEY
What did you just say to me?

The advisor promptly shuts up.

STANLEY (CONT'D)
Insubordination will not be tolerated, you *weasel.* Boys. Get him outta here.

Stanley snaps his fingers. From the shadows, two ENORMOUS bodyguards appear. Their shoulders are like mountains, chests like barrels.

ADVISOR 1
Wait! It was just a bad joke, that's all!

The bodyguards each hook an arm under the advisor's armpits and LIFT him off the ground. They drag him out of the building, kicking and squirming the whole way.

STANLEY
(to himself)
Tyler Holmes. You wanna embarrass me, huh? That it? I'll teach you not to cross the president of the United States. Not now, not *ever.*

INT. FISERV FORUM-TYLER'S SIDE STAGE

Tyler casually exits the stage, high-fiving members of his campaign team on the way. He never breaks stride as he makes his way out of the building.

His Director of Communications, KENT GRIFFITH (early 30's), fist-bumps Tyler. He's handsome, still baby-faced, with a cell phone glued to his hands. Imagine if LinkedIn was incarnated as a guy.

KENT
Great work, Tyler. That last little dig at him is getting posted everywhere. Huge optics for the undecided voters.

He holds up his phone, showing a high-quality replay of the last moment of the debate.

TYLER (V.O.)
It's called "leadership," Stanley. You should try it some time.

Tens of thousands of likes are flooding the clip.

TYLER
Not bad. I still hate social media, though.

KENT
Like it or not, you're built for it. Keep feeding me clips like that and you'll be in the White House before you can say "vote."

He pats Tyler's shoulder and peels off for another room, thumbs flying furiously on his phone.

Tyler, not breaking stride, PUSHES through a set of double doors leading out of the building.

EXT. FISERV FORUM-PARKING LOT

A sea of cameras FLASHING and reporters begging for questions overtake Tyler. He barely flinches and keeps walking.

He's immediately flanked by six Secret Service members, all in black suits and shades, surrounding him on all sides to escort him through the crowd.

REPORTER 1
Governor Holmes! Over here!

REPORTER 2
Governor Holmes, how do you think you fared?

AUDIENCE 1
We love you, Tyler!!

He just smiles and keeps moving. Ahead, a fully-black SUV waits for him. Another agent opens the passenger door, allowing Tyler to effortlessly slide in.

TYLER
Thanks, Henry. Kids doing good?

The agent nods.

INT. SUV

Another agent sits in the driver's seat, except this one doesn't wear sunglasses.

His face is chiseled with a small scar across his left cheek. His hair is jet-black and his eyes are permanently squinting from a history of checking for danger.

TYLER
Ahhhhh…

Tyler settles into the plush leather seat.

TYLER (CONT'D)
I'm too old for this, Bentley.

He speaks to BENTLEY STONE (44), Tyler's personal security detail. They're old college buddies, who have reunited in life despite their vastly different career aspirations.

BENTLEY
"Too old" for politics? That's funny. You'll be in the Senate til you're ninety.

TYLER
The whole country under the control of a nursing home. I like it.

Bentley chuckles and shifts the rumbling vehicle into start, and they begin to pull away from the building into the Milwaukee city streets.

TYLER (CONT'D)
Man, I am not cut out for this campaign stuff. All the blacked-out Chevys and Secret Service agents...I'm more of a "kiss babies and shake hands" politician.

BENTLEY
Better than a "kiss hands and shake babies" politician.

TYLER
Well said.

Tyler picks a piece of lint off his suit and wipes his hand on his pants.

TYLER (CONT'D)
You think I did okay tonight?

BENTLEY
You did well.

TYLER
Don't bullshit me just because you work for me now.

BENTLEY
You did *very* well, sir.

TYLER
Much better. And drop the "sir," we were roommates for three years. I've seen you do a keg stand in a Batman costume.

BENTLEY
(laughing)
And the stories I could tell about you could keep you out of office forever.

TYLER
Don't remind me. The last thing I need is for my kid to find out about his dad's old fondness for streaking.

They both laugh.

BENTLEY
How is he, by the way?

TYLER
Good, I think. I don't know. I've been so busy on this campaign trail I feel like I don't even know him anymore. It sucks.

BENTLEY
That does suck. But you'll be home soon.

TYLER
Yes I will, Bentley.

He turns to gaze out the window. The city lights pass him by as an airplane flies overhead. A road sign says "MILWAUKEE AIRPORT, 3 MILES."

TYLER (CONT'D)
Home soon.

Screenplay

Allie Anderson

"This Time Around"

FADE IN:

1. EXT. NAT'S HOUSE - MORNING

Cars fly past our protagonist, 18-year-old high school senior Natasha "Nat" Forster, who is standing outside her house getting ready to walk to school. Her face is expressionless but weighted as she begins to walk down the street.

EXT. MAIN STREET OF GRAHAM

As she walks, we see a little of the town around her. It's small and unexciting, mainly comprised of a few streets with old, worn-out buildings.

Nat walks past a building with a huge mural on the side. Surrounding the mural are piles of flowers, stuffed animals, candles, and other assorted gifts. The mural is of Nat's brother CHARLIE, smiling and wearing a high school basketball jersey. She glances at it but quickly looks away.

We see rapid flashes of memory: Charlie and Nat playing basketball in their driveway, Charlie and Nat swimming in the ocean, and Charlie, Nat, and their mom cooking in the kitchen.

BEGIN FLASHBACK

INT. NAT'S ROOM - NIGHT (4 YEARS AGO)

The last memory is longer: Nat is sitting at her desk in her room, visibly stressed. Her desk is scattered with papers. Charlie walks into her room and plops down on the floor.

CHARLIE
Whatcha doing?

Nat continues reading. She's not annoyed by Charlie's presence, but she has more important things to focus on.

NAT

I have a big test tomorrow.

CHARLIE
Well, I'm bored.

NAT
(not having it)
Hi Bored, I'm Nat.

CHARLIE
What's the test for?

NAT
Charlie, I'm trying to focus.

CHARLIE
Okay, okay, I get it. Bye. If I die of boredom, it's on you.

Charlie gets up to leave. Nat sighs and throws her pencil down in frustration.

NAT
I just don't get it. I can't remember all of this! I'm gonna fail this test, and then I'm not going to pass biology and-

CHARLIE
Are you hungry?

NAT
What?

CHARLIE
Do you want McDonald's?

NAT
I just told you: I. Have. To. Study.

CHARLIE
And I heard you, but you also haven't left your room since we got home from school approximately…
(he checks his watch)

8 and a half hours ago.

Nat finally looks up at him.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)
(innocently)
Please?

NAT
Fine.

INT./EXT. CHARLIE'S CAR - NIGHT

Charlie is shoveling fries into his mouth and jamming out to the Eagles' "Hotel California" while Nat calmly eats her burger.

CHARLIE
(mouth full)
This was a great idea.

NAT
Agreed.

CHARLIE
See? Sometimes you just need to take a break.

Charlie resumes his singing, and Nat laughs at him.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)
What's the cytoplasm?

NAT
Huh?

CHARLIE
For your biology test. I had to take that class too, you know. So, what's the cytoplasm?

NAT
Oh, oh it's the- wait no, it's like the inside part with the...yeah, I have no idea.

CHARLIE
What about the lysosome?

NAT
I've never heard that word in my life.

CHARLIE
Okay, do you know what ribosomes are?

Nat shakes her head.

NAT
Charlie?

CHARLIE
Yeah?

NAT
I'm gonna fail this test, aren't I?

CHARLIE
Yep.

Nat sighs, then she starts to laugh.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)
You're not a lost cause yet, though.
I'll quiz you when we get home.

NAT
Thanks.

CHARLIE
Just doing my brotherly duty.

END FLASHBACK

EXT. MAIN STREET OF GRAHAM - PRESENT DAY

A WOMAN (60s-70s) is standing at the mural, staring at it. She's holding a suitcase and is clearly not a local. Her words pull Nat out of her memories.

WOMAN
Yoo-hoo!

Nat keeps walking, praying that wasn't directed at her.

WOMAN (CONT'D)
You, girl with the backpack!

Nat turns around. She's not angry, but she has a gut feeling about what this woman wants to ask her.

NAT
Can I help you?

WOMAN
My husband and I are visiting for the strawberry festival over in Springtown, and my husband went inside over there to ask about directions, and I was just looking at this beautiful mural.

NAT
Some of the high school students painted it a few years ago.

WOMAN
Do you know the story?

NAT
The story?

WOMAN
Of the boy, of course.

NAT
Oh...yeah, I know it.

WOMAN
He just looks so young.

NAT
He was.

WOMAN
What happened?

NAT
There was a car accident about 3 and a half years ago.

WOMAN
Oh my goodness. Now that is just tragic.
(she motions to all the gifts around them)
It looks like it really affected the whole town.

Nat grimaces and starts to turn away.

NAT
I have to- I have school, but I hope you and your husband have a great trip, ma'am.

Nat turns back around and speed-walks towards school. Her breathing quickens and her eyes start to water. Suddenly, she stops. She swipes at her eyes, straightens her posture, and puts her headphones on. The emotion we saw for her brother is replaced with numbness. She just has to make it through today.

INT. CLASSROOM - MORNING

Nat is doodling on a piece of notebook paper as MR. DAVIDSON (late 30s) stands at the front of the classroom.

MR. DAVIDSON
(dryly)
Now, I know it's the last day of school, and not a single one of you would even notice if I evaporated into thin air right now, but these are important announcements, so please listen up. Seniors, you need to be here for graduation at 8:00 o'clock tomorrow. What time did I say?

Mr. Davidson's voice fades out as Nat stares out the window. Her gaze drifts over to a girl a few seats over. The girl, MAGGIE, is whispering and laughing with the girl next to her. Maggie senses eyes on her and turns around. Nat quickly averts her gaze, but Maggie's smile tightens. From Nat's expression, we can tell that there's something unresolved there. Nat returns to staring out the window.

INT. CLASSROOM - A FEW MINUTES LATER

The camera cuts to Nat dozing at her desk as the bell rings.

MR. DAVIDSON
You've all been a joy to have in class this year, have a great summer everyone. Seniors! 8:00 o'clock tomorrow in your cap and gown, so help me God.

The students file out of the classroom. Nat is slow to pack up and is quickly the only student left in the classroom. There's clearly something Mr. Davidson wants to say to Nat, and she is already determined to avoid it.

MR. DAVIDSON (CONT'D)
Any plans for the summer, Nat?

NAT
I'm not sure.

MR. DAVIDSON
Your mom doing alright?

NAT
Yeah, she's good.

MR. DAVIDSON
Good, good.

He pauses, deciding if he should say what he wants to say.

MR. DAVIDSON (CONT'D)
Can I talk to you for a sec?

Nat gives a shrug in reply, but she walks over toward his desk.

MR. DAVIDSON (CONT'D)
I remember having you in my British History class during your freshman year. And, look, I don't play favorites between students. But...you were absolutely brilliant, Nat. Blew me away. You were just fascinated by everything we studied.

Nat is silent, waiting for him to be done. She knows what he wants to say, and she can't bear to hear it. When Mr. Davidson realizes she isn't going to say anything, he hesitantly continues.

MR. DAVIDSON (CONT'D)
So, I know you didn't apply to college, but if you're reconsidering that, spring semester applications are already open at most schools. I'd be happy to help you out with the process.

NAT
Thanks, but I don't think so.

MR. DAVIDSON
Can I ask why?

Mr. Davidson knows the answer, and so does Nat. Neither of them wants to say it first.

NAT
I'm just not interested, I guess.

Mr. Davidson nods to himself, searching for words.

MR. DAVIDSON
When I was five, my little sister got sick - really, really sick. Leukemia. She fought it for a long time, but...

NAT
I'm so sorry, sir.

MR. DAVIDSON
I was in a bad place for years after that, well into adulthood. My dad just kept telling me I had to move on and get over it, but I couldn't. It felt like a betrayal to my sister.

This conversation is moving into too-close-to-home territory for Nat, and she stares down at the ground, biting her lip.

MR. DAVIDSON (CONT'D)
Finally, someone told me the truth. We don't move on from grief and loss. We grow around it. It stays with us. It's...it's like a room in our heart filled with memories. We can open the door and visit sometimes. But we can't stay. We carry it with us, and it'll feel a little lighter every day. Not because it hurts less, but because we've grown stronger.
(pause)
Let yourself grow, Nat.

Nat continues to stare at the ground. Mr. Davidson leans back in his chair, realizing that his words didn't truly reach her.

MR. DAVIDSON (CONT'D)
I'll see you tomorrow.

NAT
At 8:30, right?

MR. DAVIDSON
Not funny, Miss Forster.

EXT. MAURA'S SHOP - AFTERNOON

Nat walks up to the shop holding a box of donuts and two cups of coffee. It's a tiny building, and the front of the shop is filled with unusual plants. It's definitely old, but it's far from rundown.

INT. MAURA'S SHOP

Nat enters the shop, still holding the treats. The shop is so overflowed with trinkets that there's barely room to walk in the shop. The chaos gives the small space an element of coziness.

NAT
Maura?

MAURA (O.C.)
In the back!

Nat shrugs off her backpack and maneuvers through the shop. MAURA is sitting at a desk and felting intensely. Nat sets the box of donuts and one of the coffees in front of her.

NAT
For you. And I made Mr. Ly add extra sprinkles just for you.

MAURA
You're too kind.

NAT
Think of it as a last-day-of-school treat.

MAURA
And how was it today?

Nat sits on the desk and grabs a donut for herself.

NAT
It's crazy that it's all just...over.

MAURA
The possibilities are endless now.

Nat shrugs in reply. Maura sets down her felting.

MAURA (CONT'D)
So, what are you going to do?

NAT
We've talked about this before. I'll still be in Graham, living with my mom and working here.

MAURA
Hm.

Maura stands up and grabs a duster. She starts to walk through the shop, giving everything a light dust. Nat hops up and follows her.

NAT
What was that?

MAURA
What?

NAT
That "hm". That was a disapproving "hm"! You don't want me to stay here.

Maura continues dusting with a slight smirk on her face.

NAT (CONT'D)
You think I'm making the wrong decision about this.

MAURA
You've gathered quite a lot from one syllable.

NAT
Why don't you want me to stay?

Maura turns around to face Nat.

MAURA
I just don't know how much longer you'll be able to work here.

NAT
Did I do something wrong? Is the shop okay?

MAURA
Everything's fine, dear. I've just been thinking about what I want to do with the rest of my life.

NAT
Wait, what? Like, retirement?

Maura shrugs airily.

NAT (CONT'D)
You can't close the shop.

MAURA
Says who?

NAT
Says me! Maura, let me run the shop. I've worked here for a year, I know everything there is to know. Then I'll have a full-time job, and you can be retired and lie on a beach somewhere or something.

MAURA
We both know that you don't want that.

NAT
What are you talking about?

MAURA
You don't want to work here for the rest of your life, Nat.

NAT
Of course I do.

MAURA
I won't let you. I'm sorry.

NAT
Maura-

MAURA
(in a complete change of topic)
What's your biggest regret?

Nat stiffens.

NAT
What?

MAURA
What do you regret most? What do you wish you could change?

NAT
(softly)
I think we both know the answer to that question.

MAURA
(a little bit of foreshadowing)
I'm not sure we do.

Nat takes her time to respond.

NAT
It's my fault.

MAURA
What is?

NAT
The accident. I was so selfish...and stupid. If I hadn't made him drive, he...he would be alive right now.

Maura watches Nat with an unreadable look on her face.

MAURA
I have something for you.

Maura disappears into the back part of the shop. Nat composes herself and follows behind. Maura stands in front of the desk she was sitting at earlier. She takes the small key hanging on a chain on her neck and inserts it into one of the desk drawers. She rifles through the contents of the drawer before pulling something out. Her fist is closed around it, so we can't see what it is.

MAURA (CONT'D)
Hold out your hand.

Nat obliges, and Maura opens her hand to reveal a tiny hourglass.

MAURA (CONT'D)
Time is the measure of all human life, and the most cruel tyrant of mankind.
(motioning to the hourglass)
Take it.

Nat carefully takes the hourglass. It's filled with sand, but when Nat turns it over, the sand doesn't fall into the bottom half.

NAT
Did you make this?

MAURA
No, no it was given to me.

NAT
By whom?

Maura bursts into a witchy smile.

MAURA
A voodoo priestess in New Orleans. She was excellent with the spirits, but *I* was the better poker player.

NAT
(disbelieving but entertained)
Wait, what?

Maura doesn't deign to answer but rather stares at the hourglass and cocks her head, deep in thought.

MAURA
I've kept it all these years, waiting for the right moment to give it to someone. It's very old, most likely from West Africa.
(pause)
What do you notice about the hourglass?

NAT
It's broken. The sand doesn't fall.

MAURA
Exactly. The sand *cannot* fall. Time cannot move forward.

NAT
I don't understand-

MAURA
This hourglass can undo your biggest regret.

NAT
(still not understanding)
That's impossible, Maura.

MAURA
Is it?

The bell over the front door of the shop dings.

CUSTOMER (O.C.)
Hello? Is anyone here?

MAURA
(not even looking away from Nat)
We're closed!

CUSTOMER (O.C.)
Ummm, the sign clearly says you're open.

MAURA
(sarcasm)
Oh, well that's a pity, isn't it? We're closed!

We hear the door close, and Maura returns her attention to the conversation at hand. There's something different in her voice now, something softer and gentler.

MAURA (CONT'D)
Nat, over the past few years, I've watched you carry a pain and regret that no one should ever have to carry. Take the hourglass. Turn it over four times just before you go to bed, then fall asleep with it in your hand. When you wake up-

NAT
This is insane. I don't- I- no. No, there's no way.

MAURA
Your regret is like the sand in the hourglass. You can't move forward until you confront it. Time can't progress until you look within yourself at what's truly stopping you.

Nat stares at the hourglass for a long moment. She doesn't seem to believe Maura, but she is fascinated nonetheless.

MAURA (CONT'D)
I'm going to close up early. You run on home, dear.

Nat motions to the hourglass in her hand.

MAURA (CONT'D)
Keep it. You might change your mind. And if you don't, then consider it a memento from the crazy old lady who gave you your first job.

Nat puts the hourglass in her pocket and grabs her backpack.

NAT
I can't make any promises but thank you.

Nat starts to walk out of the store.

MAURA
Don't forget: it only works once.

NAT
Got it.

MAURA
(foreshadowing)
Good luck tomorrow!

Nat, assuming that Maura is referring to graduation, offers Maura a strained smile.

NAT
Thanks.

Nat exits the shop, but the camera lingers on Maura's face. Maura's gaze remains on the door, her eyes twinkling. It's clear she knows something that we have yet to learn.

INT. KITCHEN

JILL (early 40s), Nat's mom, is reading over some paperwork at the kitchen table. She's still in her business attire from work. Jill is a self-made, strong-willed woman. She's had a hard hand dealt to her, and she's proud of how she's picked herself up and made a life for her and Nat. Their relationship has never been perfect, but the past few years have definitely put a strain on their dynamic.

The front door walks into the opens, and Jill looks up from her work. Nat kitchen and sets down her backpack.

JILL
Hey, you.

NAT
Hey.

JILL
There's pasta warming on the stove.

NAT
Thanks.

Nat walks over to the stove and begins plating the food.

NAT (CONT'D)
Can I get you a bowl?

JILL
That'd be great. How was school?

NAT
It was fine. How was work? Is that one lady still being a jerk?

JILL
Oh, I'm convinced Michelle will never change.

Nat gives a plate of food to Jill and sits down across from her.

JILL (CONT'D)
Excited for graduation tomorrow?

NAT
Just chipper.

JILL
So... your grandparents called today. They had planned to drive down and come to the ceremony, but they said that something came up.

NAT
(unsurprised)
That's okay. It won't be that exciting anyway.

JILL
Since my parents aren't coming, maybe tomorrow night we can go into the city and have a nice dinner.

NAT
Maybe so.

They eat in silence for a bit, but Jill definitely has something on her mind.

JILL
So, earlier I went to the store to get groceries, and they were out of milk.

NAT
Bummer.

JILL
I ran into Cynthia Mitchell while I was there, actually. You know her daughter Lauren, right? You used to play together when you were little.

NAT
Yeah, I remember her.

JILL
Anyway, well, Cynthia told me that Lauren is going to Princeton. Princeton! Isn't that crazy?

Nat, a large bite of pasta in her mouth, is not impressed.

NAT
(through her food)
Hm.

JILL
Cynthia said she's going to study law. Wants to work in one of those big national firms. Lots of money, real prestigious.

NAT
Good for her.

JILL
Cynthia was just beaming talking about it.
(trying to smoothly change the subject)
But anyways, I have to go to the store again tomorrow to try again on the milk.

NAT
Is there something you're trying to tell me?

JILL
No, not at all. Just that the store was out of milk. So, don't get your hopes up for cereal in the morning.

NAT
(dryly)
I'll brace myself for the disappointment.

JILL
(thinking out loud)

Cynthia must be so proud. Nat sets her fork down forcefully.

NAT
If you think I'm a huge disappointment, you can just say it to my face, Mom. We don't have to beat around the bush.

JILL
You're being ridiculous. Not everything is about you.

NAT
No, but it feels like this is.

JILL
That the store was out of milk?

NAT
No, that my classmates are going to Princeton and becoming lawyers and I'm not.

Jill sighs. Part of her wants to have this conversation, while the other half knows it won't go well.

JILL
When you were younger, you wanted to go to Cambridge and work in a museum. I got such a kick out of my 10 year old daughter telling people she wanted to be a museum curator. Your friends still wanted to be mermaids and princesses, and you wanted to work with precious artifacts. But then, you stopped talking about it. I don't understand it.

NAT
I just don't want that anymore. I'm sorry.

Nat stands up to clear the table and takes the plates to the sink.

JILL

You could always take community college classes over in Springtown. Then you can transfer to a bigger college when you feel like you know what you want to do.

NAT
I don't want to go to community college.

JILL
And that's fine, college isn't for everyone. Let me help you look for jobs. My friend Carrie works at a dental office a few towns over, and she mentioned the other day that they're looking for a receptionist. That's a great job!

NAT
I can't. I'm sorry. Please, stop asking.

JILL
Then what do you want to do?

Nat drops the plates into the sink with a crash.

NAT
I don't know! I don't want to do anything!

Jill laughs exasperatedly.

JILL
I don't understand you, Natasha. You have so many opportunities. You have your whole life ahead of you! But you don't have any ambition.

NAT
(frustrated)
I lost my *brother*! What am I supposed to do?

JILL

In case you've forgotten, he was *my* son. But sometimes, you just have to pick yourself off the ground and pull yourself together. You've wasted away these past few years. But you can't keep this up forever! You're graduating-

NAT
(yelling, near tears)
He should've graduated too! Charlie's supposed to be in college right now playing basketball and- and being here with us- but he's not, and it's like you don't even care!

JILL
(stone-cold)
I buried my own son. Don't tell me that I don't care.

NAT
Then why don't you understand me?

JILL
(pause)
Sometimes I feel like I lost both of you in that accident.

NAT
And sometimes I feel like you wish it had been me.

JILL
You know that's not true.

NAT
Do I?

JILL
(pause)
Natasha, I love you, but I can't watch you do this to yourself. If you don't find a job or start college applications by the end of this summer, then I can no longer let you live here.

NAT
What?! You would kick me out of my own house?

JILL
I think this will force you to grow and move forward.

NAT
In case you've forgotten, I already have a job!

JILL
Sweeping the floors twice a week for a crazy lady at a junk shop is *not* a job! And while we're on the subject, you *walk* almost thirty minutes to get there. You haven't driven a car in almost 4 years, and you'll barely ride in one. You walk to school, to work, everywhere-

NAT
(interrupting, fed up)
I know, I know! I'm trying to get better! But every bit of progress I've made, I've made completely on my own. When I brought up therapy and- and medicine, *you* shut me down! You've never listened to me or asked me how I'm coping-

JILL
In everything I've done, I've tried to do what was best for you. I'm sorry you don't see it like that.

NAT
I actually can't believe this.

JILL
Natasha-

NAT
Goodnight.

Nat exits, and Jill is alone in the kitchen. She watches Nat go up the stairs, and we hear a bedroom door close. Jill puts her head in her hands, exhaling slowly. We can't see her face, but her shoulders are slumped in disappointment and frustration.
