



DOMINIC J.  
BAZZANELLA

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2024



SACRAMENTO STATE  
Department of English



# ABOUT



The *Bazzanella Literary Awards* are named after the late Dominic J. Bazzanella, an English professor and acting Dean of Arts and Letters at Sacramento State. Honoring Dr. Bazzanella, the awards encourage undergraduate and graduate students to submit their work and across multiple mediums, including poetry, short fiction, creative non-fiction, and critical analysis. Each year, the committee invites four judges to read and select winners in each category. Since its inception in 1981, the annual writing competition is one of Sacramento State's longest scholarship awards.

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# ENGLISH DEPARTMENT FACULTY

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*Linguistics, TESOL*

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*Multi-Ethnic Literature*

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*Curriculum and Instruction*

Rosa Martinez (Ph.D. UC Berkeley)  
*American Literature; Chicano/Latino/a Literature*

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*British Romanticism*

Ruby Mendoza (Ph.D. Michigan State Univ.)  
*Composition: Rhetoric and Writing*

Susan Fanetti (Ph.D. Saint Louis Univ.)  
*English Education*

Christine Montgomery (Ph.D. UC Santa Cruz)  
*African American Literature*

Torsa Ghosal (Ph.D. Ohio State University)  
*Contemporary Literature, Experimental Writing, Critical Theory*

Joshua McKinney (Ph.D. Univ. of Denver)  
*Literature; Creative Writing; Poetry*

Jason Gieger (Ph.D. Rutgers Univ., New Jersey)  
*British Literature, Literary Theory*

Douglas Rice (M.A. Duquesne Univ. Pittsburgh)  
*Creative Writing*

Hogan Hayes (Ph.D. UC Davis)  
*Education; Writing, Rhetoric, and Composition Studies*

Mi-Suk Seo (Ph.D. Univ. of Ill, Urbana-Champaign)  
*TESOL*

Julian Heather (Ph.D. Univ. of Arizona)  
*ESOL; Applied Linguistics*

Nancy Sweet (Ph.D. Columbia Univ.)  
*American Literature; Women's Studies*

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*Composition; Rhetoric*

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*19th Century British Literature; History of the Novel*

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*Creative Writing*

Samuel Brett Williams (M.F.A. Rutgers)  
*Playwriting*

Reiko Komiyama (Ph.D. Northern Arizona Univ.)  
*TESOL*

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*Medieval Literature; Children's Literature*

Angela Laflen (Ph.D. Purdue Univ.)  
*Professional Writing; Writing Pedagogy; Digital Literacies*

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Michelle Lowe  
Mary Mackey

David Madden & Mary Davis  
Elaine & Wayne Maeda  
Floyd L. McAlister  
Dr. Joshua McKinney  
Charles McFadden  
Dr. & Mrs. Paul McGinnis  
Robert Meindl  
Robert Metcalf  
Sheree Meyer  
Robert Miles  
Rubke Family  
Zohra Saed  
Shawky El Sukkary  
Dr. William J. Sullivan, Jr.  
Jo Ann Tanaka  
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Susan Wanlass  
Geri M. Welch  
Ann Weldy  
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John F. Wilhelm  
H. Nicholas & Joyce J. Windeshausen  
Julie Yen  
Patricia A. Z'Berg

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From 1981 to the Present

## 1981

Anne Appleton

Don Beattie

Peg Chappus

Mardell Child

Collen Green

Karen Peterson

Charles Scarcliff

Geneva Tully

Linda Vandermeer

Vi Wesner

## 1982

Marie Anderson

Andrew Neuman

Jon Seehafer

Joe Stagner

Michael Tomobillo

Theresa Vinciguerra

Constance Warloe

Douglas Wilson

Lucie Work

## 1983

Michael Babb

Don Beattie

Robert Brown

Mary Dess

John Wade Frias

Servin Housen

Sandra Kay

Renee Kilmer

Robert Lantz

Kathy Leland-May

Mike Ramm

Sharyn Stever

Suzan Still

Douglas Wilson

## 1984

Don Bezanson

Melinda Blaylock

Linda Burke

Paula Campbell

Victoria Dalkey

Renee Kilmer

Kathy Leland-May

Jan Probst

Gladys Serena Raines

Meredith Reinhart

Scott Richterich

Gary Short

Rosemary Smith

Theresa Vinciguerra

Sharyn Stever

Mary Welch

## 1985

Anne Appleton

Stephen Cook

Dianna Henning

Karrell Hickman

Tim Hurd

Susan Kelly-DeWitt

Elaine McCullough

Sue McKee

Carole Stedronsky

Douglas Wilson

## 1986

Richard Busman

Paula Campbell

Stephen Cook

Joe Dwyer

Catherine Fraga

John W. Hall

Dianna Henning

Nicki Kelly

Susan Kelly-DeWitt

Patrick McCorkle

Sue McKee

Ken Miller

Sharyn Stever

Carole Stedronsky

Paul Whetstone

**1987**

Paula Campbell  
Darren Crown  
Catherine Fraga  
Marijean Galloway  
Susan Kelly-DeWitt  
Paul Merkley  
Cricket Murphree  
Bill Peak  
John Anton Piller  
Nora Washburn  
Mark (J.C. Tisserand)  
Zeman

**1988**

Nadine Calder  
Scott Crider  
Anna Marie Deuso  
Catherine Fraga  
Janet Gardner  
Mark Little  
Mary Madsen  
Deborah Moody  
Clinton Norell  
William Peak  
Mark Zeman

**1989**

Karen Bijlsma  
Hin Chhen  
Steve Cook  
Scott Crider  
Nedra Evers  
Maria Fernandez

Marijean Galloway  
Jacqueline Marshall  
John Anton Piller  
Laura Raspberry  
Laura Lynn Russell  
Mark Zeman

**1990**

Grace Brenneman  
Leslee A. Brinton  
Carole Freedland  
Rosemary L. Imes  
Tiffany Ana Lopez  
Mary Madsen  
Keith F. Martin  
Katrina L. Middleton  
Hollye Nichol  
Alexandra Pope  
Laura J. Reese  
Shawn Westfall  
Chris Whetstone  
Doris Wong  
Mark Zeman

**1991**

Brian W. Berry  
Shelley Circle  
Nedra Evers  
Rosemary L. Imes  
S. April McDonald  
Scott Wm. Obrien  
Carole Peak  
Alexandra Pope

Jack Schouten  
Pearl Stein Selinsky  
Kim R. Skorich  
Melanie L. Smith  
Suzanne Tjoelker  
Sandy M. Valdez  
Janet Whetstone  
Doris Wong

**1992**

W. John Bailes  
Leticia Bermudez  
Odessa Bethea  
Thomas Bruno  
Lisa Crawford  
Karen Doede  
Tim Fulton  
Lisa Gray  
John Helmar  
Brian Jukes  
Kate Lindeman  
Guy Roberts  
Lisa Shannon  
Glen Sharp  
Kathryn Webster  
Barbara Weiss

**1993**

Tom Balfour  
Mike Beasley  
Daniel Crose

D. Lynn Doiron  
Helga Erickson  
Kearsarge Fleming  
Michelle Hartt  
Christine McGill  
Karen Morgan  
Karen Norling  
Cate Pellegrini  
Laura Russell  
Yolanda Tauzer  
Barbara Weiss

**1994**

Sandra Arndt-Kohlway  
Tom Balfour  
S. Carolyn Beever  
Dario Campos  
Carole Chambers  
Moem Chhen  
Helga Erickson  
Rich Harroun  
Dena Massey  
A. J. Roma  
Glen Sharp  
Angela Shortt  
Kristin VanTassel  
Pat Warriner  
Alex White  
Doris Wong

**1995**

Dario Campos  
Paul Fillebrown  
Suzette Hadorn

Stacy Holder  
Brian Jukes  
Wendy Lewis  
Jamey Nye  
John Osborn  
Angela Shortt  
Victor Trevisanut  
Kristin VanTassel  
William Waggoner

Pat Warriner  
Alex White

Monica Young

**1996**

Melissa Cameron  
Dario Campos  
Colleen Cumby  
Gil Entao  
Darshan Kaur-Khalsa  
Cynthia Knierim  
Kate Lindeman  
Amy March  
David Ryan  
Michael Sato  
Ruben Serna  
Glen Sharp  
Leslie Stanton  
Kristin VanTassel  
J. Chris Westgate

**1997**

Tiffany Aldrich

Leatha Andrews  
Jay Batchelder  
Bryan Carpenter  
Colleen Cumby  
Dan Fredrick  
Lesley Gale  
Robert Gmelin  
Theresa Gradine  
Christina Hayes  
Robert Mason  
Danielle Newton  
Kathy Sheehan  
Candance Taylor  
J. Chris Westgate

**1998**

Tiffany Aldrich  
Shannon Calder  
Cecilia Carrasco  
Karen Champoux  
Deborah A. Harber  
Denice Hart  
Michelle A. Johnson  
Chris J. Mirell  
Veronika Monell  
Danielle Newton  
Aaron Oforlea  
Kathy M. Sheehan  
Nancy Wahl  
Josh Walton

Cynthia L. West

J. Chris Westgate

**1999**

Mieke Boynton

Karen Champoux

Natalie Grand

Patricia Hake

Tobin Halsey

Deanne Ip

Kimberly Kim

Jennifer McBride

Kate McPike

Danielle Newton

Candace Taylor

Nancy Wahl

J. Chris Westgate

Randy White

**2000**

Matthew Anderson

Jamie Bunch

Gail Erwin

Natalie Grand

Christina Hayes

Bob Humphrey

C. G. Macdonald

Jennifer Maselli

Allen Maxwell

Richard Moser

Christopher Reynaga

Kathy Sheehan

Cynthia West

Andrew Williamson

**2001**

Grant Benton

Timothy Conlon

Elaine Feller

Chelsea Folkman

Christina Hayes

Bob Humphrey

Angelina R. Jones

Anna Koval

Richard Moser

Miranda Saake

Kathy Sheehan

Dale Stromberg

Ma Lee Vue

Janet Wallace

**2002**

Moyuri Stepahnie Ahn

Jamie Bunch

Elizabeth Campbell

Elaine Feller

Constance Gutowsky

Jason Hall

Michael Koontz

Kristine LiVecchi

Michelle Lowe

Douglas Mattes

Katie O'Donnell

Dale Stromberg

Ann Wehrman

Appalena Williams

**2003**

Sharon Baltazar

Jamie Bunch

Melissa Camilleri

Jacqueline Diaz

Danelle Dyckhoff

Karen Embry

Josh Glass

Alan Haslam

Kristine LiVecchi

Leah Melnicoe

Mariah Morgan

Heather Mundell

Natasha Stanford

Laurel Sunderman

Kara Synhorst

Ben Waller

**2004**

Daniel Benson

Jean Bricarello

Karen Embry

Heather Judy

Leah Larsen

Patrick Lochelt

Stacy Lucier

Anna Lee McKennon

David Purdy

Tina Royer

Natasha Stanford

Jeremy Trimble

Ann Wehrman

**2005**

Steve Abeyta

Frank Blackmore

Leanne Cameron

Rachel Dodge

Mary Gilzean

David Gutierrez

Daniel Baxter Jackson III

Amy Johnson

Brian King

Becky Kogos

Leah Larsen

Robert Marshall

Michael Pulley

Edythe Schwartz

Anthony Scoggins

Ann Wehrman

**2006**

Michelle Beuttel

Frank Blackmore

Kathryn Canan

Amber Dickey

Laura Dullum

Berylene Haak

Julie Ingber

Barbara Link

Autumn Newman

Steve Owen

Rafael Sanchez

Edythe Schwartz

Jeremy Trimble

Heidi Wadsworth

Ann Wehrman

**2007**

Amanda Adams-Handy

Holly Bilsky

Kylee Cook

Hai Dao

Verna Dreisbach

Nicholas Giroux

Lori Hawk

Mary Herrema Girudice

Steve Owen

Dave Powers

Jeremy Trimble

Maddy Walsh

Amy Wong

**2008**

Michelle Beuttel

Kylee Cook

Raymond Crosby

Trina Drotar

Aschala Edwards

Mary Giudice

Mikko Lautamo

Robin Martin

Joseph Montalbo

Cassandra Opiela

Michelle Pabst

Jennifer Palmares

Dave Powers

Rafael Sanchez

Laura West

**2009**

Elison Alcovendaz

Jonathan Alston

James Benton

Jill Buettner

Bridget Crenshaw

Ron Cruz

Trina Drotar

Hugh Trenton Durst, Jr.

Janet Reyes Lopez

Joe Montalbo

Lucy Nevins

Steve D. Owen

Jeffery Pressnell

Timothy Sanders

Kelsey Sorensen

**2010**

Elison Alcovendaz

James Benton

Jeannette Benton

Aschala Edwards

Margie Fuston

Shadi Gex

Marcelo Hernandez

Laurel Kolar

Cynthia Page

Ulises Palmeno

Nancy (Beth) Pearsall

Laura Torres

2011

Jonathan Alston

Lennon Cole

Julie Colombo

Cortney Copeland

Josh Fernandez

Peggy Kincaid

Ryan Little

Tamer Emerick Mostafa

Shaunna Rozette Mulderrig

Jeffery Pressnell

Teresa Silvagni

Cynthia Alicia Smith

Jenni Wiltz

**2012**

Janelle MacDonald

Josh Fernandez

Jonathan Alston

Elison Alcovendaz

Marie Bischoff

Timothy McGee

Royce Brown

Jenni Wiltz

Nathan McQueen

Amy Bush

Jamil Kochai

**2013**

Tracey Byrne Weddle

Amy Bush

Kathleen Uttinger

Jeff Ringelski

Jamil Kochai

Juan Espinoza

Margie Fuston

Stephanie Rae Lawson

Nathan McQueen

Allyce Ondricka

**2014**

Kiawna Brewster

Athena Georgakopoulos

Troy Jurach

Elizabeth Kettle

Samantha Kingsbury

Jamil Kochai

Long Lim

Monique McDade

Leanna Mirick

Ramon Roa

Carol Singleton

Delecia Sydnor

John Zumstein

**2015**

Marie Bischoff

Erik Fritts-Davis

C.J. Green

Tyler Haugen

Andrew Killmer

Evan Kincade

Lauren Lavin

Leanna Mirick

Lydia Moraru

Alexander Ramirez

Carol Singleton

Miles Joseph Tsue

Katie Walker

**2016**

Amy Bush

Kaylen Wade

Ian Kappos

Rachel Wendt

Kimberly M. Terry

Kristopher Robinson

Stuart Canton

Tyler Meredith

Samantha Margaret Kingsbury

Mary Rosenberry

Christopher Yvan

Louis Chalaye

Christopher Yocom, Jr.

Allie Gove

**2017**

Ademidun Adejobi

Amy Bush

Christophe Chalaye

Chelsea Megan Evans

Jennifer Anne Flynn

Sage Heart

Hailey Nikole Kleinhans

Leng Moua

Janet Rodriguez

Maxwell Stenson

Rachel Wendt

Susan Ann Wiacek

**2018**

Carrie Rose Evon

Dan Berget

Cisalee Nichole Burgess

Tyler Cernohlavek

Michaela Marie Erwin

Chelsea Evans

Emiliann Ferguson

Mason Gibb

Cory Gilpin

Brandon Lule

Kayla Salgado

Andrew Schley

Angela Schoch/Davidson

Quynh Tran

Dylan Wells

**2019**

Ademidun Adejobi

Carrie Rose Evon

Nicholas Evon

Mason Gibb

Ashley Gohring

Laura King

Brandon Lule

Kevin Moore

Leng Moua

Lisa Ortiz

Kristopher Robinson

Christopher Summers

Ashley Thomas

Dylan Wells

**2020**

Kayleigh Davidson-Simard

Jack DeLeon

Serena Delgado

Carrie Rose Evon

Scott Stephen Gipner

Kathryn Holly Holt

Brandon Lule

Angela Elisa Schoch/Davidson

Amber Rose Shupe

Nick Stockman

Christopher J. Summers

Dylan Wells

**2022**

Kayleigh Davidson-Simard

Jack DeLeon

Madeline Humphreys

Caitlyn Tuyet Le

Darnie Mak

Koleen Fred Burgos Matias

Charles Woodstra McCormick

Vincent Moleski

Christopher Daniel Sanchez

**2023**

Andrea Martinez Alvarez

Jimmy Buckmaster

Phillip Carey

Kayleigh Davidson-Simard

Sydney Eddenfield

Victoria Hagler

Madeline Humphreys

Erin Mahoney

Koleen Fred Burgos Matias

Sidra Nawaz

Manuel Rubio

Blair Rubke

Idan Luis Sanchez

Ryan Van Dyke

\* \* \* \* \*





# 2024 JUDGES

## Critical Analysis

**Mary Rosenberry** holds a Ph.D. in English Literature from the University of Arizona and is a proud graduate of CSUS's MA program. She currently teaches English at Sierra College and Cosumnes River College.

## Creative Non-Fiction

**Rose Himber Howse** is a fiction writer and essayist from North Carolina. She is currently a lecturer in the Feminism, Gender, and Sexuality Studies department at Stanford University, where she was a 2021-23 Wallace Stegner fellow in fiction. Rose has also been a Steinbeck fellow in fiction at San Jose State University, and has received fellowships or supported residencies from the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, the Kimmel Harding Nelson Center, Monson Arts, and Jentel. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *ZYZZYVA*, *Joyland*, *Hobart*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, and elsewhere.

# 2024 JUDGES

## Poetry

**Susan Kelly-DeWitt** is a former Wallace Stegner Fellow and the author of *Gatherer's Alphabet* (Gunpowder Press, CA Poets Prize, 2022), *Gravitational Tug* (Main Street Rag, 2020), *Spider Season* (Cold River Press, 2016), *The Fortunate Islands* (Marick Press, 2008) and a number of previous small press collections. Her work has also appeared in many anthologies, and in print and online journals at home and abroad. She is currently a member of the National Book Critics Circle, the Northern California Book Reviewers Association and a contributing editor for *Poetry Flash*. A new book, *Frangible Operas: Selected Uncollected* is forthcoming from *Gunpowder Press* in 2024. For more information, please visit her website at [www.susankelly-dewitt.com](http://www.susankelly-dewitt.com).

## Short Fiction

**Evgeniya Dame** is a former Stegner Fellow in Fiction and has taught writing at Stanford University, the University of New Hampshire, and Grub Street. She received an MFA from the University of New Hampshire where she was a Fulbright Fellow from Russia. Her fiction and essays have appeared in *Zoetrope: All-Story*, *Ploughshares*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Joyland*, *Electric Literature*, and elsewhere. Her work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and received support from the Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance and Monson Arts. She is a fiction editor for *Joyland* and is at work on a story collection and a novel.

## Critical Analysis

|                           |   |                |
|---------------------------|---|----------------|
| First Place<br>Graduate   | “With all due respect to Oedipus: Gender and sexuality in <i>The Birds</i> , and the art of Queer Misremembering”<br>By <b>Erin Mahoney</b>           | <b>Page 23</b> |
| Second Place<br>Graduate  | “What Happened When It All Stopped?: A Prosodic Analysis of Meter, Mythology & Monotony in Annie Finch’s ‘A Root’”<br>By <b>Kelsey Scaife-Puckett</b> | <b>Page 40</b> |
| First Place<br>Undergrad  | “Madame Leviathan: Maternity and Androgyny in <i>Moby-Dick</i> ”<br>By <b>Shay Ingram</b>   | <b>Page 54</b> |
| Second Place<br>Undergrad | “Pauline Breedlove and the Damage of the Hollywood Ideal in Morrison’s <i>The Bluest Eye</i> ”<br>By <b>Madeleine Dibene</b>                          | <b>Page 68</b> |

## Creative Non-Fiction

|                           |   |                 |
|---------------------------|---|-----------------|
| Graduate<br>First Place   | “The Sun Cut Flat”<br>By <b>Erin Mahoney</b>          | <b>Page 148</b> |
| Second Place<br>Graduate  | “Reputation”<br>By <b>Madeline Humphreys</b>          | <b>Page 164</b> |
| First Place<br>Undergrad  | “Hyundai Elantra”<br>By <b>Faith Elizabeth Morris</b> | <b>Page 172</b> |
| Second Place<br>Undergrad | <i>No Entry Chosen</i>                                |                 |

## Poetry

|              |                             |                |
|--------------|-----------------------------|----------------|
| First Place  | “The Home is a Desert”      |                |
| Graduate     | By <b>Erin Mahoney</b>      | <b>Page 79</b> |
| Second Place | “Carving Fingers”           |                |
| Graduate     | By <b>Daniel Kemper</b>     | <b>Page 88</b> |
| First Place  | “Journey to the Real World” |                |
| Undergrad    | By <b>Sidra Nawaz</b>       | <b>Page 92</b> |
| Second Place | <i>No Entry Chosen</i>      |                |
| Undergrad    |                             |                |

## Short Fiction

|              |                                    |                 |
|--------------|------------------------------------|-----------------|
| First Place  | “Serpent in Spring”                |                 |
| Graduate     | By <b>Madeline Humphreys</b>       | <b>Page 98</b>  |
| Second Place | <i>No Entry Chosen</i>             |                 |
| Graduate     |                                    |                 |
| First Place  | “There are Cows in the Background” |                 |
| Undergrad    | By <b>Faith Elizabeth Morris</b>   | <b>Page 106</b> |
| Second Place | “Pine Trees”                       |                 |
| Undergrad    | By <b>Ben Israel K. Gurjar</b>     | <b>Page 123</b> |



**GRADUATE  
FIRST PLACE  
CRITICAL ANALYSIS**

**“WITH ALL DUE RESPECT TO OEDIPUS”: GENDER AND  
SEXUALITY IN THE BIRDS, AND THE ART OF QUEER  
MISREMEMBERING**

By Erin Mahoney

**O**n its face, Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds* aligns with the rest of his works as an eerie tale of terror and suspense, this time with our feathered friends inexplicably turning against a small coastal town with violent and deadly results. Hitchcock himself stated that this film was about nature exacting revenge on humans for our constant abuse of the planet (Paglia), but a modern viewing of *The Birds* brings other issues to the forefront, namely its depiction of gender and sexuality, and its subsequent punishment of queerness and women’s liberation. Hitchcock’s misogyny has long been a topic of discussion, with dozens of essays dissecting his portrayal of women in his films like *Rebecca*, *Marnie*, *Vertigo*, and *Psycho*; I would argue that *The Birds* is rife with material not only for that conversation, but also an analysis of its merciless condemnation of the emerging independence of women and queer culture of the 1960s. In the hands of Hitchcock, the characters who most embody queer and feminist ideals are terrorized, violently attacked, and ultimately — and unequivocally — silenced.

It would be disingenuous to approach this argument without addressing an important element of my research process: my discovery upon rewatching of *The Birds*, twenty years after my initial viewing, that the chief queer-coded character is only onscreen for around 11

minutes of the 2 hour runtime. What did I see in 2003 that stuck with me for two decades and why did I hold onto it tightly for all those years? Supported by foundational works by Jack Halberstom and José Esteban Muñoz, I suggest that this phenomenon — of finding a morsel of queerness in a text and centering it in one’s basic interpretation, of unconsciously distorting a memory over time — can be understood as an act of self defense I call "Queer Misremembering."

Before examining the idea of Queer Misremembering, let’s first inspect the queerness at the heart of my interpretation of *The Birds*, which lies predominantly in the secondary character Annie. As protagonist Melanie pursues handsome Mitch all the way from San Francisco to Bodega Bay, she encounters and quickly builds a rapport with Annie, the town’s schoolteacher. The two women are diametrically opposed in their physical appearance, as much as that’s possible while still appearing conventionally attractive for the time. Melanie sports a feminine skirt set and jewelry, fashionably pulled together by a luxurious fur coat, and her long, blonde hair up in a bun. In contrast, Annie’s first appearance on screen is telling: she emerges from the garden, face dirty, short, black hair mussed, in a sweater and slacks; with a deep, sultry voice she offers Melanie a cigarette as they chat. While just as petite as Melanie, Annie noticeably takes up space, leaning over the door of Melanie’s convertible as they are saying goodbye, then leaning against her own mailbox while the car drives away. According to Judith Butler, these details carry meaning about Annie’s gender presentation: “Gender is instituted through the stylization of the body, and hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler, 519). Viewing this scene through a queer lens, it’s clear that Annie’s clothing, hairstyle, vocal tone, and mannerisms all work together to establish her as a queer-coded character, especially in contrast to Melanie’s hyper-femininity.

Despite her purely heteronormative gender presentation, Melanie’s interactions with An-



nie also firmly position her in the queer realm. Keep in mind Eve Sedgwick's definition of queerness, as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (Sedgwick, 8). This plays out between Melanie and Annie, especially in their second scene together. Melanie checks her hair in a window's reflection as she waits for Annie to open the door, wanting to make a good impression; as Annie answers her knock, a tangible chemistry erupts between them as she leans in the doorway, arm outstretched to straddle the entrance. The women make meaningful, lingering eye contact and engage in flirtatious banter. This chemistry continues in the next scene they share set in Annie's living room in stark contrast to Melanie's visit to the Brenner house in all its brazen heteronormative glory. This visit begins with Melanie reaching the house just as Mitch, his mother, and sister return from what we can assume was a lovely, familial walk, and young Cathy immediately running up to hug Melanie in thanks for the gifted pair of lovebirds. "They're just what I wanted," the girl says with saccharine gratitude. "Is there a man and a woman?" (*The Birds*, 33:19) A peculiar question from a peculiar child, Cathy's phrasing, "man and woman" instead of the more common and less adult-human "boy and girl," underlines the Brenner family's adherence and embodiment of heteronormativity. Meanwhile, Melanie's vague and noncommittal and uninterested response of "Well, I suppose so" shows her own lack of care, and even disdain, for the traditional patriarchal structure. As Melanie follows the family into their home, she immediately notices an imposing portrait of Mitch's father (*The Birds*, 34:48), at once establishing the Brenner house as staunchly patriarchal in structure and Melanie at odds with it. I agree with Kyle Bishop's assertion that "the power play at the heart of *The Birds* is really primarily about the patriarchy," (Bishop, 142), a claim that is supported repeatedly throughout the film — clearly in the home of the Brennens, but also through Hitchcock's treatment of Melanie and Annie, the two characters most at odds with it.

After Melanie's awkward and at times uncomfortable visit at the Brenner home, she returns to Annie's house and the easy chemistry they share; they enjoy some brandy as they get to know each other. In this scene as with the rest of her time onscreen, Annie rails against heteronormativity and embodies queerness in multiple ways, including, as discussed above, through her androgynous gender presentation and lifestyle: she works and earns enough of a living to have her own house, where she lives alone without any romantic interests of note or family to speak of, and she smokes and drinks as she pleases. Although she has a history with Mitch, having followed him to Bodega Bay while they were dating, she and Melanie are never pitted against each other as rivals. Instead, Annie's explanation for staying in town suggests a different manner of pushing against the patriarchy: a sense of equality. "I wanted to be near Mitch; oh, it was over and done with and I knew it, but I still wanted to be near him. You see, I still like him a hell of a lot, and I don't want to lose that friendship, *ever*." (*The Birds*, 44:55) By focusing on their years-long friendship — a relationship built upon a foundation of mutual respect and equality — Annie positions herself on the same level as Mitch instead of below him, throwing off the delicate balance of the system of patriarchal hierarchies.

Unlike the majority of Hitchcock's portrayals of queer characters, while Annie meets a terrible and disrespectful off-screen fate, she is portrayed as sensible, independent, and reliable: in short, as a good person. Critics note that the queer-coded characters in Hitchcock's films are usually villainous. John Hepworth writes, "The infuriating nastiness of Hitchcock's most homophobic films lies in his willingness, even eagerness, to strike low blows and hold up crowd-pleasing scapegoats" (Hepworth, 188). David Greven takes it a step further, writing, "In no film by Alfred Hitchcock does a 'positive image' of queer sexual identity occur" (Greven, 127). While I don't disagree with Hepworth's position about Hitchcock's depiction of queer-coded men onscreen, both cis-gay critics ignore the women of Hitchcock's films, even the queer ones. In fact, Annie's depiction is wholly positive. So why is her queerness permitted in this movie,

or at least, impervious to the pointed derision of Hitchcock's other films? Because the auteur knows that Annie, like Melanie, will pay the ultimate price for her refusal to adhere to heteronormativity: complete destruction.

Three-fourths of the way into the film, the birds subject the town to their most savage attack yet; Melanie peers from the diner window with Bodega Bay residents as folks outside are ravaged by gulls and crows. As Melanie witnesses terror and violence, her mental and emotional pain is on full display; she is rendered helpless to the horrifying circumstances, the only sound that of the continued explosions. The diner dwellers rush to try to help those injured outside, but Melanie finds herself almost immediately having to seek refuge in a glass phone booth in a last-ditch attempt to escape the birds. Gulls slam into it from all sides, providing the audience with a visceral experience of the attack from Melanie's point of view while Hitchcock, again, puts her trauma on display. For a solid minute and a half, Melanie is alone in the phone booth, spinning from one horror to the next as birds try to break through the glass, men get their eyes clawed out, and more. She is silent the whole time, rendered both mute and helpless.

Mitch comes to her rescue, dragging her back into the diner, where they are both greeted by more silence. At first, the place looks deserted, but as they walk through the quiet and empty restaurant, they eventually find a dozen women and children cowering in a back hallway, absolutely silent. Mitch begins almost speaks but catches their stares: accusatory, suspicious, angry. Hitchcock lets the quiet and judgment play out. One woman finally stands, addressing Melanie directly: "Why are they doing this? Why are they doing this? They said when you got here the whole thing started. Who are you? What are you? Where did you come from? I think you're the cause of all this! I think you're evil! EVIL!" (*The Birds*, 1:28:54) Her tirade only ends when Melanie slaps her square in the face, and a shocked silence envelopes them all. In the hands of Hitchcock, such behavior merits punishment, and for Melanie, the freewheel-

ing, independent, modern woman standing in stark contrast to the desperate and loyal mother and citizen of Bodega Bay, these scenes — the phonebooth ambush and the diner attack — signal the beginning of Melanie’s complete unraveling.

The emotional torture of Melanie continues in the next scene, as she and Mitch make their way to Annie’s to retrieve the schoolteacher and young Cathy. Menacing caws and ambiguous clangs pierce the quiet sporadically while they cautiously come to the fence of Annie’s, revealing her mauled body sprawled face up in her front yard, feet still lying on the steps. Melanie looks from Annie’s prone body up to Mitch’s face, as if through his masculinity alone he could will things to be different. Mitch jogs to take a closer, hopeless look at the body; Melanie rushes to the fence and lets out a birdlike shriek of horror as she gets a clearer view. Annie is clearly lifeless, lying unnaturally with blood on her shins, knees, face, clothes. Mitch runs in to the house retrieve Cathy, and moves to cover Annie’s body with his jacket, until Melanie begs him not to just leave Annie on the ground. Mitch picks Annie’s body up, carrying her inside the house in a macabre rendition of a husband carrying his new bride over the threshold, a clear reference to the safety of the institution of marriage and the realm of the domestic, the very things Annie was punished for trying to resist and move beyond.

Notably, from the moment we see Annie prone on the ground to when she is ceremoniously carried inside by Mitch, is a full 2 minutes long. Contrast this with the amount of time Annie, one of the most relatable and beloved characters in the film, appears *alive* in the movie: only 11 minutes. This discrepancy underscores Hitchcock’s cruelty as he punishes Annie for her resistance to the cis-heteronormative, patriarchal structure of 1960s American society. Again, we see the lingering effects of the Hollywood morality codes, which “enacted a parallel dynamic of enforcement and punishment, at first with the banning of any mention of homosexuality altogether. Later, as codes relaxed and homosexuality became visible on-screen, film and TV moved from

silencing to punishing, with the tendency to kill queer characters or otherwise present them as miserable and morally compromised” (Bridges, 115). Hitchcock wields the trope mercilessly, using the world of the “natural” in the birds themselves to expose, punish, and destroy what he deems unnatural: women like Annie and Melanie.

The fact that *The Birds* was released on March 28, 1963, a mere two and a half months before President John F. Kennedy signed the Equal Pay Act on June 10, further supports this argument. The social tides were turning in the United States, and The Equal Pay Act paved the way for women’s independence and autonomy. (Cross, 3). As women gained the ability to financially support themselves for the first time in the United States, they also gained independence from the patriarchal system that auteurs such as Hitchcock viewed as the natural order of things, causing upholders of the patriarchy to become a dangerous combination of uncomfortable, nervous, and defensive.

This discomfort among men is only natural, according to Hélène Cixous; she wrote “men say that there are two unrepresentable things: death and the feminine sex. That’s because they need femininity to be associated with death; it’s the jitters that gives them a hard-on! For themselves! They need to be afraid of us” (Cixous, 885). It’s no wonder, then, that in the hands of Hitchcock, the results of the male gaze are so violent. As film theorist Laura Mulvey wrote, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey, 62). In *The Birds*, a complicated inverse is realized: Melanie is physically stylized as the blond bombshell archetype Hitchcock favored, but behaviorally she embodies a rejection of the “sexual imbalance,” and therefore, according to Hitchcock, must be psychologically and physically ravaged.

This utter destruction of Melanie becomes complete in the last 20 minutes of the film as she and the Brenners take shelter in the family home. They listen to the news report from San Francisco, which underplays the events unfolding in Bodega Bay, leading Lydia to a bout of “hysteria” in which she yells at Mitch (1:36:12). Mitch and Melanie go out for more wood, and return to a calmer household, everyone sitting in silence, momentarily safe. As they settle in for the night, Lydia robotically clears the teapot and cups from the coffee table, going through the motions of domesticity as a form of comfort.

And then the birds are back; they thrash at the windows and doors in an attempt to breach the sacred threshold of the family home, which Mitch in all his virility protects by nailing boards across entryways and feeding the fireplace. Meanwhile, the three generations of women react in varying, passive ways: Lydia and Cathy cower, and Melanie awkwardly falls to the couch, legs tucked in and arms outstretched as if she could will her body to become part of it. She pushes herself up against the wall, literally rolling along it, aligning herself as firmly as possible with the Brenner house, with the security of the “family home.” Her only moment of attempted action is to tend to Mitch’s wounds, to function as caregiver to the patriarch. She seemingly has finally accepted her “natural” role.

She makes one more costly misstep, though, in the dead of the night. The birds have stopped their unrelenting attack, and while the Brenners sleep in the living room, Melanie sits next to Cathy slumbering on the couch. She stares spellbound at the fire, visibly overwrought and unable to rest. She hears the soft sound of a pair of wings fluttering and peers up and around to try to find its source, to no avail. When she hears it again, she quietly tries to get Mitch’s attention across the room, but he continues to sleep sitting up in his armchair. Melanie hears the ghostly fluttering again, and she is a woman haunted, unable to ignore the muffled sounds and stay in the relative safety of the warm and familial living room. She takes the flash-

light from the coffee table and quietly checks the lovebirds' cage in the kitchen to see if they're the source of the noise, but they are still and silent. She turns, illuminating a staircase, and registers that the sound is emanating from the second floor. She starts to ascend. As Bishop writes, "Melanie acts independent and autonomous for the last time, and the fate awaiting her upstairs is foreshadowed by a high-angled shot down the stairs that recalls the menace created by a similar investigation of the house in *Psycho*. Furthermore, by moving from the relatively public rooms on the main floor into the intimate space of the sleeping rooms, Melanie is again transgressing her relationship with the family, moving on her own accord from the space of social discourse to one of sexual intercourse" (Bishop, 143). This final act of independence and breaching of the boundaries intrinsic to the patriarchal social structure indeed costs Melanie dearly.

As Melanie approaches the door to Cathy's bedroom, the source of the fluttering, she hesitates as she reaches out to grasp the handle, momentarily looking back toward the safety of the family unit downstairs. Instead, she faces the door and with an expression that reveals a mix of dread and resigned shame — as if she knew she should not be taking this next intrusive step, but simply could not help herself — twists the knob, and slowly enters. As she steps in, she peers up, spying a huge hole in the roof and, with a gasp, flails the flashlight to reveal dozens of birds of all types covering Cathy's canopy bed. They immediately and violently attack her, and in the frenzy Melanie, with her arms up attempting to shield her face, blindly falls back against the bedroom door, shutting her into this room of horror. The scene parallels the terrifying episode Melanie endured in town hours earlier, but this time she is unprotected by the glass phonebooth — a tangible symbol of the safety offered by a patriarchal society. Instead, Melanie's bravery and independence is rewarded with violence. For a solid two minutes, the birds peck, scratch, claw, thrash, and rip the flesh from Melanie, their cawing and flapping the only sounds in the scene aside from Melanie's tiny whimpers. She is unable to call out for

help; she is alone, at the mercy of the birds. This scene especially brings to mind Modleski's assertion: "The issue of rape must be central to any feminist analysis of contemporary popular culture because mass-market entertainment often seems to revel in violence against women. In film studies, Alfred Hitchcock has been viewed as an archetypal misogynist who invites his audience to indulge their most sadistic fantasies against the female" ("Rape Versus Man's Laughter," 304). The sustained duration of the assault on Melanie, the gratuitous violence of it after almost two hours of focusing on only the immediate aftermath of the birds' attacks, and the sheer brutality and devastating results of their physical and psychological violation of Melanie, all support Modleski's assessment.

At this point, Melanie has been effectively silenced and dismantled by the trauma of the day, and only survives the latest assault because Mitch — again, acting as savior — manages to pull her body from the room. He and Lydia take Melanie downstairs, and lay her on the sofa, where she momentarily comes to and thrashes against his hands in defense, as if his hands were birds. He gently but firmly grasps her arms and folds them across her chest, placing them in an oddly funereal position that seems to calm her. In that moment, as she allows her body to be molded, Melanie has suffered and finally given in to complete ego death, essentially releasing herself from her independence and autonomy, left to stare vacantly as Mitch pours brandy into her mouth. "We have to get her to a hospital," Mitch says (1:51:30), and the Brenners band together as a family to treat her wounds and prepare to drive to San Francisco. Hitchcock scholar David Sterritt astutely highlights the importance of this scene: "In a film that lacks a single and definitive climax, this moment of virtual paralysis for the heroine must be seen as the goal of the narrative so far, and also the pivot on which it will turn in order to approach closure" (Sterritt, 141). Indeed, with the arrival of Melanie's need for care, Lydia has regained her composure, once again finding her purpose as a mother and caregiver. Cathy does her part by fetching things for the adults and tending to the fire, a crash course in domesticity. While the



women tend to their patient, Mitch achieves patriarchal hero status by braving the dangers of the outdoors, moving slowly and quietly to prepare Melanie's car for departure. He will get his family, his women, to safety. He silently pulls the car up to the house, the birds not bothering him at all, as if they are satisfied with the damage they have wreaked and the promise that the interloper is finally leaving, and goes inside to help Lydia lead Melanie outside. Melanie stares blankly ahead, fully reliant on Mitch and Lydia to basically carry her by her arms, and as they pass over the house's threshold the birds start cawing at her. "No! No!" she shouts frantically, but Mitch quickly shushes her and deposits her with Lydia in the backseat. He goes back for Cathy, who asks if she can bring the lovebirds along: "They haven't harmed anyone," she says as she presents them in their covered cage. Mitch acquiesces, and as he, Cathy and the pair of tamed birds climb into the front seat, Hitchcock cuts to the devastated and traumatized Melanie clinging childishly to Lydia and looking up to the matriarch pathetically. Lydia smiles as she hugs her new dependent close, finding comfort in her newfound sense of purpose. Mitch begins to drive, Melanie notably relegated to the backseat of her own car, and the film ends with this new family unit driving into the sunrise while thousands of birds watch them go.

By the end, plucky and independent Melanie is rendered mute, nearly catatonic, disheveled, unable to defend or take care of herself, and fully dependent on Mitch and his family for basic survival. She is torn apart physically and psychologically, rendered powerless. Hitchcock's happy ending sees the self-determining, modern feminist literally saved by the family unit, the queer-coded and self-reliant ex dead, the mother figure reestablished as the heart of the family, and the man reconstituted as the hero, leader, and patriarch. As mentioned at the outset of this paper, Hitchcock claimed that this film represented nature getting back at humans for our mistreatment of the planet. I would say that's a half truth, and argue instead that Hitchcock uses the birds as a tool to punish and brutalize queerness and womens' liberation because they

go against what he views as the natural order of things: cis-heteronormativity and patriarchal values.

### Queer Misremembering

As I conducted my research for this article I couldn't help but think about how different my reactions were from the first time I watched *The Birds* 20 years ago to my recent viewings in the last few months. My initial encounter, as an oblivious 21 year old with no clue they were queer, I left the theater incredibly affected by the sexual tension between Melanie and Annie, and intrigued by how that related to the other interpersonal relationships featured. I knew I was drawn to Annie but didn't have the tools at the time to unpack why. As the years went by, I remembered fewer and fewer details about the film, but the queerness remained fresh in my brain whenever *The Birds* came up, so much so that I was really shocked upon rewatching by how briefly the two women actually share the screen: only 11 minutes in a 2 hour run-time. This made me question my own memory, and why my mind decided to grasp onto what temporally is a minor aspect of the film. Was it a defense mechanism I subconsciously employed while I worked my way up to recognizing who I really was myself? As an impressionable person 20 years ago exploring my own identity, did I see a hint of it on screen and then misremember that experience until the glimmer became a brilliant, illuminating light? Did this "queer misremembering" help to shape my identity, or at least allow me to access it more easily?

I believe the answers to all these questions are a resounding yes, and look to reader response theory to ground my understanding. I agree with Jeremy Lane's understanding of the theory: "the reader, through the process of reading, realizes an awareness of the parallels between his or her own epistemological situation and the imagined primal human situation articulated through the [work], a tension between reasoned inquiry and analysis on the one hand and

faith on the other, and this realization renders the reader not merely an observer of but a participant in the [work]" (Lane, 37). In short, we always read ourselves into texts, and that reading will always be dependent on our positionality at the time of engagement. I argue that this can take place subconsciously and, through queer misremembering, synthesizes further over time.

Even after unpacking the idea of how queer misremembering functions, the question remains, what necessitates it and why, for me, did it come in the form of a 1963 horror movie? Gretchen Jung's work provides some insight. As Jung writes, "The individual begins questioning his/her identity through interaction with the environment. Without others to compare with, this questioning might not occur." (15) Here, Jung recognizes the need to depend on disidentification and queer misremembering for self validation: even as recently as 2003, my first viewing of *The Birds*, there wasn't a lot of representation of queer people in popular culture, let alone *positive* representation. Jung surveyed adults about their experiences back when they were between 15 - 23 years old and found that representation in film does indeed have a major effect on queer identity development, recognizing the pedagogical aspect of film as teaching "lessons of identity" (154). During those peak ages, I was still subject to the positionality of my small, conservative town upbringing. The representation I had access to was restricted to the mainstream, namely movies like *Philadelphia* starring Tom Hanks as a gay man dying of AIDS and *Boys Don't Cry* with Hilary Swank portraying a trans man who is tortured and murdered in a hate crime. Notably, both examples feature cis-straight casts and depict queer people suffering immensely. With media showing queerness only in the context of pain and torment, there's no wonder those are the conditions in which I was able to notice it while watching *The Birds*.

To further explore *why* my initial memory of *The Birds* was so skewed, I consider Jack Halberstam's assertion that "resistance lurks in the performance of forgetfulness itself, hiding out in oblivion and waiting for a new erasure to inspire a new beginning" (Halberstam, 69). I

agree with Halberstam that minoritized groups wield power through the things they can control, which sometimes only includes their own thoughts and memories. Queer misremembering can be considered a version of forgetting, and I posit it is an act of both resistance and survival.

José Esteban Muñoz explores a similar phenomenon he calls “disidentifications” as he discusses the performance of Marga Gomez’s *Marga Gomez Is Pretty, Witty, and Gay*. Gomez’s character recounts a scene from her childhood: joining her mom on the couch at age 11 to watch talk show host David Susskind interview lesbians, all wearing disguises to protect their identity. Young Marga fantastically hears one of the lesbians saying “hello” directly to her through the television, though her mother, “trapped in the realm of deep denial,” does not. (3) Here, Muñoz lays out his concept of disidentifications: “The fact that Marga was able to hear the lesbian’s call while her mother tuned out, that she was capable of recognizing the cara as her own face, contributed, in no small part, to her survival as a lesbian. Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the fantasm of normative citizenship” (Muñoz, 4). Muñoz’s supposition rings true, and aligns well with queer misremembering as a sort of preliminary stage: before you can misremember something, you have to experience it first, and disidentification provides for that.

While my exploration of queer misremembering is in its beginning stages, this deep inspection of Hitchcock’s *The Birds* has laid the groundwork for further investigation. I have heard from peers who had a similar experience with *The Birds*’ Annie Hayworth, as well as characters ranging from Disney’s animated depiction of Robin Hood (yes, the fox), to *The X-Files*’ Dana Scully, to video gamedom’s Lara Croft. Like me, they recognized a kernel of queerness in these characters when they first saw them decades ago, and over the intervening years

that morsel quietly morphed and flourished in their recollections. I take wry satisfaction in the thought that, through the torment and abuse of characters that threatened his precious cis-heteronormative values, Hitchcock stoked a small and growing fire in the burgeoning queers and feminists in his audience. Ms. Hayworth would be proud.

# JUDGE'S COMMENTS

“With all due respect to Oedipus”: Gender  
and sexuality in *The Birds*, and the art of  
Queer Misremembering  
By Erin Mahoney

**Graduate**

**First Place**

**Critical Analysis**

In this well-crafted essay, the writer performs a close reading of *The Birds*, arguing that female characters in the film who deviate from patriarchal and heteronormative standards are either violently brought into submission or permanently silenced. I found this reading to be astute and convincing, even – or especially – because the writer acknowledges that the most “deviant” character – Annie – appears only briefly. The writer contextualizes their reading with Hitchcock’s reputation as a misogynist, cultural attitudes toward gender in the 1960s, and their own experience of viewing, remembering, and misremembering the film over a period of 20 years. Drawing on queer and reader-response theory, the writer puts forth their term “queer misremembering,” which they define as the unconscious process in which a reader or a viewer recognizes an (often minor) element of queerness in a popular text and “misremembers” it as being central: both to the text itself and – by subsequently – to the reader’s own identity.

- Mary Rosenberry



**GRADUATE  
SECOND PLACE  
CRITICAL ANALYSIS**

**WHAT HAPPENED WHEN IT ALL STOPPED?:  
A PROSODIC ANALYSIS OF METER, MYTHOLOGY &  
MONOTONY IN ANNIE FINCH'S "A ROOT"**

By Kelsey Scaife-Puckett

**I**n Annie Finch's poetry there is a dominating theme of nature, especially relating to spirituality, feminism, and the female body. This is likely due in part to her own identity as a witch and her interest in combining "meter, magic, craft, and rhythm" (Finch, "Poetry Witch Community"). Her poem "A Root" is no exception. In this poem, by repeating the symbolic imagery of being grabbed at the root, Finch explores the panicked thoughts of a narrator who has been victim to sexual assault. Written in the form of a French villanelle, the poem begins to sonically "spiral" through the repeating image of the ripped-up root and identical rhymes, as the speaker begins to question what really happened and what it means. Finch alludes to this sexual violence discreetly yet recognizably not only by creating a parallel between the human body and nature, but also by invoking Greek myths familiar to an insightful reader: the myth of Persephone and the myth of Philomela. As the poem begins to further spiral through these repeating images, so too does the tone grow more anxious, and the meter more inconsistent. By contrasting the monotonous base meter of iambic pentameter with repeating lines, identical rhyme, recurrent images of the root, and gradual changes in punctuation and meter, Annie Finch presents the speaker in "A Root" as a traumatized narrator who is unable to receive an answer as to why this sexual assault occurred. As a result, they are unable to move on and doomed to spiral through these thoughts again and again.



Perhaps the most noticeable decision Finch makes prosodically is the choice of form that “A Root” is written in, a villanelle, which strongly controls the language in each stanza. The French villanelle involves more repetition than other formal poems do, involving heavy constraint on the poet and, as a result, on the speaker of the poem. Once the first and third lines are written, they will be repeated alternately in the terminal line of each stanza. This gives the poem the haunting sound of a broken record. Finch makes this repetition even more eerie by punctuating the end of some of these repeating lines with question marks. The poem’s first line is written as one of these rhetorical questions:

“What happened when he grabbed me at the root?”

The iconic function of this repetition seems to be to affect the tone of the speaker. Starting a poem this repetitive in nature with a question instantly creates a pressing and serious mood that draws the reader in to consider this question with the speaker. However, as the question echoes over the following lines without an answer, the heaviness in the poem grows, and the speaker grows more frantic. It is fitting then that the refrain is the line, “My Spiral life (from an unspiral root—” as the poem and speaker literally and emotionally spiral through these questions almost ceaselessly. When the poem ends without an answer, it is implied that the speaker has also still not received an answer to her question and is doomed to be left wondering, unable to move on.

The repetition is encouraged in the poem by Finch’s decision to make the end rhymes identical. Thirteen out of the nineteen lines of this poem end with the word “root” making up over half of the end of the lines. Moreover, the poem’s title is also “A Root” which further emphasizes the symbolism of the repetition and the image. While the villanelle demands a certain extent of repetition by nature, Finch’s decision to adhere to this even more strictly with her choice of identical terminal rhyme emphasizes the point that the speaker is stuck here. The feeling of being stuck is supported narratively as well. In the first two lines, Finch writes:

“What happened when he grabbed me at the root?”

I stopped. It all stopped: spirals fought to win”

When this sexual assault occurred, everything else in the world stopped. The speaker’s life stopped, everything around the speaker stopped, and she found herself frozen in the moment this occurred, trying desperately to process it emotionally but ultimately being unable to. This sensation of freezing or numbness suits the subject matter, as it would not be unlikely for a victim of violence to freeze up in the moment it occurred or feel stunted emotionally after. The repetition not only of lines but of words and images thus perpetrates this feeling of being constrained or stuck.

On the topic of repetition in her writing, Finch explained in an interview for *The American Poetry Review* that she likes repetition so much because of the effect it has on the meaning of words and our connection to them, saying, “It can get us beyond our fear, the fear of the conscious mind, and bring us into a place where we are willing to open ourselves to the words of the poem... It’s that physical feeling of reaching forward in time until you’ve achieved whatever you need to achieve” (Finch and Giardino, 38). Finch intends for repetition to force the reader (and perhaps the speaker) to fully process the words in multiple ways to ultimately analyze them more and understand them better, rather than moving on from them to the next new line. The repetition in “A Root” certainly forces a concentration on the word “root” and its images as the speaker spirals around the driving question that guides the poem’s story. The irony, however, is that the repetition of this poem is one of over analysis that does not help the reader—or, more importantly, the speaker—ultimately reach the conclusion as to why the sexual assault has occurred. Whatever the speaker is hoping to achieve, the poem ends how it began, suggesting that the spiral has looped around to the start rather than finding an end.

The voice of the speaker seems to be one of the most important aspects of the poem,

and it is conveyed heavily not only by the repetition, but also by the rhythm and meter of the poem. Finch has written “A Root” with a base meter of iambic pentameter, as demonstrated through scansion of the first stanza below:

U / U / U / U / U /  
“What happened when he grabbed me at the root?”

U / U / U / U / U /  
I stopped. It all stopped. Spirals fought to win

U / U / U \ U / U /  
My spiral life (from an unspiraled root—”

The use of iambic pentameter works thematically and tonally in this poem in numerous different ways. First, because iambic pentameter is the most common base meter of English poetry due to the general pattern of English, it suggests themes of tradition and steadiness when used—perhaps even of monotony, which is consistent with the established repetition of the poem thus far. While some lines, such as lines 4 and 11, could be scanned as diverting from the base meter of iambic pentameter and instead including metrical substitutions of spondees (for example, the word “husked hell” could be scanned as having an equal emphasis on both words), it seems more likely that Finch means for these lines to be regular and stay with the base meter. In the interview for *The American Poetry Review*, Finch explained that she likes “the idea of poems as incantations” (Finch and Giardino, 37). This would suggest that the steady base meter is being paired with the villanelle’s repetition intentionally to create a spell-like rhythm to the poem.

The decision to remain in iambic pentameter for so long would also contribute to both the tone of the speaker and the theme of constraint. The monotonous rhythm of iambic pentameter in the beginning of the poem makes the speaker seem somewhat even toned, perhaps even numb due to shock and trauma. Once again, this correlates to Finch’s words in the second line of the poem: “It all stopped”. The speaker’s life is at a standstill, and she finds it difficult to be-

come unfrozen and speak again. Additionally, the decision to stay in iambic pentameter further emphasizes the constraint in the poem. To be assaulted in any way requires a level of constraint or being trapped. This is confirmed by some of the imagery used throughout the poem: the speaker is “grabbed” (line 1) and “in the basement” (line 12) and imagines ancestors “throw [ing] chains”. All these images suggest the speaker has been constrained, trapped, or tied down. Furthermore, roots are a part of nature that are deep underground, usually buried and unseen. While it is unlikely that the speaker is still constrained, as the actions are in the past tense, the speaker is nevertheless still stuck in the moment that assault occurred, when everything else stopped. The speaker’s overall feeling of constraint is displayed not only in the form and rhyme, but also in the strict adherence to meter in the five tercets.

The final association with iambic pentameter that contributes to the theme of the poem comes from Finch’s own theory of meter and rhythm in her book *The Ghost of Meter*. In a chapter titled “Dickinson and Patriarchal Meter: A Theory of Metrical Code” Finch asserts that because Dickinson’s poetry similarly adheres so strictly to iambic pentameter, it demonstrates “the force exerted...by patriarchal poetic tradition” (“Dickinson and Patriarchal Meter” 13). In other words, Finch believes that iambic pentameter carries a patriarchal implication in poetry. It is therefore not unlikely that Finch would follow iambic pentameter so intensely in a poem about the cycle of violence against women to further enforce the tradition of patriarchy not only in poetry, but in the narrator’s situation.

The final stanza, the quatrain, is when variation begins to occur in the poem. While Finch continues to adhere to the repetition and identical rhyme, these final lines undergo more daring decisions with punctuation and capitalization as well as metrical substitutions. So far in the poem, Finch has manipulated the lines of repetition by using enjambment and parentheses. While the lines are built of the same words, they are not always going to be read in the same way, as they might connect to the next line or stanza, changing the pattern or meaning. For ex-

ample, one of Finch's more creative interpretations of the repetition is in lines 9-13:

“My spiral life from an unspiraled root-  
Fed pomegranate? (in the basement: root  
Husked hell of seed as if seed could have been  
What happened.) When he grabbed me at the root,  
Did ancestors throw chains down through our root”

The enjambment breaks up the repetition just slightly to create more variation in the poem. The parentheses serve a dual purpose in the poem by not only preventing excessive monotony on the poem, but also by impacting the voice of the speaker. When the parentheses occur, they affect the speaker's voice by giving it the illusion of being muffled or difficult to hear—or perhaps suggesting that these are the speaker's deepest thoughts that are still too private to voice aloud. The parenthetical effect of being muffled or unable to speak at all is consistent with the idea that the speaker is numb with shock, and with the images of the narrator being trapped somewhere out of sight and underground, like the basement mentioned in line 10. The parentheses become especially interesting in lines 3 through 5 when they occur within each other:

“My spiral life (from an unspiraled root—  
From thick cigar stubbed in my young tongue's root—  
(Heart beating uncle lifetimes through my skin)).”

The double parentheses suggest more constraint—an extreme inability to speak or be heard. The appearance of them around the mention of the speaker's heartbeat is interesting when compared to the image of the root, the basement, and being underground. There is a subtle feeling of more depth or distance between the speaker and the audience, perhaps even a sort of death that keeps the speaker from being heard.

This sensation of not being heard is contrasted by the punctuation in the final stanza with the introduction of the exclamation points, especially in line 17:

“Of loving! burns! (but not! from! foreign kin!)”

These exclamation points show that the speaker is trying to speak out about the violence that has occurred against her, trying to shout it so that someone can hear and help her. Ultimately, however, the most emotionally-heightened part of this line—the assertion that this violence has not been committed by foreign kin, but rather by family who is close to the speaker physically and/or emotionally—is put back in parentheses with the exclamation points. The speaker is attempting to shout this out in the last moments of the poem in something that seems like a desperate confession or conviction, but she has been muffled, either by someone else or by her own choice.

These choices in punctuation affect the meter as well. While the line might have ordinarily been scanned in iambic pentameter had the punctuation been regular, the exclamation points, parentheses, and capitalization force pauses and emphasis:

U / U / U / / / U /  
“Of loving! Burns! (but not! from! foreign kin!)”

/ / U / / / U / U /  
WHAT happened (when) (he) (grabbed) me at the root?”

The result of these changes is the introduction of three spondees in these lines that make the words more emphatic. These substitutions and punctuation combined change the tone of the speaker; while at the beginning the tone was steadier, confined to the iambic pentameter base, here the capitalization and stresses make the speaker sound more frantic. These changes occur at the end of the poem when the repetition has been exhausted and the question has been asked in as many ways as possible, and the speaker still does not have an answer as to why she was

assaulted and as she is growing more distressed.

Annie Finch is particularly interested in relating nature to the female body, and she uses many if not all the images in this poem to symbolize the implied scenario of sexual assault without ever explicitly saying it. The image of the root and the spiral are the most repeated images throughout the poem. To be grabbed at the root suggests that the speaker is being violated at the most intimate and personal part of herself that is ordinarily kept hidden—in this case, underground. When a plant is grabbed at the root, it means that it has been pulled out of the place they were growing, usually to be tossed out, like weeds and other invasive plants. The root also has some phallic suggestions to it—an implication that is supported with the mention of “seed” in line 11 and the pomegranate in line 10, the latter of which is more suggestive of female genitalia. The implication of these images altogether suggests a sexual theme to the poem, without any explicit mentions of sexual violence. Nevertheless, these images become obvious, especially with the repetition.

The image of the root additionally conjures images of family relations. The speaker makes it clear that this act of violence has been enacted by a family member, mentioning “uncle lifetimes” in line 5 and “not from foreign kin” in line 17, suggesting that an uncle, or a family member the speaker thinks of as an uncle, is the sexual offender in the situation. Thus, the root imagery is not only a sexual one, but one of lineage. The images of roots and trees are associated with that of a family tree, in which the “roots” of the tree on the diagram connect each member to the other. These associations further reveal that the offender in this poem is someone closely related to the narrator so that they are connected through these roots. It is also arguable that this family member attacked multiple members of the family, and that this was not one isolated attack. Finch writes of “ancestors throwing chains down through our root” in line 13 and of sisters in line 16, suggesting that other women in the family have been victims to this attack from the same family member and share in the pain that the speaker is experiencing.

Finch writes repeatedly that the speaker's roots were "spiraled" from an "unspiraled root"—for example, in lines 2-3:

"I stopped. It all stopped: spirals fought to win

My spiral life from an unspiraled root—"

The image of an "unspiraled" root suggests the image of a younger plant with smaller roots that have not yet stretched through the soil and matured. However, the speaker's "spiraled life" fought to win, but was ultimately hurt by an "unspiraled" root. This suggests that the speaker's attacker had "mature roots" and was much older than the speaker, whereas the speaker of this poem was young—a child or teenager—when she was attacked, and probably a virgin. This sexual assault becomes more traumatizing when viewing it not just as an act of violence, but a moment in the speaker's life that stripped her innocence and childhood away.

This theme of a loss of innocence from sexual assault is supported by Finch's allusions to two Greek myths: the myth of Persephone and the myth of Philomela. In the myth of Persephone, the goddess of springtime, Persephone, is kidnapped by the god of the Underworld, Hades, and he makes her queen of the Underworld. While some interpret this as a romantic story, many also interpret it as a story of captivity, and of a loss of innocence and girlhood. Persephone is usually depicted as very young and youthful, described as a maiden. She is associated with the fruit, the pomegranate, because she eats six pomegranate seeds, forcing her to stay in the underworld for at least six months of the year. Interpretations differ whether Persephone eats the pomegranate willingly or is forced to; regardless, the mention of the pomegranate in line 10 (and even the mention of hell in line 11) naturally brings with it the myth of Persephone and associations of the underworld, death, loss of innocence, and captivity.

The myth of Philomela similarly helps the reader make these associations. In this myth, Philomela is raped by her brother-in-law and then has her tongue cut out. While this allusion is



a little less obvious, Finch references this mutilation in line 4:

“From thick cigar stubbed in my young tongue’s root—”

Philomela then turns into a nightingale; interestingly, while nightingales are known for their beautiful music, it is only the male who sings—not the female. Although Philomela escapes her captivity by turning into a beautiful bird, she still never regains her voice. Similarly, the narrator is no longer captive to the violent situation, but she nevertheless struggles to speak and gain emotional freedom from the situation, just like Philomela. This would further explain the use of parentheses in the poem, situating the speaker in captivity somewhere underground or dark, like Persephone, and then unable to speak up for herself, like Philomela.

Although Finch’s poem “A Root” is only 19 lines long, it is filled with rich imagery and symbolism, creative prosodic decisions, and meaningful symbolism. With the repetitive villanelle, Finch explores the spiraling panicked thoughts of a victim of sexual assault who finds herself unable to speak about the topic, and thus unable to move on or process it. The speaker is stuck not only in a spiral of her own trauma, but also in a spiral of the trauma of her ancestors who have also experienced pain at the hands of their kin and have similarly found themselves unable to convict this man of his sins. As the poem “unspirals”, the speaker is further suffocated and confined by the spiral of her own trauma, forced to relive the moment where her life completely stopped.

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# JUDGE'S COMMENTS

What Happened When It All Stopped?:  
A Prosodic Analysis of Meter, Mythology &  
Monotony in Annie Finch's "A Root"

By Kelsey Scaife-Puckett

**Graduate**

**Second Place**

**Critical Analysis**

The writer of "What Happened When It All Stopped?" provides an appropriately complex reading of Annie Finch's villanelle, "A Root," capably guiding their readers through the seen and unseen effects of trauma and sexual violence, while providing insight into the speaker's ability (or not) to give voice to the unspeakable. Through a close reading of the formal elements of the poem and analysis of its mythological allusions and imagery, the writer argues that the speaker of the poem is effectively "trapped" in an eternal "spiraling" of a traumatic event, even as the poem itself, perhaps, can be seen as an attempt to break this cycle of violence by (obliquely) reporting the event.

- Mary Rosenberry



**UNDERGRADUATE  
FIRST PLACE  
CRITICAL ANALYSIS**

**MADAME LEVIATHAN: MATERNITY AND  
ANDROGYNY IN *MOBY-DICK***

By Shay Ingram

“Our souls are like those orphans whose unwedded mothers die in bearing them: the secret of our paternity lies in their grave, and we must there to learn it.”

Herman Melville

**M**asculinity is rampant throughout Herman Melville’s visionary American whaling epic, *Moby-Dick* (1851). Interspersed throughout the novel, however, are feminine elements that juxtapose against Melville’s male-saturated hunt for the eponymous leviathan. The novel is plagued by gender separatism, which is not only apparent in *Moby-Dick* but also in 19th century society at large, with women sequestered to private lives of domesticity as men dominate economic spheres of business, government, and production. In the hyper-masculine setting of *The Pequod*, and in the novel overall, however, feminine imagery of maternity and marriage permeates the text, often obtaining governance over the novel’s masculine contents.

A primary interaction with maternity is witnessed in “The Grand Armada,” when the *Pequod* approaches a herd of sperm whales, harpoons one of them, and interrupts a scene of female whales nursing their young calves, where upon, Queequeg “[pats] their foreheads” and Star-buck, “[scratches] their backs with his lance” (an instrument used for killing) (Melville 289). In the essay “Suckled by the Sea,” Rita Bode reconciles with notions of maternity and

femininity in *Moby-Dick* asserting that “the masculine gives way to suggestions of the maternal” (Bode 183). Even during scenes of terror, the hierarchical, hyper-masculine whalers are informed by “a maternal presence” through “an alternate view” of their relationships with the sperm whale species and thus, the entirety of the natural world (Bode 184). They find themselves at the epi-center of whale life and garnish comfort from female domesticity.

Although the interaction is brief, it is an explicit example of how maternal imagery overcom-pensates for the sheer masculinity and violence of the voyage. The men aboard the Pequod are compelled to interact with the domestic and the maternal numerous times throughout *Moby-Dick*—whether it be accessed through a simultaneous, dueling fear and adoration for mother nature, through Ishmael’s abandonment to adoption arc, or through maternal whale’s them-selves—feminine and masculine elements are counterbalanced to achieve Melville’s desired androgynous aesthetic.

The word “woman” appears within *Moby-Dick* 11 times; however, the word “man” appears 1,349 times. References to the feminine pronouns “she” or “her” are only used to reference a whaling ship or breaching whales with the exclamation, “There she blows!”; a phrase used re-gardless of a whale’s perceived gender (Melville 1851). On the surface *Moby-Dick* also pre-cludes female characters, aside from brief introductions to Mrs. Hosea Hussey and Aunt Chari-ty, who appear as one-dimensional caricatures and prove to be insignificant to the narrative. It is easy, therefore, to assume that *Moby-Dick* is a hyper-masculinized novel—written by a man and intended for male consumption. Indeed, as Leland S. Person asserts, critics “have generally agreed that *Moby-Dick* is a man’s book and that Melville’s representation of sea-faring man-hood inscribes a patriarchal, anti-female ideology that reinforces nineteenth-century gender separatism” (1). However, in the last few decades, challenging critiques have been made about instances of masculine destabilization throughout the novel by way of its feminine insertions.

In an analysis of male bonding in *Moby-Dick*, Robyn Wiegman argues that although the novel provides hyper-feminized images of male bonding and challenges the patriarchy, it still ex-cludes women from the narrative (Wiegman 749). Although critiques such as Wiegman's pose challenging questions about the legitimacy of the novel's feminization and masculine destabili-zation, they do not respond to Melville's inherent intent to deconstruct masculinity.

It is compelling that few studies have been conducted regarding motherhood or maternity within *Moby-Dick* being that the maternal grounds the text in its preoccupation with accessing veiled masculine attachments to femininity—a deconstruction of masculinity by Melville (whether intentional or not). This is also true in regards to matrimonial and queer imagery throughout the novel, however it is the maternal which provides the most resolve for the sailors aboard the Pequod (Ahab and Ishmael in particular), as Ishmael notes in “The Grand Armada”, when he experiences a “mute calm” following his interaction with a leviathan mother (Melville 290). Furthermore, images of the maternal are illustrated as the crew cohabitates with their own perceived notions of the natural world, a naturality that embodies a symbolic Mother Earth.

The earth, for centuries, has been mythologized with maternal terminology. Carolyn Merchant writes of the restrictive quality that accompanies perceiving the earth as a mother: “the image of the earth as a living organism and nurturing mother [serves] as a cultural constraint restrict-ing the actions of human beings (Merchant 7). This is evident throughout *Moby-Dick*, howev-er, Melville's mythologization does not approach its height until the novel's 132nd chapter, “The Symphony”, in which Ishmael pontificates on the contrasting features of “the gentle thoughts of the feminine air” and the “murderous thinkings of the masculine sea” (Melville 388). Following this, Ishmael observes the affections in which Mother Earth's “feminine air” provides Ahab:

[...] the lovely aromas in that enchanted air did at last seem to dispel, for a moment, the can-



kerous thing in his soul. That glad, happy air, that winsome sky, did at last stroke and caress him; the step-mother world, so long cruel—forbidding—now threw affectionate arms round his stubborn neck [...] (Melville 388).

Here, Melville's literary tone is sensuous in its delivery as Ahab is "stroke[d]" and "caress[ed]" by a sensitive, feminine presence. The passage's tone therefore mimics Ahab's need for maternal touch.

Ahab, like Ishmael, garnishes comfort from the inherent femininity that surrounds him; however, it is important not to exclude his ongoing monomania and murderous paranoia against the sea and its inhabitants (*Moby Dick*) from the conversation. In this sensitive moment within "The Symphony", both Ahab and Ishmael continue to "personalize nature as virgin, and [...] as female"; however Ahab, while seeming to briefly forget his embedded anger towards Mother Earth, also forgets his initial quest "to tame and subdue" the earth mother through defeating one of her greatest creations, the great white leviathan (Armstrong 2). Here, he appears to be wedded with nature and illustrates the analogy that Mother Earth "is good when she feeds us" and "bad when she rebels against the restricted role we demand she play" (Armstrong 3). Unlike Merchant's stance that imagining earth as a mother restricts the actions of humans, here roles are reversed to note the restrictive dominance that humans have over their inhabited natural world. Ahab and Ishmael, therefore, illustrate this dynamic, as Mother Earth is only comforting and beautiful when they garnish a reward from her "gentle[ness]" and affections (Melville 388). What was cruel and forbidden about this affection is thus forgotten.

Harrison Hayford, in the article "Loomings": Yarns and Figures in the Fabric" (1976) demonstrates how themes within the first chapter of *Moby-Dick*, titled "Loomings", sets the stage for recurrent images throughout the novel. He explains Ahab and Ishmael's incessant need to access the forbidden. Hayford writes: "Ishmael, like Ahab, like all men in their degree, feels this

attraction” for the forbidden (676). Therefore, the sensitive quality of the “feminine air” which surrounds Ahab at the beginning of “The Symphony” illuminates his transition from dominating with the natural world to finding comfort from what was once forbidden and cruel, the maternal: a “[...] step-mother world”, so long cruel and forbidding [...]” (Melville 388). Where Ahab seeks maternal affection from Mother Earth, who conceives his greatest foe, the great white whale, Ishmael seeks the maternal affections which he was forbidden access to in childhood.

Although Ishmael’s biological mother never surfaces throughout the novel, she does linger. She looms over the text as Ishmael experiences an impeding attraction toward what he has lost: a loving mother. During the novel’s exposition, in chapter four, titled, “The Counterpane”, Ish-mael’s memory is triggered after receiving an affectionate embrace from his bosom-friend, Queequeg in bed at the Spouter Inn. The memory progresses from a description of his “conscientious”, yet abusive stepmother leaving him in bed without food for sixteen hours to him waking at night during his seclusion, still “half steeped in dreams” to feel a “supernatural hand” holding his (Melville 35). The phantom, he says, “seemed closely seated by [the] bed-side” (35). Although it is unclear what happened to Ishmael’s biological mother, and whether the apparition is his mother’s ghost, this scene in “The Counterpane” undoubtedly replaces her former presence with what is implied to be a reassuring maternal hand. The scene also calls attention to Herman Melville’s scant and unaffectionate relationship with his own mother in Ishmael’s description of his abusive stepmother. This implies that the ghostly and ephemeral nature of Ishmael’s biological mother is a representation of Melville's longing for what is absent.

Melville’s mother, Maria Gansevoort Melvill (the “e” at the tail-end of “Melville” was later added by Maria), following the death of her husband and Melville’s father, cared for her eldest son like “a kind of husband, and Herman, as a result, was doubly deprived. [Maria] could not

or would not shower upon him the affection he craved, and the sense of orphanhood began to grow upon him” (Arvin 29). Important here is Melville’s “sense of orphanhood” and that his own biography infuses itself throughout the text by way of his narrator. Therefore, it is easy then to see clear connections between Ishmael’s character arc and Melville’s absence of a maternal figure. Like Melville, Ishmael is depicted as an adopted orphan as his quest leaves him in the hands of a sister whaling vessel of The Pequod, named The Rachel (29). The Pequod first encounters The Rachel in chapter 128 and is the penultimate ship that the crew encounters prior to their battle with Moby Dick. Naming the ship Rachel, as footnoted by editor Hershel Parker, evokes a biblical Rachel (Melville & Parker 380). To quote Jeremiah 31.15: “A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rachel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not” (King James Bible). It is evident that by her name alone, The Rachel is prescribed to be a grieving mother since she is not only a wife to Jacob but also the greater mother of the Hebrew nation (Melville & Parker 380).

In “The Pequod Meets the Rachel”, the Pequod learns not only that *Moby Dick* is nearing its vicinity but also, of the tragedy that has devastated The Rachel and her captain, Captain Gardiner, whose seafaring son is abandoned during a battle with the white whale. This is juxtaposed, however, by Ahab’s dissimilar attempts to reach his own family. Here, filtered through both an active and inactive paternal concern between Gardiner and Ahab, is an implication that whaling vessels, in of themselves, embody a protective quality that may only be received by a mother. Melville alludes to Jeremiah 31.15 in the chapter’s final lines announcing that, “[...] by her still halting course and winding, woful way, you plainly saw that this ship [The Rachel] that so wept with spray, still remained without comfort” (383). Here, the maternal figure is depicted as sorrowful and in constant protection of her children, whereas paternal affections are depicted as domineering, and produced out of necessity. Foreshadowed is Ishmael, who, in the novel’s epilogue is described as filling The Rachel’s sonless void, after she discovers him floating on

Queequeg's coffin amongst The Pequod's wreckage:

I [Ishmael] floated on a soft and dirge-like main. The unharmed sharks glided by as if with padlocks on their mouths; the savage sea-hawks sailed with sheathed beaks. On the second day, a sail drew near, nearer, and picked me up at last. It was the devious-cruising Rachel, that in her retracting search after her missing children, only found another orphan (Melville 410).

Submerged within Ishmael's "abandonment" and subsequent rescue is the sense that "forces are still working upon him, even in his supposition that he "close" this evasion of aggression and suicide [which] leaves him "abandoned" in the hands of a maternal figure in which he once lost in childhood (Hayford 678). His quest thus shifts from a need to dissociate from his suicidal ideations to a need to be cradled by the therapeutic presence of an able mother, "The Rachel", as he awaits "rebirth" in the water of Rachel's metaphorical womb. The maternal figure is suggested to also transcend from masculine violence, a trait witnessed amongst the most essential tool of a whaling vessel: the harpoon and its connected, umbilical-like "line."

Chapter sixty of *Moby-Dick*, titled, "The Line", serves one explicit purpose: to explain the function of the strong "line," or rope that is tied to the end of a harpoon and is often, in some instances, over one thousand feet long. It coils itself along a whaling vessel's deck in a serpentine fashion. Ishmael relays the dangerous qualities of the "line" of which foreshadows Ahab's eventual decapitation in his final battle with Moby Dick. However, at the end of Melville's short chapter there is also an implied comparison between the "line" and an umbilical cord: "All men live enveloped in whale lines. All are born with halters round their necks" (219). This is a primary example of umbilical tethering which appears throughout the novel. Whalers are implied to be born not only tethered to their mothers but also to the whales in which they "attach" themselves to re-experience the maternal warmth that they crave.

Umbilical tethering is also witnessed in “The Grand Armada” where a maternal whale’s umbilical cord, soon after giving birth, harkens back to Ishmael’s description of the “line’s” natural, “hempen intricacies” in chapter sixty (Melville 218). The sailors are caught in a “living wall” and “innermost fold” of the sea where Queequeg and Starbuck notice a recent mother and her newborn, “still tethered” cub:

Starbuck saw long coils of the umbilical cord of Madame Leviathan, by which the young cub seemed still tethered to its dam. Not seldom in the rapid vicissitudes of the chase, this natural line, with the maternal end loose, becomes entangled with the hempen one, so that the cub is thereby trapped. (Melville 290).

Positioned within this womb-like, “living wall”, not only do the whaler’s “give way to suggestions of the maternal” by ceasing to kill the whale pod, but also, at least from the viewpoints of Starbuck and Queequeg, the maternal space in which they occupy is internalized (Bode 183). They locate an “eternal mildness and joy”, like Ishmael, and find a safe harbor away from the storm that is Ahab’s quest, and for Ishmael, the storm within himself, in the womb-like space which they, like the newborn cub, are psychologically tethered to (Melville 290).

Melville compares newborn whale cubs to human infants earlier in “The Grand Armada” to note the commonalities between the species. There is a common maternal longing for the womb’s comfort and for breast feeding. The whale calves, “as if leading two separate lives at the same time”, like “human infants while sucking [will] calmly and fixedly gaze away from the breast” and when doing so will appear to gaze at someone aside from their mother; however, their gaze peers almost through them, inviting viewers into their innocent, maternal space (Melville 290). Melville’s footnote within “The Grand Armada”, therefore, aides this claim by suggesting that human and whale infancy are similar.

As noted by Hershel Parker, when breastfeeding, whale calves often, “when overflowing with

mutual esteem, [...] salute more hominum”, “more hominum”, meaning “the way people do” (Melville & Parker 290). Like Melville’s note, in service of “resituat[ing] the species boundary and environmental concerns”, post-colonial scholars Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffen claim, that there is an innate biological commonality between breastfeeding mammalian infants that confirms the “interfaces between nature and culture, animal and human” (26). For the sailors aboard the Pequod, however, not only do these “interfaces” connect them to Mother Earth and her mammalian inhabitants but also to maternal bonding that is seen between differing mammalian species (26).

When Ishmael witnesses the maternal whales and their children he is, on the surface, calmed by their innocent presence, however, submerged within his character, is a need to access a space that feels as safe as the “enchanted [womb-like] pond” is to the whale cubs (Melville 290). In-deed, it is evident that he projects “his own gendered image onto nature as a selfless and sacri-ficing mother” to force “the female bovine to symbolize a maternal nature: mindless, patient, slow moving, [and] lactating” (Gaard 613). Not only, then is the mother expected to calm a vio-lent, masculine presence within *Moby-Dick* but also, the maternal must appear as biologically perfect, selfless in her attempts to overcompensate for masculine aggression, and ambiguous in her presentation to satisfy Melville’s intended androgynous aesthetic.

Melville’s juxtaposition of masculinity with maternity achieves an androgynous, tonal harmony throughout *Moby-Dick*. Through differing maternal configurations, as highlighted here, Mel-ville “resonates with readers across boundaries of gender, sexual orientation, and disability, speaking powerfully to his readers on the grounds of shared bodily experience” (Yothers 117). However, androgyny defies gender in Melville’s novel due to its gendered “mixing.” Masculin-ity and femininity “seemed one” Melville declares, “it was only the sex, as it were, that distin-guished them” (388). Therefore, if “gender can be understood as a relatively plural category [and] androgyny can be developed as the frame through which we imagine what we require of

subjects when we long for intersubjective competence [...]” then Melville’s aesthetic choice to androgenize *Moby-Dick* by way of its maternal insertions is an act of not only aesthetics but also an act of imagining a literary futurity that is defined by its inclusion of both the feminine and the masculine (Goodlad 225-226).

Although Melville is subtle in his configuration of maternity and androgyny, his choices within *Moby-Dick* paves the way for authors such as E.M. Forster and Virginia Woolf in the Modern-ist era. Forster delights himself in the novel illuminating, in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) that “nothing can be stated about *Moby-Dick* except that it is a contest. The rest is song” (Forster 1929). Melville’s song is orchestrated not by the novel’s violence and impeding masculine monomania, but by the mothers who lay submerged beneath this monstrous beast of a novel; singing their affections and cradling the Pequod’s crew until they all meet their bitter end, all except for one remaining orphan.

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# JUDGE'S COMMENTS

Madame Leviathan: Maternity and  
Androgyny in *Moby-Dick*

By Shay Ingram

**Undergraduate**

**First Place**

**Critical Analysis**

The first place essay for Undergraduate Critical Analysis adeptly navigates the complex topic of gender in Melville's *Moby-Dick*. The essay writer enters the critical conversation confidently, acknowledging multiple critical perspectives while still advancing their original analysis of maternal presence in the novel, leading to what they describe as an "androgynous aesthetic." As a reader, I appreciated the attentiveness with which the essay writer traces a line of evidence through the sometimes oblique iterations of the maternal as represented by Melville, from the "feminine air" to the whaler's line, compared to an umbilical cord. While the essay writer takes care to note that Melville is "subtle in his configuration of maternity and androgyny," they confidently conclude that Melville's maternal figures are active in constructing the novel's memorable aesthetic, even as they remain "submerged beneath this monstrous beast of a novel."

- Mary Rosenberry



**SECOND PLACE  
UNDERGRADUATE  
CRITICAL ANALYSIS**

**PAULINE BREEDLOVE AND THE DAMAGE OF THE HOLLYWOOD IDEAL IN MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE***

By Madeleine Dibene

In her 1970 novel *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison offers the harrowing and deeply tragic story of a little black girl named Pecola Breedlove. Part of Morrison's project in *The Bluest Eye* is to reveal the insidious effects of white, eurocentric beauty standards and ideals on black Americans, specifically on black women. As the novel takes place in Lorain, Ohio, during the 1940s (with flashbacks to the 1930s), there are frequent references to the major Hollywood starlets of this era, such as Shirley Temple, Greta Garbo, and Jean Harlow. Pecola and many of the other black female characters seek to emulate these models of white beauty, and Morrison exposes the way that such aspirations on the part of black girls leads to internalized racism and self-hatred. One of the characters that Morrison uses to demonstrate this phenomenon is Pecola's mother, Pauline Breedlove. Pauline's perspective is introduced in the third section of the novel, "Spring." To fend off the loneliness of being home while her husband, Cholly, works, Pauline starts going to the movies. While in the theater, Pauline receives a unique education:

Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another - physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. In equating

physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap. (Morrison 122)

Exposure to the unattainable standards of Hollywood involves serious consequences for Pauline, with “self-contempt” chief among them. The problem is not only that Pauline covets beauty, but that she conflates outward beauty with inner virtue. Since the beauty which Pauline sees on the big screen is white beauty, she subliminally accepts the message that whiteness is superior to her own blackness in every way. It is inevitable, then, that through this exposure Pauline ends up disappointed, self-hating, and bitter.

Initially, Pauline attempts to emulate the glamorous starlets she sees on screen. At one point, Pauline recounts a time when she styled her hair to look like white actress Jean Harlow’s: “I fixed my hair up like I’d seen hers on a magazine. A part on the side, with one little curl on my forehead. It looked just like her. Well, almost just like’” (Morrison 123, emphasis Morrison’s). This speaks to Pauline’s intense awareness of white cultural figures like Harlow, and her desire to be like them and to look like them. It is worth pointing out that one major reason why Pauline and the other black women in the novel seek to emulate whiteness is because of the absence of black actors and actresses on the big screen. E.C. Koch, author of the article “Hollywood’s Terror Industry: Idealized Beauty and The Bluest Eye,” explains this phenomenon eloquently:

The Hollywood ideal, then, is at once the manifestation of a culture’s aggregated notions of beauty and a microcosm for white hegemony, as blacks could only aspire to a dominant white model in the absence of established black historical figures, informing the disenfranchised black characters’ struggles to realize any form of cultural visibility through white terms. (Koch 2)

The only lifestyles glamorized and the only beauty recognized by Hollywood during the 1930s-40s was that of white figures; this is the aspirational model that Pauline drinks in at the cinema, much to her detriment.

Furthermore, Pauline is conditioned by these films and the broader culture which produces them to internalize racist attitudes about the superiority of whiteness and the inferiority of blackness. As Magda Szolc notes in her article “Violence and Rejection: The Hegemony of White Culture and Its Influence on the Mother-Daughter Relationship in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*,” “Whereas white aesthetics was associated with order, beauty, and cleanness, the image of a black person evoked derogatory connotations ... Therefore, white standards of behavior were valorised and imitated by people of colour, since they equated whiteness with perfection and stability” (Szolc 34-5). Szolc’s commentary certainly seems to apply to Morrison’s characterization of Pauline and her fascination with white cinema and beauty. Therefore, it seems that Pauline’s imitation of Harlow is about more than just harnessing her beauty, but also these other positive labels ascribed exclusively to whiteness during this time period.

However, when Pauline loses a tooth, her efforts to secure beauty for herself come to a screeching halt:

“I was sitting back in my seat, and I taken a big bite of that candy, and it pulled a tooth right out of my mouth ... I don’t believe I ever did get over that. There I was, five months pregnant, trying to look like Jean Harlow, and a front tooth gone. Everything went then. Look like I just didn’t care no more after that. I let my hair go back, plaited it up, and settled down to just being ugly. I still went to the pictures, though, but the meanness got worse.” (Morrison 123, emphasis and quotation marks Morrison’s)

The loss of this tooth makes Pauline feel foolish and ashamed for even attempting to look beautiful. After the tooth is pulled out, Pauline has a reflective moment wherein she realizes that she

looks nothing like the glamorous starlet she has been trying to mimic with her hairstyle. E.C. Koch writes, “Pauline’s failure to establish a critical distance between the reality of the films she views and her own, at once forces her to desire the Hollywood ideal and to find fault with any aspect of her life that falls short of this model” (Koch 154). Because beauty is so intricately tied with self-worth in Pauline’s mind, the shattering of her self-image here is catastrophic. As Pauline herself admits, “‘I don’t believe I ever did get over that.’ ” When Pauline realizes that her reality does not align with the perfect world presented by Hollywood, she gives up on trying to match it - she stops trying to make herself beautiful, and unfortunately she also grows meaner and stops caring for her home and family.

Instead, Pauline gets as close as possible to the Hollywood ideal through her employment to the white Fisher family. With the Fishers, Pauline finds what she lacks in her own life: “beauty, order, cleanliness and praise” (Morrison 127). In the following passage, stark contrasts are drawn between the Fisher household and the Breedloves’:

It was her good fortune to find a permanent job in the home of a well-to-do family whose members were affectionate, appreciative, and generous. She looked at their houses, smelled their linen, touched their silk draperies, and loved all of it. The child’s pink nightie, the stacks of white pillow slips edged with embroidery, the sheets with top hems picked out with blue cornflowers. She became what is known as an ideal servant, for such a role filled practically all of her needs. When she bathed the little Fisher girl, it was in a porcelain tub with silvery taps running infinite quantities of hot, clear water. She dried her in fluffy white towels and put her in cuddly night clothes. Then she brushed the yellow hair, enjoying the roll and slip of it between her fingers. No zinc tub, no buckets of stove-heated water, no flaky, stiff, grayish towels washed in a kitchen sink, dried in a dusty backyard, no tangled black puffs of rough wool to comb. Soon she stopped trying to keep

her own house. The things she could afford to buy did not last, had no beauty or style, and were absorbed by the dingy storefront. (Morrison 123)

Notice the adjectives that are used to describe the Fishers' home: silk, pink, white, blue, porcelain, silvery, clear, cuddly. Attention is even drawn to the little Fisher girl's hair, which is "yellow" and easy to brush. Such descriptors are meant to evoke beauty, serenity, and luxury. On the other hand, the life of the Breedloves is described in words like flaky, stiff, grayish, and dusty, and Pauline describes the hair of her children as "tangled black puffs of rough wool." These adjectives intentionally suggest a life that is dull, dirty, and difficult. Unhappy with being the mistress of her own home and hearth, Pauline decides instead to become an "ideal servant" for the Fisher family. To quote Koch once again, "The locus of Pauline's attraction to the families and lives of the whites she works for is her ability to place herself once again as a spectator within, what is for her, an idealized world with which she has no other possible connection" (Koch 155). As Koch notes, Pauline's inability to make her life look like what the movies teach her to covet means that she can only come close to it through her association with the Fishers. Accordingly, "More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man - they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep ... the dark edges that made daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely" (Morrison 127). The description of Pauline's family as "the dark edges," contrasted with the lightness of the Fishers, doubtless carries racial connotations. Pauline's acceptance of whiteness as the ideal, as the embodiment of delicacy, goodness, and cleanness, began in the movie theater and is solidified in the Fisher's picture-perfect home. By contrast, then, Pauline's black family becomes for her the opposite of all this, which is why she neglects them in favor of the Fishers.

The distance that Pauline places between herself and her family has especially poignant results for her relationship with her daughter Pecola. It is evident from the outset that Pecola feels no particular closeness to her mother, who she always refers to as "Mrs. Breedlove" in-



stead of something more familiar like “mom” or “mama.” However, one scene makes it painfully clear that the gulf between mother and daughter goes deeper than even this. Pecola and her friends, Frieda and Claudia (Claudia being the narrator for this scene and for much of the story), go to help Pauline while she’s working at the Fisher home. While there, Pecola accidentally spills hot blueberry cobbler all over the kitchen floor in the presence of the little white Fisher girl. Pauline is enraged:

In one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg folding under her. Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly and Frieda and me by implication. “Crazy fool . . . my floor, mess . . . look what you . . . work . . . get on out . . . now that . . . crazy . . . my floor . . . my floor.” ... The little girl in pink started to cry. Mrs. Breedlove turned to her. “Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don’t cry no more. Polly will change it.” She went to the sink and turned tap water on a fresh towel. Over her shoulder she spit out words to us like rotten pieces of apple. “Pick up that wash and get on out of here, so I can get this mess cleaned up.” (Morrison 109)

During this scene, Pecola is injured - she is splashed with hot blueberry filling, which burns her, and subsequently slapped by Pauline which causes her to fall to the floor. Yet none of Pauline’s concern is for her daughter; towards Pecola, Pauline exhibits only wrath. But it is not that Pauline lacks the capacity for love or gentleness, because she expresses great care for the Fisher girl, even referring to her as “baby” (a term of endearment which she never uses for her own children). In this moment, it is clearer than ever that Pauline’s complete love and allegiance is reserved for the Fishers, leaving none for Pecola. The intensity of Pauline’s reaction to Pecola, though, is startling; it suggests that Pauline is not merely indifferent to her daughter,

but harbors a certain degree of hostility towards her which comes out in her violent response to Pecola's innocent mistake. Magda Szolc suggests that, "Since Pecola is a reminder of Pauline's own ugliness, the woman distances herself from her daughter" (Szolc 13). Pauline certainly distances herself from her children, viewing them as the "cross" she has to bear (Morrison 127). She also seems to feel, as evidenced by this scene, a degree of animosity for Pecola that could absolutely be linked to the bitterness and hatred she's developed for herself and the racist attitudes she's been indoctrinated with.

Pauline's story is hugely important to Morrison's commentary on the toxic effects of white hegemony and beauty standards perpetuated by Hollywood. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison shows how even something seemingly harmless and fun, like going to the movies, can be sinister. Pauline's exposure to cinema fosters within her a sense of disappointment with her life and leads her to internalize negative attitudes towards her own race and family. Pauline's affection for the Fisher family leaves nothing left over for her children, which has especially tragic results in Pecola's case. Thus, with Pauline's character Morrison demonstrates how acceptance of white idealism wreaks havoc on black individuals and their relationships with one another.

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# JUDGE'S COMMENTS

Pauline Breedlove and the Damage of the Hollywood Ideal  
in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

By Madeleine Dibene

**Undergraduate**

**Second Place**

**Critical Analysis**

The second place essay for Undergraduate Critical Analysis discusses the far-reaching effects of white idealism in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. The essay writer guides the reader's attention to Morrison's representations of the power of the cinematic gaze, the harm of unrealistic and racialized standards of beauty, and the disastrous repercussions of internalized racism. Staying focused on Morrison's diction and prose, the essay writer provides ample evidence of the intergenerational trauma in the Breedlove family and argues that this trauma is caused by the insidious conflation of beauty with virtue.

- Mary Rosenberry



**FIRST PLACE  
GRADUATE  
POETRY**

**THIS HOME IS A DESERT**  
By Erin Mahoney

In my parents' house still,  
years after they've gone,  
a picture of a fourth grade me hangs on the wall:  
bright purple and pink sweater, gold earrings and necklace  
– all from my mother –  
framing my tanned rascal face  
under my short, skater-boy haircut.  
And under all that?

I had no words for what I was,  
for who I was dying to be.  
In this small desert town,  
built on redlining and white washing,  
an escape from the “danger” of diverse cities,  
I took the words and ideas I could get.  
I ate them up,  
regurgitated them,  
swallowed them whole,  
ingesting them again and again,  
poisoning myself with every meal.

The streets were all named for indigenous tribes from all over the continent, but the main roads  
were named for the cowboys that fought them in film.

Pass Roy Rogers Drive,  
Take Happy Trails Highway,

Rancherias to Zuni  
Left on Wyandot.  
This street, paved over land -  
A past -  
Whose story has been ripped  
From the names on the signs

This town was white,  
straight,  
cis,  
scared.  
I thought I was too.

I had no words  
for the parts of me that did not fit those strict boundaries.  
I had no words  
for why I did not want to wear the jewelry  
my mom gave me for picture day,  
or why she was upset  
when I only put in *one* of the earrings,  
why she wept as she said  
“people will think you are a boy.”

I didn't *think* I wanted people to think that,  
but what did I know?  
What could I?

I knew I didn't feel like my friends -  
the boys and girls in my class.  
I wasn't comfortable in dresses,  
didn't have a crush on the class heartthrob,  
Derek,  
I wasn't pining  
for the girl



he held hands with at lunch;  
except to be *like* her,  
to be *normal*.

I did not have words  
for the dust devil inside me,  
the swirling emotions,  
the quiet disquiet.  
For the sharp spines that were forming  
on my own skin  
in my own heart.

“The feeling is censored and erased before it registers in our consciousness,”  
Anzaldúa wrote,  
putting words to my confusion:  
self-censorship so embedded that I had no clue it was happening.  
No idea what I was erasing.  
The strangling of my internal landscape.  
The emotional drought  
that threatens me still.

My mother’s tears were instructive.  
More so than words ever could be.  
I was *wrong*.  
I was *upsetting*.  
I was nine years old  
thinking only in jokes  
and three pointers,  
in best friends  
and spelling tests  
and how fast I could ride my bike

But these choices  
(read: me)

made my mom weep.  
Her anguish was echoed  
by the women who squawked  
in public restrooms,  
shooing me out  
like an interloper,  
like a mad coyote  
with glinting eyes  
foaming at the mouth.  
My existence caused *distress*.

I wish I could say that I thrived as an agent of chaos  
grinning, howling,  
crashing through social norms  
in my basketball shorts,  
but I was a sensitive kid.  
I felt the boundaries pushing me instead.

And then, puberty  
as my hormones won the war  
I didn't know was coming,  
and my body developed in ways I was powerless to stop.

Cue a tweendom and teendom  
of suppressing all urges  
to be anything  
but  
ordinary.  
Of clumsily painting on eye shadow  
even though it made me feel like  
a drag queen  
slumming it  
in 7th grade science class.  
Of hoping I could one day get the hang

of being a Normal Girl.  
Of hoping one day  
it would feel right.

Cue a period of depression  
I thought was standard  
- the normal shittiness  
of being a teenager -  
like I saw on TV  
But I was neither Dawson nor Joey,  
Brenda nor Brandon,  
Buffy nor Xander.

Cue my mom asking me  
“what happened to my happy little girl?”

Cue me regressing further into myself.

\*

When I return to the desert now  
I see myself in the expanses,  
in the openness of dirt,  
the million grains of sand  
composing an endless skyline,  
daring you to walk into it,  
daring you to underestimate  
the depth and power,  
the strength in solitude.

I see myself  
in the tenacity of plants  
that couldn't  
shouldn't

survive here,  
the quiet holes  
leading to the underground lives  
of endless species,  
the glimmer in the distance  
that could be a hubcap  
or hand grenade  
or trick of the eye.

In the purple and pink sweater,  
in the gold earrings and necklace,  
in the skater-boy haircut,  
in the tanned rascal face,  
looking for home.



# JUDGE'S COMMENTS

This Home Is a Desert

By Erin Mahoney

**Graduate**

**First Place**

**Poetry**

I found this poem to be a powerful and insightful exploration of the struggle for self and gender identity--especially as it often begins in childhood--and of everyone's search for the truth of themselves, the quest for belonging--within family, neighborhood, country, culture.

The speaker tells us that, like so many, "I did not have words/ for the dust devil inside me,/ the swirling emotions,/ the quiet disquiet." The speaker experiences a "strangling" of their "internal landscape" which we, as readers, are made to feel with a great sense of communal empathy.

Here the desert--and therefore the home--is a metaphor for so many things in this poem: "Emotional drought", the struggle and thirst for acceptance of the self by ourselves and others, but also "the tenacity of plants/ that couldn't/ shouldn't/ survive" there.

- Susan Kelly-DeWitt



**SECOND PLACE  
GRADUATE  
POETRY**

**CARVING FINGERS**  
By Daniel Kemper

"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" – Paul the Apostle

Percy exhales with a scowl and he spits. In his hickory  
fingers, the riddle of wood; in his critical snicker, a  
grin; on his table, a cup of the bitterest chicory  
left to go cold, but the bowl of his pipe has a flicker, a  
feeling that working the knots is a chance at embellishing  
images trying to rise from the hardwood. Discovering  
gnarls can be knuckles, he sees it all now, and he's relishing  
everything: Time for the knife or forever be hovering.  
This is the artist primeval, his raw ingenuity  
proving the gift in his carving, his grit and tenacity  
mastering flaws, his poetically deft ambiguity  
turning his fingers to art with implicit audacity.  
This is a Cajun immersed in the worst of Acadia,  
cursing and grinning. And working his way to Arcadia.





# JUDGE'S COMMENTS

Carving Fingers

By Daniel Kemper

**Graduate**

**Second Place**

**Poetry**

The poem's epigraph from Paul the Apostle--"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling"--sets us up for the literal and spiritual journey that takes place in the poem.

The carver's "riddle of wood" is in fact the riddle of life--a life that we sense here has had many social, political, and historical challenges. Percy, the carver, is "a Cajun immersed in the worst of Acadia" but he has "grit and tenacity...raw ingenuity...implicit audacity." He is "working his way to Arcadia."

I found this to be an excellent use of the sonnet form--its rhythm and musicality. A sonnet about survival, courage and creation--about creation as courage and survival.

- Susan Kelly-DeWitt



**FIRST PLACE  
UNDERGRADUATE  
POETRY**

**JOURNEY TO THE REAL WORLD**

By Sidra Nawaz

There's nothing conventional about  
pulling children out from rubble like a  
stream of silk from a magician's sleeve.  
Sit in and scream. Don't mind, they'll drown  
our voices out with music but at least it's with  
a Barbie song. In general, they keep their mic

away from mice with megaphones. Or  
they'll assure you through microphones to feel  
free to tell them how you feel. Don't fear, I'm just  
careening over a cavernous pit that tipped  
Alice over the edge. Slip while sipping  
from a teacup, call that spilling the tea.

Recall passing notes in class, a covert  
operation to affirm your First Amendment right  
against your headmistress. Rejoice, the minister  
speaks to the nocturnal gardens of our souls, like  
a physicist's reassurance that we live not in a world  
of objects, but events. You're not too dumb for  
quantum mechanics. Just take out the milk and  
observe. Hold a wake for your air conditioner  
amidst the twisting plumes. Recall the last time

you had a new idea. It's been so damned long!  
Have you considered that your homeland  
is a deep and arbitrary accident?

Alas, Nietzsche calls an increase of  
consciousness by language debilitating,  
not nearly as debilitating as unanswered calls.  
There aren't even enough ears, deaf or not,  
to fall on. Wear a life jacket when wading  
against the waves of labyrinthine canals.

Recall the first time you asked yourself  
how sunflowers know how to follow the  
Fibonacci sequence. I barely learned  
the times table glued to my childhood bedroom  
ceiling. I just learned how to castle in chess.  
I just decided jiffy should be a unit of time.

Three hundred thousand billion billion jiffies  
make a second, and I just spent a billion billion  
more to tell you this. How odd to have thought  
all of this in one jiffy, the jiffy it took to take apart  
sky and homeland alike, only to take one hour  
to type it all out. Chalk or ink, write because  
all someone somewhere has is a mental diary.

The truth is—  
Cities level while sea levels rise. Like everyone,  
I think I'll live forever. Will these rose-colored glasses  
protect me from UV rays? Helium was the first element  
discovered in outer space, beyond our thinning atmosphere.  
What does having an air conditioner have to do with  
leading a meaningful life, anyway? I told you,  
every object is an event. If only it didn't end in ash!



# JUDGE'S COMMENTS

Journey to the Real World

By Sidra Nawaz

**Undergraduate**

**First Place**

**Poetry**

I especially like the way this poem develops and proceeds like a collage--how a "Journey to the Real World" begins with timely and horrific world events and then proceeds to operate by taking us on a surrealistic journey/critique through the falsehoods, the propaganda, the voices that "assure you through microphones to feel/ free to tell them how you feel."

The poem is a kind of back-and-forth conversation between the speaker and himself, the speaker and us. "Chalk or ink, write because/ all someone somewhere has is a mental diary."

"Alas, Nietzsche calls an increase of/ consciousness by language debilitating..."

Uncertainty is the operative here: " Cities level while sea levels rise. Like everyone,/ I think I'll live forever. Will these rose-colored glasses/protect me from UV rays?"

- Susan Kelly-DeWitt

**FIRST PLACE  
GRADUATE  
SHORT FICTION**

SERPENT IN SPRING  
By Madeline Humphreys

**H**e still didn't know her secret. She smirked. Maybe he simply thought she had disappeared one day, never to return to him again. Gone, dissipated, a ghost, a hallucination he had conjured a long time ago that finally wore off. Whatever made him feel best.

But he didn't know the hideout she had, hidden away behind the stairs in a space barely big enough for her. It had been five days since she had last presented herself to him, and he didn't seem to mind much. She cocked her head in confusion.

It was all about timing now. A moment when he wouldn't hear her, would have chaos outside the open window, a dog howling or a child crying. Something familiar but distressing. Enough to make him focus on anything outside the house.

Tiny, twin sets of claws. Talons. They were the only weapon she had.

None of it brought her joy. The hiding, the hunting, the half-hearted pecks and lashes at his face, his hurried screams as he tried to ward her off. *I'm sorry*. She hoped he could understand it. Knew he couldn't.

It was all going well enough until he found the kitchen knife on the counter. "*How did you get in here?*" he shrieked.



She was almost to the window, about to make the last jump to the open air.

*“Bad luck bird! You filthy, wretched demon!”*

Of course the knife found its way to her. Right to her center. A perfect split.

She lay gasping below the window. His silhouette slowly solidified above her. She could see her red etches along his face as he pulled the knife from her chest, his blue eyes too bright to be real, like a meadow only colored in the lightest pastels. It wasn't right.

*“Get out of here,”* he sneered, his eyebrow spurting blood, the matched drops on her tal-on tips. *“Don't come back.”*

He picked her up with a disgusted hum and let her slide outside the window. It's funny the way a goal can be accomplished with so much trouble in the middle.

Her chest left a red outline in the snow. The damn snow.

She would never be a girl again. It was always too much work—too rigid and confining, skin stretched over bones in unnatural curvatures, muscles sprouting in useless places, teeth not strong enough for defending, hair in an uncomfortable curtain at the very top of the form, shrouding her vision at the most critical of times. And the worst part was the structure—the stupidity of standing straight, with the frailest of organs displayed at the front, limp arms held at the sides in what should look like a relaxed stance. She couldn't tell why everyone insisted on it.

No. She would never be a girl again, she decided.

She had thought a raven was her perfected form. She had spent years on and off hiding from him, flying in and out of the house but for some reason always returning. *It was easier.* But now

she'd never be back so long as she could find a new shape, something unrecognizable.

Maybe a raven wasn't her perfected form after all.

Her chest hurt and she could barely hobble to the line of trees for shelter. Flying would be use-less. She needed something, anything.

Any bit of inspiration to stop the spread of the red wound on her small body.

She hobbled farther from the house, hoping to put a bit of distance between her and *him*. The trees around her swayed in the icy breeze, their branches shedding small flurries of snow. The wind made a dull lowing across the frozen wood, but over the top of it she could hear the unmistakable screech of mice—a group scurrying through the blanketed grass, their sight focused on a house a few yards away.

Eyes closed. She used to have to kill for this, but some day—somehow, she never figured out why—she could do it now without.

Her feathers turned to fur, her wings collapsed into tiny pink feet, her long tail thinning into a fuzzy cord, and her larynx strengthened as it emitted small squeals. She could have followed the rest of the mice into the unfamiliar house—the one she could feel had a fire breathing inside—but she wanted to get farther into the forest.

After bounding from tree to tree, leaping across the small space between their branches, she could finally look back and not see the house that kept him. Only the sharp arrowheads of the trees looked back at her, the tops of their heads pointing directly to the grey sky.

But finally when she had time to rest—to find a small corner of the branches to lean her small body against—she realized how much pain she was in. The wound in her chest hadn't healed. Her bloodied, matted fur concealed what must have reached deep into her flesh. Each breath she took felt like a hand pressing down, blocking her lungs from fully expanding. She

could feel the slow drip of blood gush from the center. She didn't dare look.

Something different. Anything. What could heal her?

The bright tail of a fox glittered at the bottom of her tree and she knew.

Her new footsteps fit right into the tracks left by the one she saw. She was able to leave no trace of her new identity.

But she quickly realized her mistake.

Every part of her had grown but so did the gash in the center of her—it prickled with every slight movement, refusing to let her breathe, no longer dripping blood but unmistakably so deep within her that there would be no hope in healing it. She stumbled in the snow and left her body's outline inside it.

It could be completely different. It had to be completely different. She had never tried it before, but she closed her eyes, willing her limbs to shrink and vanish, her head to collapse into her neck until her body was a simple string.

She left the imprint of the fox behind her, slinking in the harsh ice in search of anything warmer.

It looked as if a fox had fainted in the snow, its snout sprouting a too-long thin line—as if some cruel hand had ripped its intestines directly from its mouth.

The ground held no comfort for her now. The ice was too harsh across her scales, too cold to

ever feel comfortable. But the trees offered distance. The trees, with their black-tipped pointed spears watching the muted sky, as if waiting for an order that would never come to them, offered her distance between the ground, the houses, the rain—everything. Her form offered her no company. Any other creature she spotted quickly whimpered away in sight of her. They couldn't understand.

She still felt the wound in the center of her—somewhere between the long line of her torso, where no arms or legs could help her mentally mark the space. It throbbed each time she danced along the branches, but eventually it ached less and less. The trick, she found, was no quick trick at all, just a waiting of nature. Each time she shed a skin—slithering out of the dead body she once inhabited—her patch of pain eased. Sometimes she enjoyed staring at what was left. Her hollow outline. A lifeless, lightless bit of past flesh. It felt both foreign and familiar to her, like discovering a common phrase written backwards.

Round after round of shedding, she noticed the sky opened up inch by inch. The trees no longer held their constant vigil, and instead kept a continual half-attention. They swayed with their new freedom, waving to each other, leaning over to whisper words of welcome. The branches she wound herself over would bounce her gently. They'd show off their glittering new buds on their fingertips, humming in anticipation of their coming colors. Spring. Rebirth. Resilience. Once the snow melted, it would be official. It grew thinner, she could tell, but the icy blanket was holding on, teasing her, begging her to beg it back. She crossed from tree to tree, not needing the ground.

She hadn't thought of him. She hadn't thought of him until one day one of the trees' yelps

sounded like his call. Frantic and angry. She reminded herself. Frantic and angry. She would not go back. She would not be going back.

Somedays she longed for limbs, to be able to touch the changing leaves, the dew drops that collected on them. Her scales did not allow for it. She could flick her tongue at it, make a ripple in the small pool, feel the rainwater refresh her, but she could not enjoy the wetness of fur. Or hair. No fingers on scalps, no massages, no caresses—

She would not be going back.

It was by accident. She did not know there were any others here. She had fallen down a branch—its arm too thin in the springtime wind, with her weight too much to carry—and she had tumbled down to the green earth below.

His yellow eyes weren't vibrant. They didn't pierce into her like she would have expected. They were mild, glowing, she imagined, like a small candle flame. Something natural. Real and in place. His scales were complementary, reflecting the golden buds full along the branches. He flicked his tongue at her and nodded, looked at the treetops. They didn't need to speak.

They did not have limbs but they could coil around the other, crouch in tandem when a passerby disturbed their peace. They could huddle together in wait for the heat of summer. They could shed their skins—their past bodies a small silhouette of their present forms—and try each other's on, slowly, delicately, before the movement torn the fine filaments of dust apart. She could pass the time like this. Chasing him throughout the branches, hopping from one arm to the next. The trees lost their juvenile bouncing and she hardly noticed that the rising heat of summer crept into their stillness. They're still, just for me. Just for us. She no longer kept track of the

forest like she used to.

Day after day they braced themselves in the treetops, not noticing the changing scenery around them, the trees becoming sparser, the branches thinner in between each transition. There were houses in these parts of the forest. *The house*. Somehow she had made her way back here. Maybe she would always make her way back here. *I won't go back*. She promised herself. *I'll never go back*, and she could feel a dull throb in the center of her form.

But she could hear him call her name, repeatedly, hysterically, frantically. Ritually. Almost as if he was wounded. As if he were sorry. She promised she wouldn't be coming back.

Around and around the two snakes climbed along the tree branches, reaching the bottom and climbing over roots and dirt before going up again. They circled back on each other, always following the other's direction and path, their focus on the long sleek line of scales in front of them, their eyes high above the line of green grass beneath them, their tails becoming the beginning as it was the end as it was the very start.



# JUDGE'S COMMENTS

Serpent in Spring

By Madeline Humphreys

**First Place**  
**Graduate**  
**Short Fiction**

We never learn the name of this story's mysterious protagonist, nor the circumstances that force her through a string of metamorphoses, from a raven to a fox to the eponymous reptile. Instead, "Serpent in Spring" offers us something magical—the illusion of being inside the body that transforms. With its hyper-awareness of the physical, with the language honed beautifully to reflect the smallest sensations, with the natural world so prominent it feels like another character, this story creates images and moments that I found absolutely stunning: "Each time she shed a skin—slithering out of the dead body she once inhabited—her patch of pain eased. Sometimes she enjoyed staring at what was left. Her hollow outline. A lifeless, lightless bit of past flesh. It felt both foreign and familiar to her, like discovering a common phrase written backwards." Perhaps this is a postscript to the famous poem and we learn at last what happened to Poe's raven? True or not, she has her own story now. As the narrator says, "She would never be a girl again. It was always too much work."

- Eveniya Dame





**FIRST PLACE  
UNDERGRADUATE  
SHORT FICTION**

**THERE ARE COWS IN THE BACKGROUND**

By Faith Elizabeth Morris

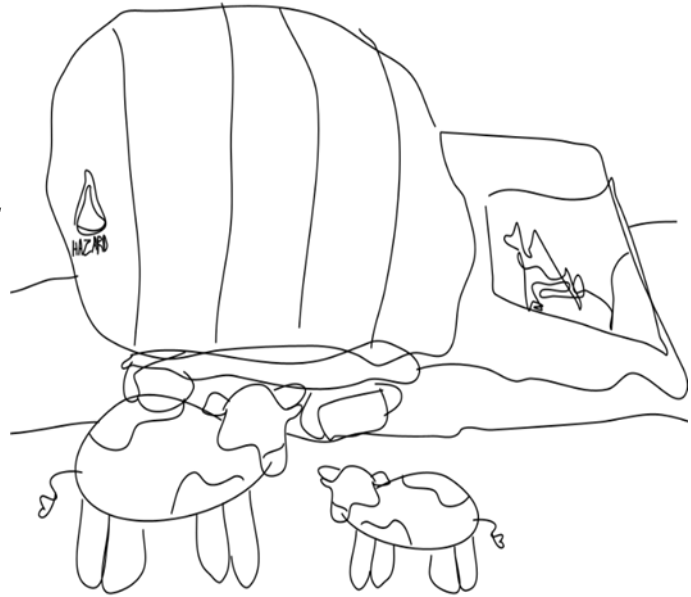
**F**or Nathaniel (nineteen-years-old, mostly broke, and out-of-his-element since the moment he won his first and only Honor Roll in fifth grade), trucking seemed like a good enough gig; cross-state trucking proved an even better one. Sure, it would be lonely, he knew that, but at the end of the day, it would land him a good wad of cash and a lay of the land. Peace of mind too, which he needed most of all. Somewhere in his head to retreat far enough into, far enough away that he could not hear the voice of his overbearing mother, nor his long-lost father, nor his little brother, nor that one girl things didn't quite work out with in his senior year of high school (Jahaleel Sayed was her name, she went by Joan and had brown eyes and black curly hair and brown skin and more pride than he did). Yes, away from all that, away from all that and onto the road, onto the American frontier, as it were.

This was the idea. Yes, this was the idea: beautiful sunsets, blue skies, green fields, a few awful drivers, and a loud radio, so loud as to block any thought which managed to, by tooth and nail, scramble up his shoulder and into one of his rather large, white ears.

Yes, within a giant gasoline truck he traveled the country like a modern Magellan or perhaps a Columbus, if we are being honest with ourselves (and we are).

Here's what that may have looked like:

*(For reference, that man in the front seat is Nathaniel. It may not be the most accurate depiction of his face, but it demonstrates his essence very well if I do say so myself. If you do not think so: I do not care. Draw your own portraits then).*



Yet, dreams are not what they are all cracked out to be. We know this. We know this (we don't), but we know this. So, (knowing this) Nathaniel hopped in his truck for the very first time and drove far, far away from his childhood home in Oakland, all the way to Charleston, in fact. His life-long friend Isaiah sent him off that morning. Isaiah had short, brown tufts of hair that curled up like clouds, brown freckled skin, and a winning smile. He was Joan Sayed's brother, but that's hardly worth mentioning.

Regardless, here's what that may have looked like:

*(I do admit that Isaiah's biblical sort of beauty is not pictured very well here, so you will just have to trust me on that. Understand, regardless, that his sadness was great).*



"I'll miss you, dude," Isaiah said, the early rising sun casting a soft glow over his radiant features.

"Oh c'mon, quit it, I'll only be gone for like, a few weeks, man." Nathaniel chuckled,

but only half-so, somewhat concerned that the glow revealed his rather hideous ones.

“Well, still. Really dude, I will. Call me man, I’m always here for you,” Isaiah said, just-in-case, because Nathaniel had only been released from the hospital a few months ago.

“Thanks, dude. I will.”

“Good, remember that.”

“I will, man. I will.” The words *I’ll miss you too* lingered on his unbrushed tongue, but they clung there like moss to hardened stone. He was never a sentimental man, much less a man at all. He got in his truck after that and drove off— I don’t think he ever got the chance to say goodbye to his mother, who was sleeping in, nor his little brother, who watched him from the doorway with a great deal of childish curiosity (not that Nathaniel really ever wanted to, though I fear you’re smart enough to pick up on that).

One hundred miles from his hometown later, he felt an anxious bliss tickle him from head to toe. He quite liked having this vehicle, enormous and commanding as it was. At the touch of a turn signal switch, he, in this venomous, gasoline-filled chariot, could part the metal seas on either side of him and change lanes whenever he wished. The radio did not disappoint either: he blasted Kendrick Lamar, 2Pac, J. Cole, Kanye West, A Tribe Called Quest, and Queen until his ears began to ring and his eyes began to blur. That last one was said to be his father’s favorite; thus, Nathaniel listened to it with bitter indulgence, for it was unfortunately one of his favorites now too. The fields were a bit more yellow and dry than he had expected, and the sky a lot grayer, but such trivial things could not stop the blood pumping through his veins, the freedom bubbling out from underneath his newly shed skin.



That could've looked like this:

*(But I hope it didn't. Yuck!)*

Another two hundred miles later, he had already run through his entire playlist, such that the songs began repeating again in a more annoying fashion than before, as if the good songs (in fear of being skipped, let alone being taken off the playlist) were pushing the bad songs out into the forefront. This phenomenon certainly takes the zeal out of a young man, indeed. It did not help that he'd suddenly run into a fair bit of traffic on the I-580 because of what he considered an even more annoying car accident. He couldn't get much of a good look in, considering it was on the far-left side of the freeway, but I saw it, and here it was:

A drunk man (perhaps under the delusion that he too drove a grand chariot like Nathaniel's truck full of flammable gas) changed lanes without checking his blind spot. He accidentally killed a mother and her two children who were on their way to visit their grandmother who lived in New Mexico. Even as he was being dragged from his car, I am not so sure that the drunk man knew what he had done. He seemed to be on another plane of existence.

But, really, this is all hardly worth mentioning.

Here is what Nathaniel said as he passed by the wreckage:

The word "DAMN" is written in a simple, hand-drawn style. The letter 'D' is a vertical line on the left and a curved line on the right. Inside the 'D', there is a small drawing of a truck horn. The letters 'A', 'M', 'M', and 'N' are simple outlines. The 'A' has a horizontal bar. The 'M' has two peaks. The 'N' has a vertical stem and a diagonal stroke. A period follows the 'N'.

*(Five miles back, her little children kept chugging their arms up and down out the window in an effort to get Nathaniel to use his truck horn.*

*They seemed to be on another plane of existence then, too).*

Three hundred miles later, Nathaniel pulled into a truck stop with a sigh and a push of his gear shift. He ate at a local diner tucked away in the corner (the food was delicious, mind you, if not a bit greasy), and returned to his chariot shortly after with a full stomach and a renewed mind. A ten-minute break of scrolling around on his phone served him poorly— he responded to a text from Isaiah:

*How's it going out there?*

*good. boring but good. hbu?*

and merely glanced at the text from his mother:

*You become more and more like your father every day. I'm disappointed in you.*

He put down his phone and went off driving again, the words sizzling on the side of his

brain like pop rocks. They burned holes into its pink flesh and let free thoughts of the hospital, of Dr. Richter, of breathing in and out, and of escitalopram. His hands tightened upon the wheel, a piece of plastic flotsam keeping him afloat among the great, empty, tired plains on either side of him and the taste of stale air. The hills stretched on for a millennium, sparsely decorated by herds of fat cows and a few lone, skinny horses.

The sun set (as it tends to) and it left little effect on him, as it tends to. To me, of course, it was very beautiful indeed: the purples, the reds, the pinks, the yellows, melting together into a sweet, astronomical pudding; but he could not have noticed it. He attempted to find that solace in his head instead, that empty, nice, fantastical part of it, where he could drift away to other worlds. Still, the pop rocks sizzled. His hands tightened.

Soon, it was ten o'clock in the afternoon and Tupac Shakur and Freddie Mercury and Q-Tip had all gone to bed (equally bored of the cows and horses and rolling plains), leaving him alone with the vacant, tinny screeching of tiny wheels under twenty-five thousand pounds of steel. Every now and then, when another car came blistering out from the darkness, he'd have to reach his hand out and flick off his brights. Then, they would pass and he would have to turn them back on. This miraculous vigor was the pinnacle of his movement, besides the brief pushes of his foot against the pedals. The rest of his movement was located somewhere between his cerebellum and his hippocampus.

Here's a drawing of Tupac Shakur, Freddie Mercury, and Q-Tip having gone to bed already:

*(Because I'm just as bored as they are at this point. Are you?  
I certainly hope not).*



In at least a century or so, Nathaniel traveled one hundred more miles and was sick and tired of his own nonsensical mind, so he pulled over into another truck stop. He bought a bottle of water, used the bathroom, and had a good time with a prostitute for a whopping fifty-five bucks on his way out.

This prostitute's name was Whitney Carney, and she was nineteen years old. She worked for a strict, financially savvy pimp, who was known to dispose of his lowest earning workers like a real businessman does. Two weeks ago, after she had dropped twenty pounds and fell victim to a one-hundred-three-degree fever, she had gone to the doctor in secret and been diagnosed with late-stage HIV, so late-stage in fact, that she was expected to die within the coming two to three months. She did not tell anyone about this, mostly because she was not a very sentimental woman, much less a woman at all. Still, I could see it: the purples, the pinks, the reds, the yellows melting together-- colorful blotches spreading about her pallid nose and her chapped lips.



Here is what she looked like:



*(However, with her face utterly obscured by the bathroom's faulty lighting, Nathaniel observed none of this).*

He lay slumped against the cold, dirty wall and never gave her a single look besides the first couple of them, busy thinking about Jahaleel and if he was ever going to go to heaven.

Here's what that may have looked like:

*(Gotcha.)*



Nathaniel paid her and left the bathroom with a familiar frown on his tired, pale face. A ghastly chill ran down Whitney Carney's spine, so much so that she went on swearing up and down to all her friends that, for the rest of that night, she felt suffocated by the thick stench of brimstone and sulfur. She swore it for the rest of her life, in fact. It's really hardly worth mentioning, but all that swearing must have thrown her into a more feverish state than before: she died within the next week.

What *is* worth mentioning is that she was not lying. The stench was thick in Nathaniel's

nostrils, as it was in mine. He shook all over, thinking again of breathing in and out and Dr. Richter and escitalopram and what his mother would think and how he was just like his father because a double-helixed serpent had dug up a space for itself between his veins, strung up his hands, and smashed nails into the sides of his feet. The futility of it all weakened him terribly, painted dark circles beneath his eyes and a horrid, reddish flush against his cheeks.

I would show you what that may have looked like, but I do not wish to embarrass him more than he has already embarrassed himself. I fear he's had quite enough of all that. I also have a harder time drawing men.

He got in his truck and, contrary to the fact that it was now midnight, began driving again. Except, he was not driving to Charleston— not quite. He was driving somewhere else, ushered by an indistinct voice in his head. This voice floated about his person like a twittering bird, a warbling angel. His hands loosened at the sound of it. The pop rocks, for just a moment, ceased their quiet sizzling.

Yes, if you are curious: it was me.

And I was telling him to just keep driving forward:

“Just keep driving forward, Nathaniel!”

All he offered in response was his obedience, to show me that nothing had changed.

“Go a little faster, Nathaniel.”

He went a little faster. Fifty miles per hour or so.

“A *little* faster, Nathaniel.”

Fifty-five miles per hour.

“A little *faster*, Nathaniel.”

I smelt brimstone and sulfur, yet I did not retract my request. He gave the idea some thought and, with a bizarre shrug of his shoulders, pushed down upon the pedal. Seventy miles per hour or more, or a lot more than that.

“Goodness, why are you going so fast, Nathaniel?” I asked.

He did not reply. He could not hear me, or maybe he just pretended not to hear me. His foot kept pushing: seventy-five miles per hour, eighty miles per hour, eighty-five miles per hour, ninety miles per hour—

“—Nathaniel, I just said a bit faster. That’s a lot more than a bit, Nathaniel, if you are not aware.”

Nathaniel’s eyes welled up with tears, slightly smothering me. I was right behind his eyeballs, after all.

“Nathaniel, why are you crying, Nathaniel? Just slow down, won’t you? I am not angry. I am not disappointed, Nathaniel.”

“It doesn’t matter what you think,” he said to me. His lips did not move, yes, but that is what he said, I assure you. “I know the truth.”

“The truth of what, Nathaniel?”

“I’m nobody, I’ll always be nobody. And I’m awful at everything I’m supposed to be, you made me that way. I’m awful at being a son, I’m awful at being a big brother, I’m awful at being a friend. I’ve been driving this truck for no more than fourteen hours and I already miss home, but I feel like I can’t go back. So what do I do? What do I do?”

“You keep driving, Nathaniel.”

“Keep driving? Why? Why bother? Why waste the time?”

“The time will pass anyway, Nathaniel.”

“Stop with the self-righteousness. You’re just as awful as I am. For making me this way. For being this way.”

“Oh, do not speak to me that way, Nathaniel! I am indeed very faint of heart!”

Nathaniel was going a hundred miles per hour at this point. Torrents of flammable gasoline did somersaults over one another, excited for a real performance, a real show.

“Call Isaiah, Nathaniel. Good God, pull over, Nathaniel! Don’t act rashly now.” I said this, even though it might work better for the story if he did, in fact, act rashly.

It seems we are in luck: he ignored me promptly, as he did unto his mother, his father, his little brother, his best, dearest friend; and the one girl who ever loved him.

There was another hill up ahead. Another dull hill, filled with dull cows and dull horses and dull trees.

“I can’t do this anymore, man, I can’t do this anymore,” Nathaniel whimpered, the tears now pouring freely from his face, “Living the same day over and over and over again.”

“Pull over, Nathaniel. Don’t you dare go over that cliff.”

Nathaniel pulled over. He pulled over, all right.

He yanked the wheel rightwards. The truck spun off its left wheels, toppled from the road, and rolled over like a dog, earning itself a large gash in its side. Torrents of gasoline leaped over each other to escape through this gash, to ignite the flame which would make them famous.

Here’s what that may have looked like:

*(A real show).*



Yes, Nathaniel “spun out” as it were and blew himself to smithereens. Perhaps he could have pulled over and called his friend, as I suggested, as I thought– but this is the ending you prefer. This is the ending I prefer, too.

Is it not?

Oh.

It isn't the one you wanted?

OK.

OK, then.

Let's go for something a little different:

“Pull over, Nathaniel. Don't you dare go over that cliff.”

Nathaniel pulls over. No funny business this time. He thinks about it, though. He thinks about spinning out and blowing himself to smithereens, but he cannot do it, he cannot do it precisely because he is too afraid, too afraid of a lot of different things. But even the mere thought of it overwhelms him, overwhelms his body, rendering him utterly powerless.

He sits in his car and sobs into his hands, mourning on behalf of his mother, his little sister, his best friend, the only girl who ever loved him; wondering how he could even begin to think of doing such a ridiculous thing to them. The idea only makes him hate himself a little more than he already does. Nathaniel cries like a child, like a little boy (because he really is only a little boy), pulling his knees to his chest so that they may soothe his throbbing heart. Soon, he is holding his phone close to his ear and listening to it ring.

He is one-thousand-and-sixty-two miles away from Oakland and it is nearly one in the

morning and Isaiah Sayed answers his call the second he sees the letter “N” flashing upon his phone in his pitch-black bedroom.

“Nathan? Hey, Nathan, what’s goin’ on, man?”

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry—”

“Sorry? Sorry about what?”

“I just— for callin’ you, man, fuck— I just—”

“Don’t be sorry, dude, it’s alright. I-I’m glad you called, actually. I told you to.”

Nathaniel hears the rustling of Isaiah Sayed’s sheets one-thousand-and-sixty-two-miles away as he throws himself out of bed. He is awake in its purest form.

“You... gettin’ *those* thoughts again?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, man.”

“It’s alright.”

“Alright. Well. We can talk for as long as you need to, dude, I’m here for you. Y’know that, I’m always here for you.”

“Thanks.”

“Uhuh. What’s going down?”

“Nothing, I just— I don’t know—”

“But you do know. You do know, you just aren’t telling me; so tell me, man.”

“I’m just such a piece of shit. Y’know?”

After a brief silence on the other line, Isaiah Sayed responds: “Nope. I wouldn’t know anything about that.”

“Alright, alright, man, well, y’know what I mean, don’t you? I’m a fuck-up. I fuck things up. For everybody. And it just makes me feel like– like everything would be better if I just went away. Y’know?”

“How could I *ever* know what you mean? You aren’t a piece of shit, and you don’t fuck things up for everybody, and everything wouldn’t fix itself straight up if you just killed yourself, it would just stay how you left it. That’s why you have to stay *here*, to stay here and to talk with me. People make mistakes, man– newsflash, dude– *you’re* a person. Newsflash: you are a *good* person.”

Isaiah Sayed spoke so passionately; one would think he could see Nathaniel huddled up with his knees to his chest right before him. In fact, I believe he could:

HERE’S WHAT THAT LOOKS LIKE:







# JUDGE'S COMMENTS

There Are Cows in the Background  
By Faith Elizabeth Morris

**First Place**  
**Undergraduate**  
**Short Fiction**

Nineteen-year-old Nathan is (mostly) broke and out of his element, so he signs up for a cross-state trucking job. Many stories could originate from this premise, but “There Are Cows in the Background” is as unique and memorable as its wonderfully-inventive shape that alternates text with hilarious, touching, and obsessively-annotated drawings. I loved this story for its audacity, voice, and explosive sense of humor (“...within a giant gasoline truck he traveled the country,” says the narrator at one point, “like a modern Magellan or perhaps a Columbus, if we are being honest with ourselves (and we are)). Nathan’s search for himself becomes a modern Odyssey, a playful take on love, friendship, car wrecks, and finding purpose in life, told with so much gusto, word play, and open heart that I can hear Kurt Vonnegut cheering for it from some other realm.

- Eveniya Dame



**SECOND PLACE  
UNDERGRADUATE  
SHORT FICTION**

**PINE TREES**  
By Ben Israel K. Gurjar

**Prologue**

It snowed all year around where I lived, often covering the pine trees to their leaves. Pine trees were strange little trees...no one planted them, no one watered them, no one cared about them, yet they were always there, standing tall and strong.

My mother once on her way to collect herbs with her basket, said to me “Pine trees symbolize strength and resilience. Remember that every time you look at them, and since they’re everywhere, you’ll always remember that” she laughed

I smiled without uttering a word. I was glad they were there, but I didn’t need them. I already had a symbol of strength in my life – my father. Life here has simply never been possible, which is why you could walk miles and miles and never find another human. My father came here alone when he was about my age and made life possible. He chopped pine trees, burned them for heat, and made a house, and all the furniture you could need in it. He hunted dinner for us, deer, moose, sometimes rabbits (those little things are hard to find, especially with that snow-colored hide), and even fish. The only source of water was a frozen lake, a few miles east, my father made that journey once every two days and came back with that huge barrel on his back, sometimes he returned with a block of ice.

He was way stronger and resilient than those pine trees and he was alwa...well, I guess that's where the stupid trees had him beat. He wasn't always going to be there.

## Chapter I

My sister is sleeping on the bed. Mother's out on her quest. I am trying to carve a ship out of this wooden block at my favorite place, in front of the fireplace. Dad's still out with his axe. He often goes farther and avoids chopping trees close to the house, "the trees protect the house against storms and heavy winds." He says. Yet I can hear his axe meeting the tree "THUD... THUD...THUD" forming ripples in the water of the barrel.

The noise suddenly stops, and my father is back home. He opens the door and places his axe aside. His beard is as long as my forearm and has turned white with snow, so has his eyebrows and eyelashes. Cold winds blow through the door, fluttering the fire and sending a shiver down my spine.

"Close the door," I say wrapping my hands around me with chattering teeth "You're letting the heat out."

"Oh sorry" he smiles "Hehe"

As he always does when he comes home, he ruffles my hair playfully, kisses Elin on the forehead, and then goes upstairs. He is home considerably early, given his daily routine. The sun is

still out, there's no sign of storm or rain, not that that would have stopped him. He never comes home early or leaves his axe by the door. It's a safety hazard, Elin tries to eat everything she can get her hands on, and I mean everything.

The axe is clear enough for me to see my face reflected in it and... it has blood on it. I rush and yank the door open. The cold wind hits my face. It's quiet, there's nothing out there, except the pine trees. I stare at them for a while and then see her. A shadow of a woman, with white eyes and flowing hair, giggling. My heart stops in my chest and my voice dies in my throat.

My father's advice echoes in my head.

If you see it, don't run, you'll never outrun it. Keep it in your sight, if it escapes, rely on your ears to hear, remain still, and kill it.

Perfectly still, breathing through my mouth, vapor escaping to the sky, the axe is right here but she's moved to another tree. The shadow creatures are powerful but also very cowardly, they'll never risk their own lives and attack unless they are out of your sight. You can only see them when you focus with all your might, even the slightest distraction, a small thought, a musical tune playing in your head, could be your end.

"DAD!" I yell and the creature moves further ahead to another tree, covering her mouth and giggling. She's at the last tree, dad could be asleep, her next jump would be right in front of me. She'll kill me, Elin, and father, and will wait for mother. Two options. Pick up the axe or

shut the door. Pray it won't break through. Grabbing the edge of the door I slam it hard. The creature jumps and with a hoarse screech, punches a hole into the wooden door. The dark hand desperately searches for the latch, increasing in size, increasing its reach.

Both hands on axe, trying with all my might to lift it up but it's hopeless, even with this fear coursing through my veins, I am helpless. Click... the latch opens, the screech dies down, and the door slowly creaks open creaaak. Dark mist spreads, the shadow's grinning ear to ear, with bright white teeth. It jumps at me; one touch and I'll cease to exist.

"MAGNUS!" My father yells and throws a spear, it hits the creature in her shoulder and throws her out of the house, pinning her to a tree. It screeches, struggles to grab the spear, but her hands keep passing through it. Pain makes it difficult for them to remain in this world. My father flashes by me, his axe in his hand and slices the creatures in two. The symbols on the axe light neon blue and absorb the creature leaving behind the spear.

"Are you hurt?" father asks.

"Are you hurt?" he asks again shaking me by my shoulders. I meet his eyes and nod. He checks Elin, she's still asleep, unaware how close to eternal sleep we all have just been. Father doesn't waste another second; he brings his toolbox and nails a plank covering the hole.

"It might be time to get a new door, eh?" He jokes but I am lost in my thoughts. I hear what he says a little late and nod in approval. Stare at the fire in the fireplace for the rest of the day. My father gives me concerned looks and makes jokes hoping to lighten the mood. When mother comes home, she has a million questions. She holds my head to her chest and kisses me, a thou-

sand, million times, before she goes to argue with my father about where he was and why the door didn't hold. Their fight lasts long after I've gone to bed.

"How did that thing even get so close to our house!" My mother whisper yells

My father sighs "If we knew what kept them away all this time, perhaps we'd know"

"You have to build a better door" my mother pleads "Not just a door, a fence, a big one"

"You know that is not going to help, Liv. These creatures, they can adjust their strength, manipulate their bodies, till they can break any fence." says my father "You know what we have to do"

"No, he's still too young"

"He couldn't even lift up the axe, Liv" my father stands up "What if I hadn't heard the door slam? What if I was a second late? What if I hadn't come home early? What if ... What if I hadn't come home at all?"

"Please...Don't speak of such things"

"I killed a wolf today. He almost killed me, and he would have, had I not seen his reflection in my axe. This could happen, we need to face that fact"

Mother turns silent, and so does my father. Every time they fought, they had this ritual, where if the other doesn't answer, both must remain silent for a time. In that silence, everything that covered the very core of their fight flowed out, leaving the words that had to be forced out.

"Remember my father" father spoke softly "He always hurled insults at me, called me weak, pathetic, a disappointment, said I'd never amount to anything in my life. Hit me with that leather belt of his. I still have those marks on my back. I promised myself I'd be different with my son. I never raised my voice, never touched him, but I am afraid, by doing so I have made him

weak”

“You haven’t” my mother argues “Your father was wrong”

“I am not sure of that anymore. When the axe feels heavy in my hand, and the weather is cold on my skin. I remember how many times he called me weak, and that anger keeps me going. One more hit, one more step, one more day”

My father always gave me concerned looks when I spent entire days in front of the fireplace, but they were always followed by a playful smile that said “It’ll be okay” but today, his looks were followed by more concern that said “It won’t be”

People are simple creatures, everyone wants something and sometimes our wants don’t align with the wants of people around us, and that creates chaos. Here’s an interesting fact about me – No one can make me do something I don’t want to do. Not the gods, not the fates, and certainly not my father.

Father didn’t say anything about his plan the next day; given what had just happened, he waited. The cycle repeated, he came home, ruffled my hair playfully, but I sensed a slight restraint in it. I don’t have eyes at the back of my head, but I knew instead of a smile, he had a look of grim determination that he was going to change me.

Come day four, early morning, my father comes in my room to take me with him, except I’m not there. Nobody in this world is a saint, we all have our breaking points, we all can snap and show our true colors, even someone as calm and gentle as my father. You just have to find the right string to pull. For him, that string is consistency. He likes knowing exactly how his day is going to go. In the past three days I have burned as much wood as I could and emptied the water barrel. He has three tasks today, get firewood, water and teach me and he isn’t going to have enough time for one of them.



“MAGNUS!” he yells the sixth time and I show up “Where have you been?”

“Bathroom”

“I checked the bathroom. You weren’t there”

“Wasn’t when you checked”

“Go get dressed and where’s my axe?”

“I don’t know” I say and leave

The axe is at the one place he isn’t going to look for, right outside the door. My plan does include going outside, as much as I tried, I couldn’t avoid it, so I cover myself from neck to toe. The scarf, the sweater, the gloves, and my snowshoes and wait for my father to find his axe.

“Dammit who brought it outside?”

“Can’t be anyone else but you. None of us can lift it” I argue

I couldn’t lift it, but I could horizontally place it on a piece of firewood and slide it outside.

“Is that right?” he asks “Well you are going to pick it up and follow me”

Even before I take a step outside, the cold winds coming through the door numb my body head to toe.

Slow, deep breaths, do it today, and never do it again

Father stands with his arms crossed in frustration, watching me struggle to pick up the axe with

occasional glances to the sun and the empty firewood bucket. I manage to place the handle on my shoulder and pick it up, but it knocks me out of balance, like a heavy force pulling me towards the ground. I walk three steps before I drop the axe again, my father's frustration multiplies every time.

“Come on you can do it”

After dropping it three times I suggest dragging it

“No, you'll ruin the blade”

I know

“I don't see any other way. This way we'll never make it in time to get any work done”

“Fine” my father sighs “One side and watch out for stones and pebbles”

I start dragging the blade on one side. Not as hard as lifting it but dragging isn't any easier, especially the distance we were travelling. I am slow, and my father becomes more and more upset every time he has to stop and wait for me to catch up. He glances a few times at the blade that he spent hours sharpening being eaten away by the moisture and pebbles in the snow. He finally takes it from my hand, and we walk in silence.

When we arrive, my father starts talking somewhat passionately about cutting trees. How to find the right tree, determine the way it is leaning, where to cut, how to hold the axe, that I listened halfheartedly, never make eye contact and yawn constantly. When he hands me the axe, I go against everything he just instructed me with.

“Magnus no” he stops me “Did you hear anything I said? That tree is leaning towards you, if you cut it, it’ll fall on you, you hold your axe here and hit here”

I get the axe back and continue going against his instruction. To force it further, I swing the axe in a way it’s a danger to me and even allow it to slip it out of my hand. And that is the end of it. My father pulls the axe of my hand. By the amount of strength he uses, I realize how close he is to his breaking point.

“Just go home, Magnus” he says calmy

“Why?” I complain “I am doing everything I can”

“No, you’re not. You’re deliberately going against my instructions. You think I don’t see that? You should be exci-”

“What? excited about this?” I ask “Eager to learn this mindless chore? so you can sleep till the afternoon and spend your days in front of the fireplace. So, I can teach my children how to throw their lives away too?”

“Magnus that is enough” he says sternly, his hand tightening its grip around the handle

“Don’t you see it?” I ask “Your life is meaningless, what you do is meaningless, that firewood will run out, that barrel will run dry. I wish you had never left your father’s village”

And there it is. A slap that echoes through the forest, leaving red finger marks on my face and heat and vibration through it. I watch my father’s face turn from utter anger and frustration to sky heavy guilt and heartbreak. The axe drops to the ground.

“Magnus...I” words choke in his throat as tears flow from my eyes “I didn’t mean to”

“You’re just like him” I say and start walking away

He can’t follow me as much as he wants to. Apologize till he gains his forgiveness. The fire-wood bucket is empty, walking home, going back, he won’t have any energy or time left for the task at hand. By the time the day’s over, he’ll feel his window is closed, overwhelmed by guilt, he’ll never ask me to do this again. Things go as I had planned. He comes home and tries to apologize, I pay him no attention, he eventually gives up and leaves to collect water.

At night I hear them talking again

“How could you do that?” My mother asks

“I don’t know...He just said some things and...I don’t know” says my father defeated “I’ll never know.”

That last part wasn’t part of the plan. I just underestimated the amount of self-control he had on himself. Part of me knows someday I’ll have to pick up that axe, but I can’t see myself doing it. The same mindless task, again and again, and again and again. There must be more to life than that.

Every day he tries to repeat his ritual when he comes home, except when he comes close to me, I move my head away, indicating it isn’t over. I’d forgive him eventually, I just need the guilt to

seep in deep, deep enough so that it could never be cleaned. Days, weeks, months go by. Nothing changes, except I noticed every morning that the axe in his hand seems heavier, grey hair in his beard, seem to multiply. Usually, he'd just pull them out, but it seemed there are too many to do so now.

Today he's late, it's been hours since the sun has gone down, and a snowstorm has begun. Mother is beside me in front of the fireplace, Elin in her lap, occasionally glancing at the closed door.

"Where's papa?" Elin asks and I place my book down

"I don't know," says mother

"I will go find him" I say getting up

"It's not safe to go out there," she says standing and blocking the door.

"It's not that bad" I argue as I opened the dresser and put on some clothes "And he might need someone, maybe he's hurt, or trapped under a tree or boulder, or maybe he just fainted. Someone has to go"

She slumps her shoulder in defeat and then hands me the spear.

"Don't go too far" she warns

As the door opens, cold winds fill the house, shaking the fire in the hearth. I step out against the strong forces of the wind. They shake the pine trees weak. I glance back at my mother, and she closes the door behind me. I take one step at a time, covering my face with one hand and enter the dark forest.

“DAD!” I call turning my head in all directions

If he fainted, he would have been buried by the snow, which would make it impossible to find him. I remember the place he took me that day, he is most likely to be there. I reach the place and see tree stumps as far as the eye can see, but there’s no sign of him. I continue walking around, jabbing the back of my spear into anything that resembles the shape of his body and anything that doesn’t.

A few hours have gone by and there’s no sign of him. Mother must be worried. The storm is also slowing down. This place will soon be crawling with predators. Father must have found shelter somewhere close by in a cave or a tree trunk. I turn to leave and my foot lands on something hard. I get down on all four and dig for it. It’s my father’s axe, his hand still holding it. It takes me an hour to break the ice, enough to pull him out, which I do, somewhat easier than I had expected. He had fainted, that was all.

I lift him up to my shoulders and hold onto his arms. His body’s cold but I am sure he’s fine, an hour in front of the fireplace, he’ll be fine. Halfway home and the storm is dead, and the sun is up, it’ll be fine. Mother’s waiting outside the house, she rushes towards me when she sees me. I smile to let her know he’s okay when something warm trickles down my face and drops in the snow. Drop...drop...drop. It’s red...blood red.

“Whose blood is that?” mother cries

“IT’S FINE JUST DO AS I SAY” I yell “Throw firewood in the fireplace. He just needs to warm up”

She follows my instructions as I lay down his body and see what I didn't see last night. A wolf's teeth marks on his neck, but no, it'll be fine, he didn't bleed out, he'll be fine. I carry him into the house and place him in front of the fireplace while mother finds every blanket she can and covers him.

The sun rises higher and higher and then starts setting. The ice turns to water and trickles down his body, but he doesn't wake up. Mother bangs her arms on his chest and curses, but he doesn't wake up, Elin cries and pulls his sleeve, but he doesn't wake up. I grab the axe and hang it on my back, open the door and leave, spear in hand, unable to bear the pain of what I just witnessed.

The illusion is fading...yet. The tree is dying, leaves are drying, the sun has left you now.

"You know you did this" says the creature as she places her chin on my shoulder and her arms around my chest "I was there I watched it happen"

I start walking, she hangs on to me with her cold embrace, invoking a feeling where it seems she is freezing me from the inside out.

"We both know no one could best your father, not me, not a bear, and certainly no wolf"

I keep walking, spear held tightly in hand

“He was always one step ahead” it continues speaking “Alert, quick, oh but that day the axe was heavy in his hand, the guilt of what that hand had done weighed him down, when he saw the wolf, he felt as if he almost deserved it, he hesitated, that one second delay, cost him his life”

I walk, not knowing where I am going, till I reach where I had found him. This is where I am supposed to be. The wolf is here too, back to collect his spoil of war. He growls at me. The shadow hovers over my head and laughs a laugh that echoes through my head and through the forest.

“He’s not your father’s murderer. You are” she whispers.

I charge, he charges, blood splatters, he cries in agony, tries to retreat with a spear in his back, only to die leaving a blood trail behind, within my sight. Mother continues crying with her head on his chest. I don’t enter the house, but I can see it through the uncovered window. He seems at peace, even if he wasn’t in his last moments. He should be put to rest as soon as possible to avoid the transmission of diseases and so that he may be allowed to enter paradise.

The ground is buried under six feet of snow, even if I dig through that, the ground will be as hard as stone. The lake is frozen; therefore, he can’t be sent floating in a boat. The only option remaining is to burn his body. Fire...fire needs wood. I grab the axe from my back and make my way into the forest. Just as he had taught me, find the right tree, determine which way its leaning, mark the spot and THUD...THUD...THUD.



“You have to let go mother”

“Oh Magnus...” she cries and covers her mouth “Just a little longer...Please”

“I can't”

I lift dad up and bring him outside. Mother doesn't let go and is dragged out with him. I place dad on the pile of chopped wood and then drag mother to a safe distance. Holding the fire torch, I utter a small prayer to the gods.

I am a little late, I pray, just this once, look the other way

And up he goes in flames. The glowing embers seem to reach the sky. Cold winds shake the pine trees. When a great man dies, the entire world mourns him. Elin stands by mother and mother holds her tight but glares at me with accusing eyes. I will never feel that embrace again, not even when I am dead. I don't go home that night, sleep in a tree trunk with the spear in my hand. I don't know, perhaps I feel like I deserve it, explains why I didn't allow myself to set some wood on fire. I dream about dad. He is walking ahead of me, axe on shoulder as he always did. I run and try catching up to him but keep stumbling on tree stumps.

“DAD!” I call

He stops, sighs, and says “Take care of your mother and sister for me, that's the least you could do”

“I can handle it” I speak softly, half doubting myself “You can rest now”

He looks back and smiles “I know”

I do as he had asked. Chop trees early in the morning, gather the woods and empty them in the bucket by the fireplace. Go to the frozen lake, saw a hole, and gather water with a bucket and pour it into the barrel with my hand. Next, I go hunting. As a child I always wondered why deer ran away from me, what were they so afraid of. I only realize that now as I watch the light fade out of her eyes, as she lays bleeding at my feet. I should feel some empathy but lately I have been feeling so lost and empty, almost as if my heart’s frozen and it’s not beating.

I repeat the ritual day after day and every day the creature taunts me.

“Look at you, doing the mindless tasks you accused your father of doing?” she laughs “Whose life meaningless now?”

I don’t know... whether this axe is heavy in my hand or it’s the weight of this creature that’s weighing me down. Feels like I am standing in front of an empty grave, ready to fall down. The sun goes down, mother prepares dinner, a plate for Elin and a plate for her, occasionally glancing at father’s empty chair. My tears are frozen, I can’t feel my face or my body. Am I dead already?

“You were never alive” whispers the creature

I turn to leave, one step, two steps, I feel weak in my legs. I am going to faint, fall and never wake up again. But I keep walking anyway. I know I deserve it; this feels right.

“Magnus” I hear my mother’s voice and hear the creature screech and fade away. I turn to see her knife, the engraved symbols shine. Tears flow out and my heart starts racing again dropping me to my knees.

“I did it” I confess “I killed him.”

“No, you didn’t” she assures me and wraps me in her warm embrace that I believed I’d never feel again. I must have cried for an hour holding onto her. The guilt was overwhelming, I almost considered snatching her knife, cutting myself open and letting it flow out on the snow, but I didn’t because she held me tight.

“I knew that the creature killed anyone it touched” she finally speaks “I just misunderstood how it did it. It got your father, and it almost got you”

She brings me inside, covers me in the warmest blanket she can find, starts a fire in the hearth, and makes tea. The cup is hot but the blood in my hands is frozen. I can’t feel it.

She pours herself a cup and sits beside me.

“I am sorry I took so long” she says “I saw it touch you, wasn’t sure if there was anything I could do. But I did notice the longer it remained on you, the more it allowed itself to hover around you. The more you died inside the more it lived. In the end became like a mosquito, who drank too much blood to fly right, and I got my chance to kill.”

“What’s a mosquito?”

“I’ll let you find out” she smiles “But for now I will sit on the edge of the chair to show you I am serious. Tell me what you would like to do now. Live as your father did, take his place, and become him or be who you are.”

“Do I even have a choice?”

“You always have a choice” she smiles sadly.

“I never wanted to live the life he lived” I say moving to the edge of the chair myself “I always dreamed of running away, so far away. But if I have to, I’ll give it up”

“Do you know why your father chose this place?” she asks and before I can imagine she answers “He didn’t. He chose a place that was lush green, close to a lake with water so clean, it reflected all the fine details of everything around it. This place used to be paradise before the god of death cursed it. All because of your grandfather”

Father never talked about him. When he did, all he said was that he was a cruel and ruthless, abusive, and mad. From his conversations with mother, I had gathered he was a village chief where my father used to live, before he left and built a home out here.

“Your grandfather was a madman,” she says “He believed he could become God, and in his madness, he traveled to the depths of hell and stole something from Death. A crystal feather that momentarily brings true anything you write with it. Money, fame, power, all the pleasures of life but the moment passes, and it disappears. Reality repairs itself. Death demanded it back and your grandfather refused, so he cursed this land, opened the gates of hell, released those shadows, colds winds, and became on curse on everything here that breathes. Your father always meant to go down there, to the gates of hell take that feather from him, but he knew there was a good chance he wasn’t going to come back, and he couldn’t leave us hanging.”

“That is why he tried to teach me, and I killed him”

Mother shakes her head “What’s past is past. Do not dwell on it any longer but choose your destiny. Become your father if you’d like or go down there and become who you’re meant to be.

We'll be waiting.”

She brings me a map and a sword, engraved with those symbols. She then carries sleeping Elin and goes to her room as I ponder over this. I open the door, letting cold winds blast my face, one last time and step through it. My axe bouncing on my back, my sword still in my hand, the map leads me where my father always meant to go, cutting trees one by one, step by step towards it.

“What are you doing?” swirls one of shadows around me, then another and another “Where are you going?” they say in unison “This is madness, you cannot cross this land.”

The symbols glint at them, and they keep their distance as the cowards they are. Even if one of them possesses me, I won't change my path, no matter what happens, if I die, I will die for them. I walk past the pines, past where my father breathed his last, and reach my destination. In the snow-covered mountain, is the mouth of the cave. All the shadows fly and become one blocking it into the figure that once possessed me. The sky turns dark and everything else except the cave of the mouth is covered in a dark mist.

It's the woman that came to visit me “I will make you an offer” she smiles “Turn back and I will bring your dear father back.”

“We're weak together, I'll hide behind him, he'll remain by me. History would repeat itself” I say and slash her with my sword. She will return to hell, only to walk through that open door again. I step into the dark cavern, the temperature seems to drop further and further as I walk

through the mist into another world, my body drops behind me, and my spirit keeps on walking, and I see my father.

He stands in front of me, his axe on his shoulder. He looks at me and smiles. I run to him and wrap my arms around him.

“You’ve done well son” he says patting me on my back “More than I could have ever imagined. I am so, so proud of you, and I forgive you. Now you can take this weight off your shoulders”

It feels as if a boulder had been lifted off my head and the air trapped in my lungs can finally be free. He messes up my hair playfully and walks happily in the other direction.

He turns back and says “In another life I hope I have a chance to be your father again”

Further ahead and there he is. Death. Covered in a black cloak head to toe, his scythe in his hand, his face in darkness. There is no palace, just a broken wall behind his throne and around it, the ground littered with broken armors and chipped swords, ruins of great empires and emperors. His chin resting on his hand, listening to a man standing next to him, long white beard, grey hair, and a silver feather, held tightly in his hand.

“Just think about it Death” he argues “If I can become immortal imagine the knowledge I would gain in that time, I could become god and not just any god, but an all-powerful ruler of gods. I could make you my second in command, get you a magnificent palace with a warm sun, servants, or souls if that’s what you like.”

“Welcome Magnus” speaks Death in a voice colder than hell itself.

“I want you to close the gates” I demand.

“Of course, you do” he says and snaps his bony fingers and my grandfather bursts into dark flames, screams and disappears, all that remains is the feather where he stood resting on his ashes.

“Pick up it up” says Death and I do “Write your desire and then break it. Your wish will be sealed permanently. Anything you want. Anything at all”

Anything at all. I could close the gates of hell, restore life, or become immortal? Become a god? Everything comes at a price.

I write Seal the gates of hell in the air, and it floats there, bright white as the only source of light in hell. I then hold the feather with both hands, ready to snap it, not knowing if death would even allow me to leave.

“You could have killed him anytime you wanted to” I say “Ended this nightmare. But I guess you liked him, found him entertaining, like an animal pleading for its life”

“Immortality Magnus” he speaks “Is more of a curse than a gift, something humans will never be able to see”

I snap the feather in two and it shatters, the shards fly and stick themselves to the words and then they themselves shatter. The gates close shut, vacuuming every soul that has escaped, dragging them in kicking and screaming.

I turn to leave but ask one more thing “It was you wasn’t it” I ask “That shadow of a woman. You came to see me, killed my father, possessed me”

Death smiles “I have seen greatness in your future. One of your many futures. I have also seen boredom and simplicity. I found a future amusing and pushed you towards that destiny. I have learned Magnus; a boy will never become a man as long as the father remains by his side. The world breaks and remakes when the pillar is out of the way”

I walk and death appears twice in my way. I keep walking, avoiding looking at him “I look forward to your life” he says the first time and second “And the conversation we’ll have on your death bed”

The world becomes lush green again, something I witness at the mouth of the cave, the lake is a lake again and I learn what swimming really feels like under the warm sun. And, mosquitos, that one wasn’t fun. I miss the snow, so in winter it returns. We start farming, people come from east and west to this new land, a new life has begun. Death waits patiently in the shadow of the pine trees for what is to come.





# JUDGE’S COMMENTS

Pine Trees  
By Ben Israel K. Gurjar

**Second Place**  
**Undergraduate**  
**Short Fiction**

“Pine Trees” is an imaginative, blood-chilling tale. The story of Magnus, who lives an isolated life in a snow-covered country with his parents, combines myth, folklore, horror, and bildungsroman elements. What holds it—impressively— together is the father-son relationship that shines with subtleties and deep understanding of human psyche. As Magnus alternates between devotion and rebellion, between strength and powerlessness, between the desire to save his father and to be done with him, the story abandons the familiar and pulls the reader along on a journey that ends with meeting Death itself. I wanted to be there every step of the way.

- Eveniya Dame



**FIRST PLACE  
GRADUATE  
CREATIVE NON-FICTION**

THE SUN CUT FLAT  
By Erin Mahoney

When my mother died, I was holding her foot. In the moment, I knew I would later reflect on how ridiculous that sounds, how god damn stupid it was, but I held on nonetheless. Machines crowded one side of her hospital bed, and my dad sat clasping her hand on the other. My brothers and I awkwardly filled the rest of the space beside her while my cousin wailed from the corner. Why couldn't I cry like that? Why were Mahoneys silent in their grief? Was it rude to be so quiet in the face of such loss? Would mom prefer to hear us cry? Could she hear at all? I rubbed her foot through the hospital-sock, my index finger tracing the rubber ridges meant to keep her upright on the slick tiled floor (a battle they never had the chance to fight) and watched her chest struggle to rise and fall on its own now that the breathing machine was turned off. Any minute now.

Waiting for a last breath is a uniquely dehumanizing experience. It is ludicrous and cruel.

It is tiring. It is intimate and embarrassing and makes time mean everything and nothing all at once.

I stood silently, trying to stay in the moment, willing my heartbeat to sync with each blip of the monitor tracking hers. Instead, my chest pounded and my mind fled to anywhere else besides this place, away from the smells and the sounds in the air and the finality of this drab room.

I thought about the short drive to the hospital that day, sitting in the back seat and bris-

ting at the songs on the radio but too submerged in my anger and anguish to do anything about it. What is the right thing to listen to on the way to killing the person who gave birth to you? I didn't know for sure, but I didn't think it was Fergie or commercials for mattress stores and local diners. I seethed, face hot and lips tight, but I would take anything over more silence.

As we pulled into the hospital parking lot, I wondered if other drivers noticed where we were headed, if they experienced a tinge of sympathy or a moment of concern for the strangers driving toward doom. But we were one car of many, and traffic continued around us like sands through the god damn hourglass from Mom's favorite soap opera.

A new beeping tugged me back from this memory, pushing me toward panic. But what is there to be worried about when the worst is already happening? Dennis and I locked eyes, hoping the other knew what to do, but as abruptly as it began, the new tones disappeared from the airspace and we were left with the regular muddled sounds I'd already grown accustomed to: cousin's crying, machines whirring, labored breathing, and the ambient noise of a busy hospital floor prying its way into our room.

Gaze fixated in the safe realm of my mom's sock, lost in the pattern of the white rubber grip, I begged my thoughts to drift away again.

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As a child I was closest to my brother Michael, two years my senior and basically my guardian and guide as we lived our best latchkey kid lives in the streets of LA. We bopped around - 5 and 7 years old and seemingly unkidnappable - with other neighborhood scamps,

adventuring throughout Frogtown. We roamed from the LA “river” to the corner shop that everyone just called “The Little Store,” to the gravel parking lots we converted into (extremely dangerous) baseball fields. I don’t remember any of those kids except Tommy, the little boy from the apartment next door. We were buddies until the day he laughed a little too hard when I jumped down a flight of concrete stairs and landed on my ass. He said my crying sounded like

laughing and that made me wail even harder despite being true. My face burned with pain and anger; I was less upset by his reaction than by the fact that he saw me crying at all, which harmed my street cred as “a girl tough enough to hang with the boys.” Nevermind the fact that I probably bruised my tailbone and that he would’ve cried too if the butts were reversed, this questioning of my rough-and-tumbleness was not okay and I’m not sure I ever forgave the little bastard.

During that summer of 1989, Michael and I spent a lot of time at the river splashing around and catching critters, doing our best impressions of down-home rascals in the middle of a big ass metropolis. For those who don’t know, the LA river is a freak of man-made nature, a concrete aqueduct running through the second largest city in America, crisscrossing freeways and neighborhoods of all economic brackets. It has large swathes of confusing marshland along its banks, and we squished and splashed all through it, catching and releasing a variety of slimy things. After an afternoon of playing in the sticky heat, we talked about all our options for what to do the next day, and made a decision. It was time to pop the big question to Mom: could we keep a frog? Before setting out, we grabbed the jar of off-brand peanut butter from the cupboard and took turns using our grubby fingers to scoop out the last bits. Michael poked holes in the lid and we scurried down LA streets and river embankment to our favorite squelchy spot in search of our new pet. It wasn’t hard to find it - this was Frogtown, after all.

Mom, of course, said no. It was a firm no with no further elucidation, but to us it was easily explained: we couldn’t keep the frog because it was too small. This is the logic of little geniuses. Thus began our near-daily ritual of walking the five city blocks down to the marshy river and finding bigger and bigger frogs to bring home. Every day, we’d present our offering, and every day, Mom’s answer

was a hard no. We always returned with grosser, fatter frogs

thinking she would eventually be satisfied. This went on for a couple weeks with her simply saying no and offering no justification for her cruel refusal, which is not out of character for a mother of four shithead kids. I'm sure she just liked that we were occupying ourselves and not constantly asking for money for the ice cream truck.

I don't remember how we realized we were never going to be allowed to keep a frog as a pet - I guess that disappointment wasn't important enough for my brain to retain - but eventually we stopped bringing them home. My obsession did not end there, however, and I started a new amphibian endeavor. One day, flying solo because my brother had some other dumb stuff to do, I collected the black and gray film canisters we had lying around in the 80s, pre-digital cameras and smartphones. After a quick search of the house for the goods and new receptacles for the tiny screws and baby teeth I found in them, I had amassed a whopping four or five canisters, and headed down to the same marshy spot of the river to carry out the first step of my prank. In less than an hour my canisters were all set and I made my way back toward my house, knowing I'd run into plenty of neighbors along the way. One by one they'd stop to say hello to me, Joyce and Neil's precocious youngest kid, pinch my chubby cheeks and ruffle my hair. I'd play along, leaning into my cuteness, and then I would smile and hand them a canister. They each were puzzled, and the most suspicious among them asked why I was giving them a roll of film, but I just grinned and motioned for them to open it and see. In the end, they all smiled and popped the top off the canister, only to have a lil frog jump directly into their face.

By the time I reached home, only one canister remained in my knapsack, and I knew just who to give it to. This time I didn't worry if the frog was big enough for her.

\*

“Mom.”

Someone finally said something out loud, snapping me back to this, the worst room.

Dennis was talking quietly to our mom, who offered no reaction, telling her that his wife Kathy was pregnant and he was pushing for the name “Indiana”. Kathy would go along with it as a middle name if she got to pick the first.

It felt rude to listen.

Why were we like this?

I looked down, letting the grimy tile’s pattern absorb me and enfold me until I was falling deep through its layers, plummeting further into its strata, twisting as I floated downwards, somehow unscathed, somehow still silent.

\*

I thought about the way up to the third floor from the lobby, a familiar route that became more and more dreaded with each journey. A crew cut boy, 12 or 13 years old with a white shirt imprinted with a pattern of black skulls, squeezed onto our elevator with older folks I assume were his parents. He was smiling, joking with his family, as they headed up into the hospital’s insides to visit someone who clearly was not there for anything serious. I wanted to shake him and scream in his face: “Don’t you know people are dying at this very minute, all around us?”



Don't you know your stupid fucking skull shirt is the wrong thing to wear when people are getting ready to say goodbye forever?" Instead, as the elevator door closed us all in together, I kept my eyes fixed on the digital numbers changing with every floor we rose past, until a shrill ding told me it was time to drag myself to my least favorite room in the world.

\*

The room felt contradictory in every way: sterile but dingy, crowded but vacant, intimate but drained of humanity. I felt contradictory too. I was so angry that this was how it ended. This complicated, strained relationship was going to end in this shitty, impersonal room, and it was her fault. How many times did I guilt her about smoking cigarettes? How many ways did I make her feel bad about her bad habit, pointing out the health risks, and the monetary costs, and the embarrassing smell, and how her smoking affected me, me, me?

I could have had more compassion, yeah, sure, but I had been a teenager when I doled out those harshest reprimands, and I didn't realize I was being the absolute, stereotypical worst.

Jesus, I was still just a teenager+, AKA in my early 20s, standing here with her fucking foot in my hand. And now we'd never have the chance to laugh over a cup of tea about how shitty I was back then, mouths gaping and heads back as the joy and love oozed out of us freely. We'd never have frank talks about the depression we both dealt with in our own ways, and how I finally understood why some days she would just stay in bed; we'd never help each other find more and better ways to deal with our depression together, and eventually laugh over a cup of tea about how sad we once were, hands entwined in casual affection. We'd never get to com-

pare scars, hers from the c-sections that split her open, mine from the top surgery that made me whole.

There wouldn't be an afternoon of me teaching her about pronouns and gender identity, us laughing over a cup of tea about how the musicians she drooled over were gender non-conforming before it was an "identity" at all. We'd never list them together, cackling between names - Rod Stewart, Mick Jagger, David Bowie, Stephen Tyler, Prince - as she got that love-sick look on her face that always made me uncomfortable as a kid, but not now as a teenager++, now

that I was grown. Now we could be honest with each other, we could be real and direct, and caring, without the dusty sheet of past fights obscuring our connection. "God, you're so embarrassing, Mom!" Tears squeezing out of my eyes as I fall backwards with laughter, tea spilling and pooling below our feet, not a care in the world. Now, this would never be. She'd never get to see me as my fully realized self. I'd never get to help her become hers.

\*

Any minute now.

The last time I was at this hospital, we brought Mom in when things had gotten really bad. We knew the cancer had spread from her lungs, but that was the trip we learned the fight was over before it started. She was delirious with pain, unable to focus enough to maintain a conversation between small moans. While we waited to be admitted, nurses wheeled her bed into the emergency room hallway and we stayed saddled at its side. It was me and Michael, as

Dad stayed home so our little sister Kelly - added to the pack after the infamous frog summer - wouldn't get too freaked out. She was only seventeen - born on the same day as the eldest Mahoney kid Eileen, but 22 years later - and had homework. She was terrified of hospitals, and at that moment I was too. The ER teemed with people at every degree of stress, a disorienting swirl of fear and relief and effort and boredom.

A mumble.

“What was that, Mom?” She had her eyes squeezed closed through the deep-set pain.

“Dontcha..”

...

“Don't I what?”

Eyes still shut, blocking out as much of this reality as possible. “Dontcha wish ...”

Silence, waiting for her earnest question.

“Dontcha wish your girlfriend... was hot. Like. Me.”

Michael and I met gazes, both confused, as Mom began singing Pussycat Dolls through gritted teeth. She grinned through the pain, still taking joy in embarrassing us in public. I grinned back, impressed by her devotion to the bit.

\*

We lived in a small but sprawling town, low in population and wide in desert expanses. I scored rides home from classmates more often than not, but on this day I needed Mom to pick me up to take me to a doctor's appointment. Like most high school seniors, I felt closer to my friends than my family and so mainly relied on them for support, but this was not a trip I wanted my buddies to know about. I was lonely and in the midst of recognizing that, in some very fundamental ways and despite being the class clown, I had closed myself off from everyone in my life, including myself; I didn't know who to talk to or how to talk about it, and I needed a doctor to tell me why.

After sixth period ended, I hustled down to the roundabout and stood among a couple dozen other kids waiting to be picked up; they were mostly freshmen and sophomores that I didn't feel compelled to talk to, so I just stood and watched as car after car pulled in and out like clockwork. After half an hour or so only a few of us were left, and that's when I saw Mom's blue Jeep Cherokee peel into the parking lot and come barreling toward the curb. As it approached, music sped ahead of it from its speakers, blaring through open windows:

"I'm a bitch, I'm a lover..."

Oh no.

"I'm a child, I'm a mother."

No, no, why this song?

"I'm a sinner, I'm a saint..."

Oh no. No no no. She was singing along.

"I do not feel ashaamed!"

Despite only being surrounded by lower classmen, my face burned with embarrassment as the Jeep came to a sudden stop in front of me and my mom beamed from the driver's seat. I got in, rolled my window up, and stared at the glove box until she drove us away. She continued singing; I sat, grinning in spite of myself, silent to spite her.

\*

Silence.

Or as close to it as a hospital room gets, anyway. After the Chaplain came and went, there were a few minutes of active crying from the Mahoneys and dramatic sobbing from our cousin in the wake of Mom's body finally giving out. I have no idea how long it was until the cousin went home and my family and I were left in silence.

It was 6:30 pm, and as my brothers and I rallied around my dad, we latched onto the job of helping him through the loss of his wife of 40 years. I know now that for me it was not an entirely selfless act. It was easier - more tangible, fathomable, check-listable - than dealing with my own amorphous grief, and so I dove into keeping us moving through the motions. Step one: sign the paperwork and leave this god forsaken place. I softly joked that Mom knew what she was doing, leaving time for us to get home for Jeopardy. I knew my audience: people who were also ill-equipped to talk through this pain and not ready to face this new reality.

Eileen flew in from Texas the next day, and for the first time in many years (5? 10? I have no idea) all the Mahoney siblings were in the same place at the same time, coming togeth-

er to mourn Mom and help Dad. The five of us sat together in the living room, laughing with teary eyes as we collaborated on the obituary, summing up a life in fewer than 400 words.

“Thelma Joyce Mahoney, 57, of Apple Valley, passed away Saturday, April 7, 2007, at St. Mary Medical Center. She was born Feb. 13, 1950, in Glendale to Fred and Hildajeane Drennan. Thelma began her lifelong work with children by opening and managing a small daycare in her home. She started her career in education as a volunteer teacher's aide in 1976 at Dorris Place Elementary School in Los Angeles. She continued to work there until moving to Apple Valley in 1989. She worked at numerous schools, most recently Apple Valley Middle School, where she worked for many years. She also sold Avon for more than 20 years and recently began a small internet business.

Thelma enjoyed going to Las Vegas, Stateline and Laughlin, fishing in Mammoth and Convict Lake, dancing and romancing (both with her husband), gardening, talking about how Jimmy Carter got a raw deal, reading mystery novels, eating chips and salsa and Tommy's tamales, drinking the occasional margarita or strawberry daiquiri and wearing bathing suits around the house. Thelma was welcoming of friends as family and giving to both charitable organizations and individuals in need. She loved playing Scrabble and Trivial Pursuit; taking care of any and all animals, including surviving pet dogs Maggie and Baby; watching cop shows, true crime programs, old mini-series and especially 'Survivor'; making arts and crafts with her kids and on her own; and hiding candy around the house, which her pesky kids promptly found and ate.

Thelma is survived by her husband of 40 years, Neil Mahoney, and her children ... (a long list of names)”

We mourned the best way we knew: with jokes, and memories, and completing a task. Nobody

cried outright; no one breached the subject of sadness. We went to dinner that night at one of mom's favorite restaurants (one of two sit-down Mexican spots in town), where we would go fairly often over the next week or so. The pickiest among us, Michael, would eat before we went and then we'd wheeze as we made him tell the waiter he was on a special diet and ordered the guacamole for the table.

Dad stayed home, occupying his usual seat from morning until he went to bed: a chair at the dining room table, drinking coffee and watching a constant rotation of baseball, poker and game shows on TV.

\*

“No whammies!”

A few months earlier I sat next to Dad at the table, talking over the chatter and theme song of “Press Your Luck.” Mom sat planted 10 feet away at her favorite spot, at the computer desk in the den, cruising eBay and other online marketplaces buying and selling a bewildering assortment of items to supplement her income and temper her shopaholic nature. Doorknobs, Beanie Babies, and an entire stockroom worth of sofa covers. My parents' physical proximity rattled me - they had been married for almost 40 years at this point, with a love clearly deep and lasting enough to carry them through all the beauty and pain that comes in four decades, but one that left them sitting for hours on end, quietly, within spitting distance from each other

but in entirely different rooms, worlds, holes.

It was a hard place to visit; I loved my dad's quiet humor, my mom's silly sweetness. I relished in Michael and Kelly's clever weirdness that complemented and surpassed my own. I loved watching Jeopardy together and then one-upping each other with bizarre Youtube videos, laughing until our parents shook their heads and went to bed, then taking over the den to put on whatever obscure movie we could find; I loved falling asleep in the first 20 minutes and waking up at the credits, to them shaking their heads at me.

But I felt smothered by the combination of Mom's cigarette smoke and clutter permeating every bit of the house. Smothered, and deeply angered in a way that scared me. I hated that these two bad habits - the smoking and the hoarding - were taking a toll on her and everyone who considered this place home. I could see how these activities that provided Mom momentary relief were twin weights dragging her deeper into a depression spiral, but I couldn't articulate this feeling in a way that wasn't rooted in brattiness and anger. I didn't have the tools to offer an alternate path to relief, an escape route. I didn't have the patience to find one. Was I really the only one to sense this peril? I felt like a frog sitting on a countertop watching my frog family relax in a pot of water on the stove; they're quietly going about their business, blissfully unaware as the fire beneath them slowly grows bigger and hotter, the water starting to bubble up. I don't have a little frog ladder to get them out. I don't even know if little frog ladders exist or how to get one. Nobody says anything as the boiling water becomes more frenzied.

I had my own confusing life to deal with, so I kept my visits short and conversations light, and occasionally sat at the dining room table bridging the gap between parents, rooms, worlds.

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# JUDGE'S COMMENTS

The Sun Cut Flat

By Erin Mahoney

**First Place**  
**Graduate**  
**Creative Non-Fiction**

In this moving essay, the writer mourns the premature death of a mother through moving imagery, honest reflection, and strikingly rendered memories of childhood. This writer understands William Carlos Williams' adage that there are "no ideas but in things." In the moment of the mother's death the narrator gets lost in "the pattern of the white rubber grip" of the hospital sock on the mother's foot as she dies. But for every poignant and quiet image like this, there are shrewd assertions. Turning on the radio only to ask "What is the right thing to listen to on the way to killing the person who gave birth to you?" And there are well-earned moments of humor, too: most notably, a prank involving frogs and 80's film canisters that you'll have to read the essay to understand. This essay covers a remarkable amount of time and emotional material in thirteen pages, and we leave it thinking about death, life, and how to remember both childhood and those we've lost.

- Rose Humber Howse



**SECOND PLACE  
GRADUATE  
CREATIVE NON-FICTION**

**REPUTATION**

By Madeline Humphreys

**I**t's an everyday request.

Sissy, my sister asks me slowly, softly. Do you have time to play with me? That twelve-year-old smile, sappy sweet and all-knowing. She knows the answer. She already knows the disappointment I'll wrap and gift her with excuses, but she still tries with that syrup grin, in case she can make me forget responsibility. Open the presents before Christmas. Cross the street without looking. Only rely on one of your senses.

Staring at her soft, fragile face, full of determination and hope, that thing called priority delights in taking its time crawling up my throat, latching itself in all the right places to make me retch, before I can spit it out.

I can't tonight, I whisper-whine, complaining that I want to, that I'd rather spend time with her than work on homework. Than to work on assignments. Papers. Presentations. I have too much school to do, I tell her. I tell her maybe over the weekend. Maybe I'll be done with homework by then. It's all truth, you know. But she already knew this was coming, and she knows all of this is just a courtesy act, that we'll be right back in this conversation over the weekend.

How long does it take to build a reputation?

I'll study, read page after page, only recognizing the words within the sentences, the strings of letters. The paragraphs' meaning will never jump or yell. Rereading becomes my top tendency.

Otherwise only singular words will leap into my mind, digging inside my memories to crumple the pages of peace my brain had filed away. The word “school” will awaken my assignments’ hunger; the word “car” laughing at the lines deepened across my forehead, the ones panic attacks have tattooed into me; “happiness” unraveling the fibers in my spine, shredding them thin as cotton candy, as tasteless too. The word “time”—throwing me into a vat of ice water, freezing me in my hunched position, eyes closed and sob in place, hands not yet intertwined in my hair, fingers half-curved and closing in on my scalp.

Because I never do enough. I’ll deny my sister time with me, leaving her to play video games on her own, or watch video after video until my mom yells at her to take care of the cats, clean the cat box, give them food, clean the floors, all at nine o’clock when she is supposed to get ready for bed, and because I didn’t play with her she’ll give me that goodnight with disappointment in her smile when she comes into the kitchen to give me a hug, me at the table with a book in front of me and my phone occupying my eyes and fingers, and she will whine that I have time for my phone and not for her, and then I’ll cry when she goes off for bed, knowing her sadness, feeling her sadness, not being able to express to her this sadness, of this sick, tired mind that wants nothing that will be challenging, that wants everything to be easy and thought-less, and I’ll cry until I eventually fall asleep, crying as I get ready for bed, crying instead of working on schoolwork because emotions always win, and I’ll cry in the morning as I leave for school and hug her, knowing that she’ll try again tonight asking me to play, and I’ll cry knowing that it will repeat, that I’ll cry this evening because she’ll whine and I won’t get homework done and I’ll have to cram it in before class because even though I try to do enough I never do enough.

And I’ll cry. When she says the word Sissy. That’s all it takes.

Friday will come and by then my sister will have pleaded every day. By then she will have called me out to my mom, and my mom will step in as a barricade between the two of us,  
a

called-in message man because both of them think I've missed their messages. She'll tell me I should have time to do a little something with my sister, that I can spare half an hour. My mom's arms will fold in front of her chest, and when I say I have a lot of homework to do, her hands will move to her hips, cupping her self-conscious sides, twitching her neck back to push her hair over her boney shoulder. She will sigh. She will say, Well, Love, I guess you'll have to find something else to do. She'll let the words dangle in the air, hang, purposely flat and limp. And then I will cry when they leave the room, wondering why this crossbow in front of me is shooting off arrows without my permission.

I've built my reputation.

There are purple paintings under my eyes that never go away. They're reminders. Staying-up-till-three insomnia. Sleeping-in-till-twelve depression. Hyperbolic terms I've clung to for a sense of reality. I've painted these purple patches by hand, by myself. They are only fit for my eyes. My family? It's not a shade they can see. They only see the blinding sparks of my laugh-ter, when we watch Mrs. Doubtfire together, or when they chuckle at my cartoon-face carrying the news of Fall Out Boy's latest single. They have been lulled by the flashing lights of the show I've created, and I am the shrieking mime. Sounds without words. They see the lightest hues in my emotions, but they haven't looked close enough to notice the black and white stripes I wear.

They don't hear the cries when I go to sleep; those muted hums are purposely too low a frequency for them to hear.

There are many ways to build a reputation.

The Monday before Thanksgiving, my sister slugged her energy up next to me after dinner, wrapped her arms around my shoulders. Held and trapped. She asked me, Sissy? She knew

that's all she had to say.

The living room hummed a frequency we could clearly both hear—the roar of the TV and my family's shouting of pleasurable outrage. My literature book stared at me from the armrest, a pencil resting on the inside of its spine. The loudest object in the room.

My sister tugged my arm, and I nodded. She dragged me into what we titled the “Big Room,” because it was the biggest room in the house. Little not-special namings that have become pro-found simply because we wanted them to be. Technically it was the greeting room, or whatever average houses and families call it—this was where the most sunlight came. We had to replace the carpet twice before from fading. My sister yelled and turned to me, dropping into a football player stance, saying, Are you ready? in her gruff, hysterical voice. High and humming with energy.

She told me I was an animal-alien named Ralph. She said, Pretend like you're going crazy, okay? When I turn my back, you go crazy, okay?

She stood at the corner of the room, back to me, making Ralph some sort of sleeping cupcake with air-ingredients, cupping her hands around air-containers. I lay on the floor. Hopped up. Ran to the door across the room. I flailed my arms out to my side, around and around. High knees and animal shouts. Primal.

Her laughter became louder as she ran towards me. She held my own arms at my sides, giving me a hug-style tackle from behind—trapped—turning me around and pushing me back to the middle of the room. Ralph, sit. Stay. Stay, boy. She went back to her corner and gathered air-ingredients again, her turned back giving me the cue. I ran again, yelled, jumped, laughed. Repeated. Again! she said, breaking character for a second, hiccupped giggles barely allowing her to speak. Again!

She said, Ralph, sit, and pointed a finger at me, her eyes wide with fake discipline. No,

Ralph, be quiet! Ralph, stop! She smiled. Freckles scrunched together. Ralph, she said, You're supposed to learn your manners.

Every time she ordered me to stay put, I only acted wilder. I jumped, and yelled, and laughed, over and over—and when she told Ralph to sit down, I wanted to start jumping again. She handed me the air-cupcake she made, the one that would put Ralph to sleep. She whispered to me, secretly, It will only make Ralph go crazier—I accidentally used the wrong ingredients. On the floor, I lay, eyes closed, the carpet smelling like sunlight—the good kind of sneeze, the kind that pinches in your nose when you just can't take the stimulation anymore. Like a cry but with the promise of release.

I kicked my legs in the air. Shook my head and rolled over in a spider crawl, eyes as wide as I could make them, staring directly at my sister, me yelling and her doing the same, both of our shouts jagged from our shaking laughter. Our own earthquakes. She said, Oh no, oh no! Oh no, Ralph!—I gave you the wrong one—Ralph! I gave you the wrong one!

I crawl-leaped over to her, wrapping my arms around the X she made over her chest with her own arms, palms out over her face. I forced her to collapse with me on the floor, then I sprang up, ran to the glass door that separated the Big Room from the living room, jumped in front of it, not knowing where else to go but here or to the other side of the room, jumping and yelling at the white doors because Ralph didn't know what to do with them. She rolled side to side on the floor, knees up to her chest. Hands on stomach. She didn't have to look at me to know whatever I did was stupidly funny. I didn't have to look at her to know what her reaction was.

Her laugh. Her laugh was like fireworks, the kind in perfect circles, the loudest, widest ones. Tri-colored. I could see all the shades.

Ralph didn't know the word steady, or calm, or silent, or homework. Ralph danced



when my sister requested dancing, jumped when she requested quiet, teased and pounced when she requested manners. Ralph didn't understand worries or panic, only the freckles on my sister's face that would scrunch together when she smiled. Another run across the room, more yelling and fake discipline, my sister shouting for Ralph to settle down, gasping for the air her laughter stole, giving this crazy animal-alien demands between each inhale. The house was filled with voices, screaming, so loud I'm sure the neighbors could hear.

She yelled more fireworks. And I found I had ones of my own. Mine were those golden kind that trickle down the sky—loud at first but lingering. Except not golden, but purple.

And every one of those purple sparks lightened the patches under my eyes, taking them away shade after shade.

# JUDGE'S COMMENTS

Reputation

By Madeline Humphreys

**Second Place**  
**Graduate**  
**Creative Non-Fiction**

In this tender essay, the narrator's attention to family relationships allows us to slip seamlessly into the intimacy of the home sphere. In one of my favorite images of the essay, a child tells her sister, "When I turn my back, you go crazy, okay?" and then makes a "cupcake with air-ingredients, cupping her hands around air-containers." The sometimes unintentional and ever-surprising wisdom of children lends this essay many such lovely moments, but the narrative itself possesses a wisdom, too: that even in a family with unspoken hardships, there can be moments of connection. This writer's mastery of syntax—fragments for speed, rhetorical questions to draw us inward—adds to the overall immersive effect.

- Rose Humber Howse



**FIRST PLACE  
UNDERGRADUATE  
CREATIVE NON-FICTION**

HYUNDAI ELANTRA  
By Faith Elizabeth Morris

**T**here was a day where I laid my little head against the window of My Mother's Car, seeing the red and yellow glow of bumpers and headlights amid a black, bottomless bath, thinking of death and of God and of other things young girls think about.

Visions of caskets, Hell, and Heaven visited my brain for a cup of midnight tea. My brother had told me last week that in Heaven, we became tiny, luminous, shining balls, floating about randomly, bumping into each other and, at the feel of an aura, recognizing ourselves for what we are. A lady from my church had told me a month ago that in Hell, we became very sad, since it was a very hot, painful, depressing place. I had told myself, between a thin seatbelt and cold glass, that in The Ground we became nothing, encased in eternal quiet and peaceful darkness. I had always been afraid of the dark, and of painful things, and of having no face— if I found myself facing backwards from a mirror, I would turn around as fast as possible, just to make sure that my face had not slid off or been jumbled around while I wasn't looking. So, among all these bleak entireties, none of them seemed appealing.

This dissatisfaction made my stomach come alive with a feeling I am still not quite so sure I am capable of describing. I must name it, so powerful does it reign over my mind: The Sinking Feeling, then. The Sinking Feeling is like a weight, but it is not only heavy. It also seems to be hanging there, whispering jointless things at me. It is also like a hole, something

empty and vague, asking questions which I do not, will not ever have an answer to. It twists me up until I am sick with myself, squeezing and pulling me apart right there, right in the center of my stomach, draining somewhere down into my bowels. It makes me reminiscence on all of what is good and dwell on all that which is evil, and pushes me to believe that which I do not: “Yes, all of that good is only in the past, there is only evil now, turn around, stop thinking, everything is going to turn out horribly; Your Mother is going to die one day, did you know that? Your father is going to die one day, did you know that? Your brother and your cousins and your uncles and your aunts and your grandparents too, did you know that? Your friends will die one day, and some of them will become pretty, floating stars and the rest will be burnt up by their rays, did you know that? You are going to die one day, did you know that, and there could be nothing, absolutely nothing, absolutely nothing, did you know that? And what if you have chosen the Wrong God— because this I considered worst of all— what if it is Allah or what if you reincarnate into a little bug or a bleating sheep because you did not reach Nirvana, what then? Did you think of that you silly fool?”

In the backseat of my Mother’s car, there was nothing I could do about The Sinking Feeling. After all, I was just a little girl. I would have to breathe in, brush away my tears, and clutch my stomach to keep myself from throwing up. I cannot tell you, cannot tell myself, why I was such a sad, anxious child in this way. During the day I laughed and told jokes— I was even known to mime stand-up routines as a baby, to wrestle and play pillow-fight with my father and brother, to eat and roll around in the mud like a pig. So why, when night came, did Fear bare its teeth and wrap me up like that ghastly beast come to Heorot? Why did I hide it for so long, so desperately in that little dingy backseat? I’m afraid I do not know and will never know.

I do know; however, that I have not changed so much:

I laugh, I eat, I talk my mouth off, I worry, of course, because my mother worries; I do Stand-Up Routines On Wheels, I roll my eyes and beep the horn of my own car— yes, my Own Car, not my Mother’s Car, my Own Car now.

Yet, when night descends and I am alive and exhausted and driving along the same old roads, I think of all that is to come and the very few things I have ever done. I linger in my failures and dismiss everything which would do me any good, I imagine inane tragedies and cry over them relentlessly, I still think of Heaven and Hell and The-Only-Other-Option, and I think of my beautiful friends and their beautiful hearts and brains and that old ladies at church once told me when I was a little girl that they would go up in flames regardless. The Sinking Feeling comes again. I try to pray but I just Sink some more— I feel as though my words fizzle out between FM radio static, that they hit the windshield and fall backwards into my own ears instead. My back is rigid, yet each attempt I make to slouch against my headrest or make my arms go limp at the wheel makes me stiffer than before.

I will never be able to explain how badly The Sinking Feeling feels, how I must kick and shout myself out of that trance because no longer am I in my Mother’s Car. I am in My Own Car and am free to resist the beast as much as I want, and there is no backseat to hide in anymore.



# JUDGE'S COMMENTS

Hyundai Elantra

By Faith Elizabeth Morris

**First Place**  
**Undergraduate**  
**Creative Non-Fiction**

“Hyundai Electra” moves gracefully on the page between childhood and adulthood, peace and fear. The author’s colorful figurative language places us in the kind of child’s mind where visions of heaven and hell “come for tea” and “luminous, shining balls” fill heaven. Just as easily, the narrator can inhabit an adult mind, less magical but more discerning: this new retrospective narrator feels “as though my words fizzle out between FM radio static.” Perhaps most commendably: despite a dark and brooding subject matter, the essay strikes a tone of hope: it is scary but also freeing that there is “no backseat to hide in anymore.”

- Rose Humber Howse





*Thank you to all who have taken part in the Bazzaella Literary Awards for 2024.*