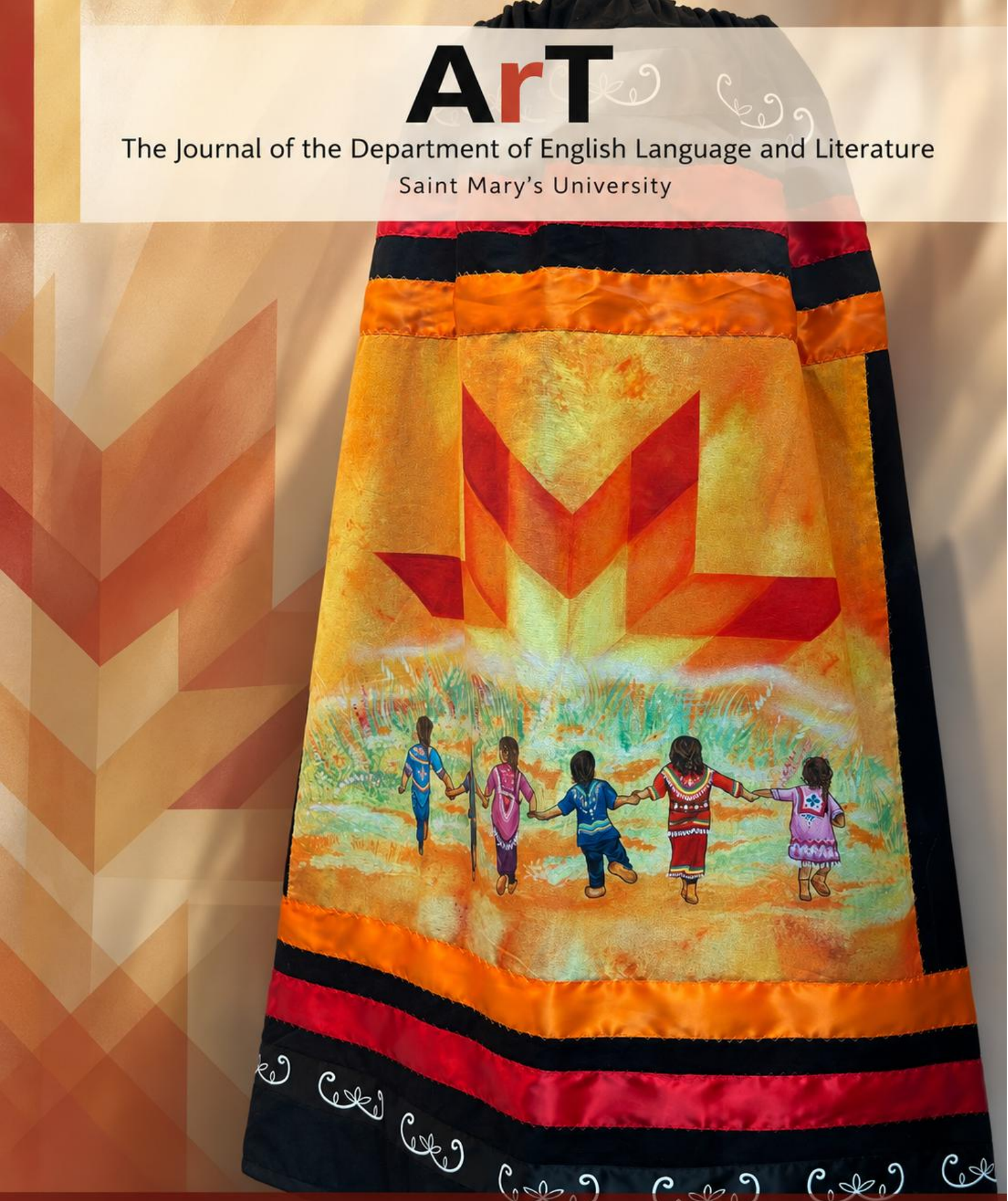
ArT

The Journal of the Department of English Language and Literature

Saint Mary's University



celebrating outstanding critical and creative student and community work

Inaugural Issue · September 2026

Masthead

ArT: The Journal of the Department of English Language and Literature

Department of English Language and Literature, Saint Mary's University

Kjipuktuk · 2026

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Cover image: Digitally stylized version of Sasheen Regalado's Ribbon Skirt. Original artwork featured in the digital publication and in the physical exhibition in the Saint Mary's University Atrium.

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Contents

INTRODUCTION
In Many Voices: An Introduction to the Inaugural Issue of ArT iv

POETRY
Annastatia Brooks — "Maidenhood," "Gentle Lies," "Death of a Nation," "Life's Vessel," "Stolen Land," "Doomsday," "White Jesus," and "Incitatus" 2

POETRY
Daryan Gerami Schaefer — The Shape of What Stays 8

POETRY
Grayson Kennedy — "Salt," "It Kills Us," and "Death is a Capitalist" 13

POETRY
Samantha Lord — Teens, Dreams, and Automobiles 19

VISUAL VOICES
Charlotte Gilson — Amntu'kati 23

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES
Chelsie "Ellie" Rodgers — How Educated Women Influenced the World Around Them 25

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES
Alexander Brozek — Imagination and Propaganda: Literature as the Path to Revolution 31

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES
Grayson Kennedy — Literature as an Interactive Site: An Argument Against Plato's Republic 40

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES
Kiley Bleich — A Fragmented Reality: The Challenge of War in the Literature of Louis MacNeice, Keith Douglas, and Elizabeth Bowen 45

VISUAL VOICES
Kya Spillner — Solastalgia and the Slaughter of American Buffalo 49

SHORT FICTION
Grayson Kennedy — Firekeeper 51

SHORT FICTION
Mikayla Hanlon — Children Are the Only Ones Who Blush 61

SHORT FICTION
Samantha Lord — The Spider (L'araignée) 74

SHORT FICTION
Victoria Dean — Gone 79

CLOSING VISUAL VOICE
Sasheen Regalado — Ribbon Skirt 87

In Many Voices

An Introduction to the Inaugural Issue of ArT

It is my great pleasure to welcome interested readers and art lovers to the inaugural issue of *ArT*, the multimodal publication of the Department of English Language and Literature at Saint Mary's University. This new annual journal features winning undergraduate work of literary criticism, short stories, poetry, and visual art. As a publication that brings together the best of creative and critical work of our undergraduate students and community members, *ArT* makes visible the remarkable range of voices being nurtured in our Department, in the University, and the community connections that sustain us.

The distinguishing feature of this issue of *ArT,* and, I hope, all future issues as well, is that it is both a publication and an exhibition. What this means is that the inaugural issue has a physical counterpart in the SMU Atrium, where selected student artworks are being exhibited alongside the launch of the publication:



The exhibition and the publication are therefore not separate projects. They are two manifestations of the same creative community and two ways of encountering the

same work. This means that in the SMU Atrium, our students' art occupies physical space; in the digital version *ArT*, it enters a digital space where it can be read, viewed, revisited, and placed into conversation with poetry, fiction, criticism, and undergraduate scholarship. The featured work is thus conceived of as moving from classroom to campus, from campus to publication, and from publication to a wider public. That movement is central to the multimodal nature of *ArT*: the journal brings together winning poetry and short fiction from our 2026 Creative Writing Competitions: the Joyce Marshall Hsia Memorial Poetry Prize Competition and the Margó Takacs Marshall Prize for Excellence in Short Story Writing Competition; it features literary criticism in the form of conference papers that a select group of our students annually present at the 2026 Atlantic Undergraduate English Conference; and, it also features original collage, painting, textile, material art created by three of our students. All of these forms have something to say to one another. The inaugural issue therefore asks us to read, but it also asks us to look, inviting us to notice the thematic continuities that cross formal and modal boundaries and the ways in which the critical and the creative complement, borrow from, and propel one another.

This theoretical orientation is not accidental. *ArT* grows out of a department with a long-standing commitment to combining creative with critical practice. Rooted in the English language and the literary field and fed through the unique and broad-ranging expertise of our faculty, our program furnishes students with creative and critical methodologies across disciplinary boundaries, situating the literary not only within broader historical, political, and cultural continuities, but putting it in touch with the world around us, and the experience that students bring to the task at hand. Our program asks students to 'read for their lives,' to borrow Joseph Gold's fortuitous conception of literature as a biological tool that we have evolved to help produce and nurture thought and feeling alike (2001). Our students do 'read for their lives' in more than one way: they read to make experience thinkable, to write into what they have read, and through these complex encounters to challenge the stories we have inherited or to add another layer of understanding to how we have received them. They also 'read for their lives' connecting their experience and observation to the world that surrounds them, and their critical and creative output in all modalities makes visible the interdependence among reading, writing, and artistic expression. And when I say, "our students," I mean all students who are taking our courses, not only students who are majoring in English.

The Department of English Language and Literature is one of the University's largest departments, and our programs combine literary, historical, and genre-based study with attention to society, culture, media, and gender, connecting with Atlantic Canada Studies, Indigenous Studies, Linguistics, Irish Studies, Women and Gender Studies, and Creative Writing. Many of our courses are open to all students at the University, and many students who over the years have won one of our creative writing prizes have been majors in other disciplines, with either a Minor in Creative Writing or simply a passion for reading and writing that may have been kindled while taking one or more

of our courses. The Department's commitment to creative writing itself extends back more than four decades. In 2026, we marked 40 years of creative writing leadership in Atlantic Canada, celebrating a tradition of supporting writers at different stages of their careers and actively contributing to the literary culture of the region. That history is also a history of literary community: of bringing writers to campus, of creating spaces in which students can encounter established authors and practitioners, and of nurturing students whose own writing would go on to become part of the literary life of the region and beyond.

The legacy of that mentorship can be seen in the writers who have passed through our classrooms and creative writing programs, not only in individuals like Danny Jacobs, a graduate of our program, a poet, essayist, and novelist, but also in the numbers of students who proceed to study at the master's and PhD level. The mentorship is also visible in the many student-led publications that have emerged from within our halls over the decades, such as, for example, the 2001 anthology of students' writing, *Lockpicks,* a SMU English Society publication that came into being through the generous support of Jackie Cameron, Gwen Hardiman, Gary R. Porter, Scott Hyland, the Saint Mary's University Student Association, the Department of English, and, Coca Cola Ltd.!

At its core, our program—and the student work represented in this inaugural issue of the Department's journal--is built on the premise that all works of literary scholarship are creative and that all creative writers and performers must have well-developed critical skills. Literary scholarship asks us to read closely, interpret imaginatively, situate texts historically and culturally, and make arguments about how stories, poems, images. It asks how ideas shape our understanding of the world, and how they participate in the larger cultural sphere. Creative expression asks the author to undertake related work—to observe closely, research, experiment with form, attend to language, materials and forms, make choices, revise, and imagine experiences from multiple perspectives. Both require curiosity, discipline, critical attention, and an openness to discovering what a work can become. The voices gathered here emerge from that environment. These are voices that have been encouraged to write, to experiment, to research, question, interpret, imagine, revise, make, and share.

As a publication, *ArT* represents another step in this creative and critical continuity by providing a space where undergraduate student work can leave the immediate context of the assignment or seminar and encounter readers and viewers as published work. Although the works in this issue differ widely in genre, medium, subject, and style, they repeatedly return to several interconnected questions: Whose voice gets heard and who gets to speak? What does it mean to witness? How do we remember? What can imagination make possible? How do we represent experiences that resist representation? And what happens when we cross the boundaries between text, image, archive, memory, place, and object?

These questions create unexpected conversations among the submissions. Several of the critical works are concerned with the relationship between voice and power.

Chelsie Rodgers's essay on educated women and their influence on the world around them considers the intellectual and political significance of women such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Germaine de Staël. At stake here is women's access to education, but also the larger question of what happens when women claim intellectual authority and enter public discourse. Alexander Brozek's "Imagination and Propaganda: Literature as the Path to Revolution" approaches voice from another direction, examining literature's relationship to the political imagination and social transformation through figures including Madame de Staël, Karl Marx, and Charles Dickens. Although these two essays are separated by historical period and argument, both ask us to consider the relationship between language and power: who speaks, whose ideas circulate, and how imaginative and literary forms can alter what people believe is possible.

Another powerful continuity across the issue is an interest in seeing and witnessing. Kiley Bleich's essay, "A Fragmented Reality: The Challenge of War in the Literature of Louis MacNeice, Keith Douglas, and Elizabeth Bowen," considers how literature represents the experience of war and the difficulty of giving coherent form to experiences marked by violence and fragmentation. Annastatia Brooks's poetry similarly raises questions about witnessing, particularly in a contemporary media environment in which violence can be encountered through screens and social media. The distance between seeing an event and experiencing it becomes part of the poem's inquiry.

These questions in turn take visual form in the artwork. Charlotte Gilson's collage brings archival photographs of Point Pleasant Park into combination with painted elements in her work on *Amntu'kati*, where she layers historical record and artistic intervention. The viewer is asked to look at a familiar place differently—to see the archive less as a transparent record but as something that can be re-read and re-imagined. Halifax Peninsula, where Point Pleasant Park is located, was known to the Mi'kmaq as Amntu'kati, which means "a spirit place" or "the place of spirits."[1] The teaching says that if you follow the Halifax Peninsula around, you will come to a small cove, Wejkwe'tukwaqn. Wejkwe'tukwaqn is protected from the rough seas and means "to come to a legend," or "where the legend comes from." It is the place where the Mi'kmaq legendary warrior Amntu' ("the spirit") resides at his Lodge and guards the Eastern Door to protect the Lnu'k (the people) from any dangers that come from the open sea.

Kya Spillner's *Solastalgia and the Slaughter of American Buffalo* invites us to look at the intersection between environmental loss, and loss of land and Indigenous ways of life. The work is a powerful representation of colonial devastation, taking as a point of departure the mass slaughter of the American buffalo driven by commercial hide hunters, recreational hunters, and the U.S. and Canadian governments who in the

[1] Legend shared by Michael William McDonald of Sipekne'katik First Nation, *Mi'kmaw Culture-Oral Tradition*, accessible at https://www.muiniskw.org/pgCulture3f.htm (Sep 15, 2026).

1800s systematically destroyed an estimated 60 million animals down to just a few hundred. Fueled by industrial demand for leather and facilitated by expanding railroads, this ecological collapse was intentionally weaponized by both nations to strip Plains Indigenous peoples of their livelihood and culture. In both the United States and Canada—under Prime Minister John A. Macdonald—officials used forced starvation as leverage to coerce starving communities into signing treaties, relinquishing their lands, and moving onto restricted reserves, leaving a devastating legacy of generational economic and human harm. The work's title is inspired by a recent work of scholarship, Stef Craps' "Climate Trauma."[2] As opposed to nostalgia – the homesickness experienced by people when separated from a loved home – solastalgia is the distress produced by negative environmental change impacting on individuals directly connected to their home environment. It is the loss of comfort, or "solace," when one's home is transformed by external forces" (Craps 276).

The textile images of five children moving together through a landscape on Sasheen Regalado's ribbon skirt evoke the richness of Indigenous relationships to land, community, ancestry, and continuity. Rising above the children, the star-like form that stands in place of the sun, the giver of life, provides a powerful visual anchor to connecting generations and suggesting guidance, belonging and the continuation of life and cultural knowledge. According to Chief Jasen S. Benwah, Penwa' Mawi-Amskwesewey L'nue'kati, Benoit First Nation, "the eight- pointed star is a revision of the seven - pointed star that has been used for centuries as the symbol for the sun, but it also represents the original seven districts of the Mi'kmaq Nation which later became eight districts with the addition of Taqamkuk (Newfoundland)."[3] The star itself has many variations and, based on the same source, it is one of the petroglyphs that can be traced back over 500 years in Bedford, Nova Scotia. The colours of the star represent the four races of people and the four directions: North - white, South - black, East - Red, and West – Yellow, while the number four has great significance throughout Mi'kmaq culture: the points show the four directions and emphasises balance within oneself and with mother earth. It also shows that there are things more complex by being doubled to eight points. The children holding hands symbolize the shared sources of energy and connection, providing hopeful gravity to the inaugural issue's emphasis on new voices, creativity, and the propelling of ideas into the 'real' world. The medium for this art, the Ribbon skirt itself, represents a proud act of identity reclamation and a form of 'armour', offering cultural protection against assimilation and degradation in a specifically gendered way. The Ribbon Skirt thus acts as a reminder of the central role that Indigenous women play in Indigenous communities,

[2] Chapter published in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, eds. Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja, 2020, 275-284.
[3] Chief Benwah, *Benoit First Nation: Eight-Pointed Star and its Meaning* (2016), accessible at https://www.benoitfirstnation.ca/pointed_star.html (Sep 15, 2026).

foregrounding their sacredness as women and the power that comes in that, telling the story of adaptation and survival.[4]

Several of the works ask related questions about what it means to look, what it means to witness, and what forms of representation allow us to see something differently, returning to the question of memory and experience. For example, Daryan Schaefer's poetry explores the emotional traces left by experience. Samantha Lord's poetry and fiction similarly move through memory, intimacy, family, childhood, and loss. In "The Spider (L'araignée)," Lord brings together childhood memory, environmental change, storytelling, and the recurring figure of the spider, allowing personal and cultural memory to intersect. Victoria Dean's fiction uses domestic space and its material details to evoke a disrupted personal history. Grayson Kennedy's speculative fiction similarly uses an altered world to explore the relationship between memory, environment, and human experience. And once again, in dialogue with the visual, the works extend this line of inquiry in material as well as symbolic sense: Gilson's use of archival photographs makes the past materially present. Regalado's ribbon skirt demonstrates how memory and story can also reside in an object—in textile, pattern, image, construction, and embodied making.

The present issue is also united by a strong belief in imagination as a mode of inquiry. Brozek's conference paper makes imagination explicit as a force within political and literary life. Grayson Kennedy's critical essay, "Literature as an Interactive Site: An Argument Against Plato's Republic," asks readers to reconsider what literary representation does and what becomes possible when literature is understood as an active encounter rather than simply an imitation of reality. His fiction, "Firekeeper," makes that question material by constructing a world in which ordinary expectations about the natural world are disrupted. The visual artists do something similar. Gilson transforms archival material, Spillner translates ecological grief into paint, while Regalado transforms textile and decorative forms into a work that carries complex narrative and cultural meaning. In each case, making is also a form of thinking. This principle foregrounds that creative practice, rather than being separate from intellectual inquiry, is, in fact, one of its key forms.

Seen together, these works suggest that the most interesting boundaries in this issue are precisely the ones that refuse to remain fixed: text and image; criticism and creation; archive and imagination; private and public; past and present; human experience and environment; physical object and digital reproduction. To encounter Regalado's ribbon skirt, Spillner's painting, or Gilson's collage in physical space is different from encountering a reproduction of that work on the screen. But the digital—and limited print-- publication create possibilities that the physical exhibition cannot. Here, a visual work can sit alongside the poem, story, or critical essay that opens another route into its themes. A reader can move between genres, return to a passage,

[4] Kaija Heitland, *The Ribbon Skirt Project - from Indigenous Nouveau*, accessible at https://www.theribbonskirtproject.ca/whatisaribbonskirt (Sep 15, 2026).

pause over an image, and discover relationships among works that might not be immediately apparent in the physical gallery. The physical exhibit and the publication therefore extend one another and are to be understood in continuity: the exhibition gives the work physical presence, while the publication gives the works an additional aesthetic and critical dimensions, another culturally engaged life.

An inaugural publication is necessarily a collective undertaking. *ArT* exists because many people were willing to imagine something that did not yet exist and then contribute the time, care, expertise, and creative energy required to make it real. I was blessed in being surrounded by colleagues, who like many kind midwives, helped give life to my idea about the journal, bringing it into the light of day. I am grateful to all colleagues in the Department for their generous support of this initiative, and for their thoughtful teaching practice that continues to nurture and inspire our students in their thinking, writing, and wide-ranging creative endeavors.

Special thanks and acknowledgment are due to several people whose labour made the journal's work become reality: Soji Cole, the inaugural Creative Writing Editor of the Journal, was instrumental from the very beginning. Soji not only helped give shape to the idea of the journal but also birthed the idea for its name and provided vital ideational energy behind the initiative. Ray Sewell, our inaugural Visual Arts and Community Engagement Editor, has been equally important in expanding our understanding of what the Journal could be. Through his teaching, he inspired students to create visually compelling and culturally resonant work, which now forms part of the Journal's multimodal character. Ray also advanced the idea that *ArT* should remain open to different kinds of creative expression and storytelling, and that its community should extend beyond the Department to welcome creative submissions from talented members of the wider community. His contribution helped us imagine the Journal not simply as a publication of writing, but as a space in which visual, material, literary, and community-based forms of creative expression could coexist and speak to one another.

Mark Barr has provided stalwart and enthusiastic support for the journal from its earliest conception and has subsequently taken on the task of serving as its inaugural Literary Criticism Editor. Mark has worked closely and patiently with our students to help them develop their conference presentations into publishable pieces, helping students make the transition from presenting their ideas in an academic setting to imagining those ideas as contributions to a public scholarly conversation. Mustafa Hussaini, our excellent Department Secretary, has been a steady and indispensable source of support throughout the entire process. Most notably, Mustafa enabled the Journal to find a home on our Department's web pages and carefully coordinated many aspects of its design and publication. He has also served as an indispensable communication link among students, editors, authors, and the many different offices and units of the University whose cooperation has been necessary to bring this project to fruition. His practical knowledge, responsiveness, and willingness to solve the innumerable small problems that accompany a new publication have been invaluable.

I am deeply grateful to each of them. Their contributions have shaped *ArT* in ways that go well beyond the individual responsibilities associated with their editorial roles. Together, they have helped establish the Journal's founding ethos: that literary scholarship is a creative and interpretive practice; that creative work is strengthened by critical attention; that art and writing can illuminate one another; and that a university publication can create meaningful connections between students, faculty, artists, and the wider community.

As well, I am very grateful to Suzanne Van Den Hoogen, Dean of University Library and Archives, Peter Webster, our first Librarian Emeritus, and Hansell Cook, Associate Dean, Library Strategy, Planning and Assessment and Librarian of Archives, Special Collections and Records, for agreeing with us that this is a good idea and coordinating time and effort to determine how best to help. The publication would not be possible without Hansell's expertise in digital publishing, repository design, preservation, and metadata management—this has been instrumental in shaping what is possible in terms of the journal's structure and ensuring a sustainable home for its multimodal content within Saint Mary's University's Institutional Repository. My sincere thanks go to Pam Correll, Assistant Curator of the Saint Mary's University Art Gallery, for her generous support of *ArT's* inaugural issue. From the earliest stages of planning, Pam helped me envision how selected student artworks could be shared with the wider university community, offering curatorial guidance, logistical support, and thoughtful collaboration throughout the process. Her work in coordinating and installing the exhibition of student artwork in the Atrium display case created a beautiful and welcoming public presence for the project, helping to connect the digital publication with a physical space of engagement and celebration. I am very grateful for her expertise, encouragement, and commitment to showcasing student creativity.

We also extend our thanks to the students whose work gives *ArT* its living purpose and energy. Most particularly, we thank the student contributors for trusting us with their work and for allowing us to share their poems, stories, scholarship, and visual art with a wider audience.

The journal truly comes to you, therefore, in many voices—and hands.

Welcome to the inaugural issue of *ArT*. Sit with us. You are in for a real treat.

Tatjana Takševa

Professor and Chair, Department of English Language and Literature

Inaugural Editor, *ArT*

In Kjipuktuk, on unceded L'nu lands, 2026

Poetry

Voices in verse

Poetry

Annastatia Brooks

Maidenhood

I'm forced to be a spectator looking out from a tower.

I know what's happening just across the southern border.

I watch the violence and hear the screams through Instagram reels, But I am like a powerless princess staring into her crystal ball.

How many hours of death does a girl have to witness

Before she is told how to stop it?

I can't punch an ICE agent in the face

To save the five-year-old in a blue bunny hat

From being kidnapped and taken to a detention center,

Better known as a concentration camp, Which sounds so dramatic, so fantastical, But it's real, and it's horrifying,

And it feels like there's nothing I can do about any of it.

I know writing poems

Doesn't compare to going up against goblins, Like that nurse who should have been wearing silver armour.

He was a knight who died for doing nothing wrong.

All I have is a pen, And it's hardly a sword, But I'll wield my words like a weapon

And look evil dead in the eyes, Courageous, though not unafraid.

I'll write a poem

That burns like tear gas

And hits like rubber bullets.

I'll make my letters little daggers

That cut through the comfort that's all too familiar.

I'll shout from my window that there is hope, That it lives, even though so much of it was dead.

If I ever have the chance, I have faith that I would do the dangerous things

We need to do to fight the dragons

That breathe bitter ice instead of flames.

Until then, while locked in this tower, I'll write, and I'll go on hoping, And I'll love like love is the weapon it is.

I am no helpless maiden.

I never have been.

Poets are soldiers too.

Gentle Lies

I tell myself that everything will be okay, But I've always been a terrible liar.

I find the empty promise hard to believe, Even coming from my lips.

I hug my ribs, Assuring myself that the world isn't ending, And praying that there will be a future for my generation.

We've got big dreams, big plans, But we can hardly afford to rent an Inglis Street apartment in downtown, Or buy a box of Cheerios, Or pick up our medication this month.

I've been welcomed to the real world so many times

By adults who think that basic necessities are a luxury

And suffering is the norm.

I am left wondering why grown-ups let the real world come to this

That at barely five I was supposed to be thinking of mortgage.

I tell myself everything will be okay, And I don't really believe it, But someone has to say it.

I'll whisper it over and over again

Like a prayer, Or a curse, Until I convince myself it's true.

Death of a Nation

Art is resistance, Song is resistance, And joy is resistance

When that joy has been deprived.

Kindness is a weapon.

Our community is an army.

Can you hear the banshee screaming?

The ending has arrived.

The old world, the flawed world, Is heading towards its grave

While raising fearless children

Discontented to behave.

It's dying with the billionaires, It's falling with the files.

It weeps for innocents imprisoned, Condemned without trials.

The banshee's not a dark sign, Not a spirit sent to harm;

She's a beacon and a harbinger

Sounding the alarm

To rebel against the powerful, Stare them in the eyes, And dare to care about what's left.

Welcome the woman's cries–

She sings of a brighter dawn, A future we must make.

The screaming banshee sings of change

That comes after we break.

Life's Vessel

What's the point of making art when the world is burning, When our canvases are going to be consumed by those flames, When our paints will boil, and our clay will melt, and our ink will evaporate, And the words on our pages will become nothing but ash?

If my art is made only to be destroyed by a cruel, evil world, Then the world saw something fit to destroy

And I am proud I was a threat.

Darkness only consumes the light, after all.

We have to paint, and sculpt, and sew, and sing, and draw, and dance.

For goodness sake, we have to create, With every last bone in our body.

Even then, when we're nothing but dust, I pray a child will mindlessly drag their finger through our remains

That have long wasted into soil, And make an image out of death.

Life always finds a way, And usually, it manages to find its way

Through the art we make

When we are searching

For life.

Stolen Land

I wish we would understand that

The land we are standing on

Is not our world to claim.

These rivers are not our own.

These forests are not ours to harvest.

These plains and bogs are far from our belongings.

We cannot pack the seas in a suitcase.

We cannot pin the stampeding caribou to a wall.

They were never ours to start with

And they'll never be ours to keep.

What right do we have to pick and choose

Who calls it home?

Doomsday

The world seems to be ending, And it almost feels like it's time to whisper our final goodbyes.

We are all huddled in a bomb shelter, Wiping each other's tears and saying I love you, All holding hands while staring at the meteor hurdling towards Earth.

Bombs echo across borders, borders blur, And everything erodes under the acid rain of reality.

America is falling, As empires always do;

No one is safe when a giant hurdles towards the ground, Especially the people standing in its shadow.

Still, There is no meteor in the sky.

The sun keeps rising whether we want it to or not, And metamorphosis is always painful

When the transformation is long-awaited.

One world might be ending, But a better one emerges from the corpse of what was.

Our lives are not yet over.

Tell your people that you love them, Gently wipe their tears away, And hold their hands tight, Even while the horizon is not clear.

White Jesus

They claim a blue-eyed, Unvaccinated, Natural birthed

White man

Clad in organic cotton cloth

While ignoring the immigrant, Refugee, Jewish boy

With cinnamon skin

And hair like the night.

They paint him with pearly pigment
And hang him up on cathedral walls
As the justification for the rich's wrongs, Turning their eyes from the words
Which were written for the masses, And weaponizing chronicles of love.
They conveniently omit
The lines that clearly state
His lineage, His intent, And the color of his skin.
They gather up iron nails
And use them as blades
To kill the ones they think less of.
"They're sinners," they say to rationalize the crime, As if murder isn't also a sin.
Stop using my Lord as a knife to cut love from the gospel.
Your hatred cannot be justified by my God.
Jehovah's name is also Love.
He was once a Galilean fleeing political violence
And a man with brown skin executed by the state.

Incitatus

It's always been bad, and it always will be, The past has shown us that's a guarantee.
We've always been faulted, begging for fame, And money, and power, and land we can claim.
Horses in office, Caligula's craze;
We've been demented since the early days.
It's true, nothing changes. Tyrants run wild.
Laws that ensure liberty are defiled.
Forests have fallen, and rivers run dry.
The wealthiest men try to rent out the sky.
If nothing changes, as history shows
Then it's also true that love only grows.
We will go on singing, as we've always done, As a choir of voices, much stronger than one.
There will always be fights, and we'll always be fighters, As crafters, as poets, as lovers, as writers.

We'll rise from the rubble of days we've survived, We'll rally together 'til' hope is revived.

We've won revolutions, we've rebuilt from loss

Like the corpse of a tree that is footing for moss.

We'll sow our harvest on turf overturned.

We'll nurture our crops with the litter we've burned.

It's always been bad, and it might always be, But we'll always endure, and we'll fight to be free.

The Shape of What Stays

Daryan Gerami Schaefer

I. When the Sky Weeps

I wonder when it's my time, if I'll make the sky prettier, or if the stars will fade, and the clouds will hold their tears.

Will the dawn rise softer, or will I drown in endless dark?

I dream of leaving something bright, but all I see are fading sparks.

I wonder when it's my time, if I'll make the sky prettier, or if the world will pass me by, a whisper lost to silence.

I wonder when it's my time, if I'll leave behind a trace, a mark upon the silent world, or vanish without a face.

Will my absence be a whisper, or will it echo through the years?

Will the sky remember my name, or will it weep for all my fears?

I wonder when it's my time, if I'll make the sky prettier, or if the stars grow distant, cold, as my heart grows dimmer.

Maybe then, I'll find the peace, that's always slipped through my hands, but until that day arrives, I'll hold onto the shifting sands.

And when it's finally my time, the sky will know my silent plea, for in its vast and endless blue, I'll find the peace that's meant for me.

I wonder if the stars will shine, not for the ones who've come and gone, but for the souls who've held the weight, of dreams they've carried too long.

So when the sky no longer weeps, and silence settles in the night, I'll know I made it in my own way— a quiet spark within the light.

II. Shifting Sands

Time does not rush.

It settles.

Grain by grain, it slips through its narrow mercy, unconcerned with what waits below.

I have watched it fall for years, thinking the moment would arrive

when the glass would pause, when something in my life was worth the delay.

But the sands keep moving.

I used to believe each passing grain

was a measure of progress, that meaning accumulated somewhere unseen, that the weight of living would eventually tip the

scale in my favor.

Instead, the hours emptied quietly.

No signal.

No witness.

Only the soft sound of loss

too small to name.

There are days I turn the hourglass over, hoping the motions might change, as if repetition alone could make time kinder. But it falls the same way each time, indifferent to my watching.

I have learned how easily a life can pass without leaving an impression in the glass. How effort becomes indistinguishable from endurance.

How wanting fades into habit.

Still, the sands keep falling.

So do I.

If there is anything left behind when the glass runs empty, it will not be proof.

It will not be triumph.

Only the shape of where I stood, briefly resisting the fall, before becoming part of it.

The sands shift.

They always have.

And I am learning how to live without asking them to remember me.

III. Where the Wine Spills

What a lonely love you are, the finest wine to inebriate every fiber of the heart.

But alas I cannot be the chalice that will hold you.

Oh lord, I pray another chalice appears that can embrace that love.

For you truly deserve it.

And though my hands may tremble at the thought, I will not try to taste what is not mine.

I will watch from afar as your essence spills, filling a vessel worthy of your divine shine.

May that chalice cradle you tenderly, and may your love bloom fully, unbound by me.

A fire that lingers in the veins, seeping into the marrow of the soul, consuming all yet leaving light, a divine ruin that none but you could command.

And yet I remain, a silent witness to your blaze, each pulse of your being a tempest in my chest.

I ache to drink the light you spill so freely, to feel it burn through every hollow I call mine.

But I am not the vessel fit to hold such radiance;

I am but shadows, trembling beneath your brilliance.

Still, I pray the world bends kindly toward you, that another hand, steadier and worthy, may cradle you.

For love like yours cannot be contained, it demands to rise, to overflow, to set the heart aflame—

and I, with empty hands and full devotion, will watch, rapt, as you bloom beyond me, a fire unbroken, untamed, unforgettable.

IV. What the Tides Took

The sea is patient in its taking.

It does not ask permission of the shore

But only returns, again and again, until even the stone forgets its shape.

I learned early how to hold what was never

meant to stay.

Some weights are learned, not given, passed quietly from moment to moment—

until the hands forget they were clenched.

I carried what the tides could not keep

names worn thin by salt, promises softened by repetition, a devotion heavy enough to change how I stood

in the world.

The water never rushed me.

It waited.

It always waits.

Each leaving was small, almost merciful.

A grain here.

A memory there.

Nothing dramatic enough to be called loss.

There is a kind of faith in enduring erosion, in believing that what remains will be enough, when the sea is finished speaking.

I told myself this was strength.

I told myself the ocean admired patience. But even the most loyal coast is reshaped by what it loves.

The tides took what I offered freely. They always do.

And when my hands were finally empty, the water did not thank me—it simply moved on, as water has always done.

Now I stand lighter, unfamiliar with my own balance, learning the language of absence— that release is not betrayal, but a return to what endures.

Not everything lost was stolen.

Some things were answered.

Some things were finished.

And though the sea will come again, as it always does, I no longer mistake its pull for a promise.

V. The Fracture

You are the fracture in my certainty, the light entering through it.

I thought I was diminished by what would not remain.

Measured myself in departures.

Each leaving felt like proof.

I mistook disappearance for subtraction.

But a crack, does not mean collapse.

It means something has shifted enough to let clarity in.

The walls did not fall.

They only thinned, where illusion once stood.

I was never the thing that left.

The floor beneath me did not move.

My pulse did not falter.

The air still entered my lungs, without asking who stayed to witness it.

There is a difference between being unchosen, and being undone.

I am learning it slowly.

In the quiet after certainty breaks, in the light that does not wound, only revealing what was always standing here.

VI. The One Who Stays

There is no storm this time.
No tide rising to test the shore.
Just a room with the light left on.
You sit across from me
without spectacle.
No fire to consume, no wine to spill.
Your hands rest
as if they have nowhere else to be.
I am not a vessel.
You are not a flame.
We are only two people
in the same quiet space, breathing without effort, unchanged by the need to prove we can endure.
You do not choose me as rescue.
I do not choose you as salvation.
We choose because we are already standing.
The walls do not tremble.
The floor does not shift.
Nothing collapses.
Nothing needs to.
Outside, the world continues
with its vast indifference.
Inside, you stay.
And for the first time
I do not mistake staying
for something I must earn.

Poetry

Grayson Kennedy

Salt

Salt is small, Miniscule white inhabiting the black of the Atlantic, Unseen but sensory, Unseen but present.

Taste it on the tip of your tongue, Splashes from rocks thrown into sea, More water than mineral

Enough to deter from drinking.

Salt is not meant for large consumption.

The people are like salt, White like salt, All encompassing like salt.

A drop of history on this land, Changing its composition, Changing its people;

Making way for the future, Leaving others behind.

It tastes like ocean brine.

It tastes of new beginnings, The start of new nations.

First contact, Continent connecting to continent, Proverbial sea bridge.

Cultures clashing, People clashing, A people dying.

A winner.

History tells us of one.

People tell us of none.

Nature corroborates under industrial hell.

The people are made of salt.

Find it on their skin.

Find it transferred by force.

Find it in Shubenacadie.

Find it embedded in scar tissue, Old wounds pried open

Dripping blood upon the snow.

Unsightly.

Spread salt to prevent sticking,

To prevent slipping, To prevent the past.

Utter hollow words and move on.

Salt exists in the bricks of this city, Water torn from the harbour, Pushing sea on to land

And land into the sea.

Blood washed away.
New blood.
Blood remembered.
Blood memorialised
In shattered windows rebuilt, Shattered brick rebuilt.
The people rebuilt their homes
While tearing others down;
Hypocrites in their philosophy.
There is no co-existence in this ocean.
This is not a pastoral poem playground.
This is not fantasy fulfilled.
Fantasies are too expensive to keep.
No locals live in these poems.
These words are crafted for distant eyes:
Picturesque seaside homes next to roaring ocean waves.
Sea sprays over the edges, Smelling of perfection.
Salt is not perfect.
Two deadly chemicals combined, Safe by design
Though beware of overconsumption.
Consume our outdated lobster traps and
Post cards of Peggy's Cove above black rocks painted
By the ghostly prints of those washed away:
Reflections of the picturesque seaside home.
By all means, buy our lighthouse magnets, Buy our lobster bottle openers.
Support a have-not province.
Dollarstore novelties are not who we are.
When sea sprays over the rocks, I smell home.
I smell days spent throwing stones in the ocean
Tasting salt on my tongue,
Of youthful innocence, Child-like ignorance.
Salt tasted of peace, Of family, Of bike rides under speckled shadowed streets of sunlight in the fall, Kool-aid frozen treats melting in summer heat, The wonder of four-toed bird prints in winter snow, The chirp of backyard peepers in soft spring evenings.

It tasted of late sunsets to fight unwanted night, The smell of the last day of school,
The awe of a Christmas tree wading in unopened presents

Reflected on the TV screen as a Muppet's Christmas Carol played.

It was safety.

Now with age curtains fall away.

Overcast skies raining upon the land

Flooding with ocean water.

I see it now:

Sunlight was an illusion.

Kool-aid evaporates in the heat

Under roars of fighter planes

Bombing fires next door, Bombing cities far away.

There is no more snow for birds to walk on.

There is no more innocence of truth;

Truth was never innocent.

The world fell on its deathbed centuries ago

When salt invaded this land, When salt emerged from the cradle of humankind and

Invaded its people.

What is salt?

It is complicit in the genetic make-up of oceans, In the genetic make-up of people,
Of their cities, Their history.

It is invasion.

It is change.

It is ignoring the past.

It is the past.

It exists in every craig of this coastline.

It is imperfect.

To deny imperfection is to deny change.

In perfection there is no growth.

The salt weathering away our coastlines

Gives us room to improve.

This is not a satire, An ugly two-faced sketch of politicians grasping throats.

This is a love letter to a home long lost and rediscovered.

This is a hope and a wish, A call to action.

There is still room for pride among this salt.

Salt makes up the last steps of men heading for war, Tasting of heroism, Tasting of finality, Tasting of the final glimpse of home.

The courage of life to push through explosive tragedy, Withstand the blizzard next door.

Salt makes up the courage to seek change, To recognise the past and say "Sorry."

Words are not enough but it is more than silence.

Salt makes up the blood in my veins, Pulsed from the hearts of fishermen surviving on a cold nature's bounty, Absorbed through the cracks of crowded boats, Fleeing oblivion, braving sickness, facing the might of the sea.

Wexford legacy turned Annapolis Valley.

Starvation turned to prosperity, Pens scratching poems, Seeking immortality.

Ghosts of the past fought for a better life, Fought for a better home, Found the shores of Nova Scotia Strong.

They replaced dreams of food with dreams of fortune.

I will eat what they cultivated and seek to

Preserve these fields for future peoples.

This is not convicted by defamation.

These are not hateful words thrown into the slop of Twitter.

This is acknowledgement of the past.

This is tasting the salt of years gone by and

Adding something new for improvement.

Let this be my legacy, Let this be *our* legacy:

Watch kids bike on wet streets in the fall,

See bird prints in the snow, Eat solid popsicles in summer heat, Listen to peepers chirp their melodies, And say:

"This is our future if we find the balance in this salt."

It Kills Us

We don't pet the hand that feeds;

We pet the hand that bites, Nails digging into skin, Producing red ribbons

That *drip*, *drip*, *drip* into

An insatiable maw.

We keep it on a leash, Tie a loose muzzle around its mouth

Thinking this is how it's always been, Always will be, And never will end.

The way of the world, natural, familiar, Blinding us to the fact that the muzzle

Is gone.

We smile and push through the pain

As it hangs from our arms, Sapping our strength as it drinks our blood, Eye twinkling with thoughts of

There is nothing else we can be.

We smile away the pain and bite

The hand that does feed, Reaching in to release our burdens.

We defend it.

We defend it and it kills us.

We support it and it kills us.

We created it and it kills us.

We give it everything and it kills us.

We give it our lives

And it breaks them over its knee, Handing back the broken pieces and forcing us to fix them

So it may do it again.

It gives us nothing and

It kills us.

Death is a Capitalist

Death lounges by an open door, Lingering there in the house of poor

And dejected, unfortunate souls, The perfect price to pay Life's toll.

Death watches with a hungry eye;

He knows for him to live, they must die.

His living comes of squeezing dry

All of those he takes to die.

Reap their souls, exploit their minds.

Their strength is all for Death to find

And grind into a fine, grey dust

To disappear within a gust.

No one wins when Death knocks on their door;

It's all the worse if he finds them poor.

But here he lingers in the entry

(Notice how there are no gentry).

Death has a preference of those below;

He wouldn't want to kill those he calls his own.

Who do you think cleared the way

For Death to reap a deadly day?

He steals the food for those in need

And throws it out for rats to feed.

He bars the way for perfect health

So he may have a growing wealth.

He owns the quarry to make the graves.

For the stone and casket, they must pay.

He's the reaping stalker of the night, With whom they not only pay to live, But pay to die.

Teens, Dreams, and Automobiles

Samantha Lord

Breaking Up

I still find your hair,
Those wandering curls
That danced in the warm summer breeze.
Back when the days were long and our skin
Tanned from the sun's rays.
Before we fretted about the brown
Flakes of melanoma forming on our skin.
And just like that, all the years were gone
In only 20 minutes,
We fell apart.
And we soon found that
Once our pieces had disconnected,
Be it some unnoticed deformity caused by the puzzle-maker
The pieces no longer fit back together.
Had they ever?
Your body is the arctic; foreign and unfamiliar to me.
Your flesh is warm,
But I am freezing.
Against your skin flows an endless river of fresh water,
And I, a thirsty traveler, once halted to bathe in your stream.
But as I part my lips to drink,
The water turns to salt
And I become greedy for more.
Plagued by my bottomless thirst.
Now, lying next to you,
Despite how we tried
Your body soon became a stranger to me.
Even your skin loses its warmth
At the thought of my touch.

Was it true then?

Was this fantasy of teenage love ever real?

Mother

Mama

Do you remember what I first said to you?

My first word, the first thought I'd ever express.

It's okay, we all forget things.

Mommy

Remember when we picked berries by the riverbank- or when you brought us to church on Sundays when even Daddy wouldn't go?

Too young to remember

Too old to forget.

Sorry, I'll let you rest.

Mom

He raped me.

Why couldn't I bring myself to tell you-?

You were my mother.

I needed you.

Mother

I understand it was not your nature to nurture me.

I could never hate you.

You tried, Mother.

Now blow out the candles and wish.

Him

There will be a man.

There will be a monster.

And there will be a man who will offer to

Protect you from this monster.

These are not three men,

They are one.
Him.
He was older than me
Too much older.
Wiser than me,
Too much wiser.
Him.
He played the role
Of a younger kinder man,
And we all hoped that
If I was so lucky
I'd be too mature
To have been deceived by
Him.
He was a top performing car
Accelerating with no air bags
Faster, faster,
Aimed directly at
A brick wall.
When you crash,
The radio will keep playing.
Life will keep moving.
When you crash,
The wall you shatter into will be that of the
Church.
And he will impale you
With the steeple.
He will warn you that
The Devil is in you.
But truth be told
He is the devil.
Brought to blame you
For his own sin.
Him.

He's hunting you.
Like a lion.
No, like a sly fox!
Swift and eager
Cunning and patient
He will rob your coop of
All its chickens.
And lick his lips before you even notice
They are missing.
So, my dear,
Hide,
Clutch your pearls,
Grit your teeth and clench your jaw.
Pray. Wish.
That this man may never find you.
And I hope he never does.

What happened?

Where did the time go?
How did sleepovers in basements
Decay into overnight stays in stranger's hotel rooms?
Was it gone when schoolyard crushes and first kisses
Became sex, masturbation, and pornography?
Could it be that the sweet paper notes passed under school desks
Had to become unsolicited photographs of your d**k?
Thoughts of when we cuddled our baby dolls and dreamed of being mothers
Did not come to mind during my abortion.
When our privileged stomachs were full, and our bellies were chubby
Before we starved ourselves in fear of becoming 'fat'.
The days when we went to bed at 7:30
And insomnia could not reach us.
Why did time have to go away?

VISUAL VOICE

Amntu'kati

Charlotte Gilson



A collage comprised of archival photographs of Point Pleasant Park layered with hand-painted elements to tell the story of Amntu'kati.

Critical Perspectives

Literature, history, representation, and interpretation

How Educated Women Influenced the World Around Them

Chelsie "Ellie" Rodgers

Both Mary Wollstonecraft and Germaine Necker De Stael had influence over the politics around them despite coming from opposing socio-economic circumstances. Wollstonecraft came from lower class in England and commented on the French revolution, whereas De Stael was extremely wealthy and existed inside of the French revolution. Though they came from opposing sides, they both had similar ideas about women's influence over the political climate. The women they talked about were not just any women; they were women who were educated enough to understand what was going on around them--women who could hold men accountable for their actions. Despite the men around them discouraging education for women. It didn't matter what social class a woman came from as long as they had access to a proper education; they held the ability to influence the political world around them.

Politically speaking women were not allowed to involve themselves in matters that were for men, during this period. Nor did most women have the ability to do so, due to their lack of understanding of how such matters were discussed. The men involved in the decision-making processes attempted to make sure even the most educated of women were discredited and not taken seriously. However, there were a few women who were outspoken and refused to accept that women were just playthings for men. Madame De Stael and Mary Wollstonecraft made it clear that women could in fact influence the political world around them using their education to question the things that didn't seem right.

Women were discouraged from being educated. Especially if their studies impacted the way they cared for the household. As De Stael said here:

Women were certainly allowed to sacrifice household occupations to a love of society and its pleasures; serious study, however, was condemned as pedantic. If from the very first moment one did not rise above the teasing which went on from all sides, this teasing would end by discouraging talent and poisoning the well of confidence and exaltation. (3).

This was largely because men throughout history saw educated women as a threat. They did not want women to become educated because knowledge is power. Men thought that if women had the knowledge to understand what was happening around them, they could take that power away from the men who valued it.

Aside from education being looked down upon for women, it was also very rare to see a woman in politics. Other than a woman being married to a man so that the families could combine wealth and power, woman had little to no say in what was

happening politically. Though it was rare to see women in politics during this time period, it wasn't completely unheard of. A notable example of a woman in political power around the same time was Catherine the Great of Russia who was highly educated and even expanded the empire.

Much like what Mary Wollstonecraft said here: "Men, indeed, appear to me to act in a very unphilosophical manner when they try to secure the good conduct of women by attempting to keep them always in a state of childhood" (4). Men tried to keep women from being educated by keeping them in a childlike state, because they were easier to control if they simply listened to what they were told without the ability to question it. If they didn't understand what was being talked about, women couldn't get involved with matters that were considered to be those of men, like politics, religion, and war, though women who did manage to become knowledgeable in these topics, like both Wollstonecraft and De Stael, understood and spoke out against the way men treated women who sought education. This of course was not without consequence, even for De Stael, who was banned from Paris by Napoleon. He banned her because she was outspoken about politics and he perceived her to be a real threat to his political position.

Women being punished for their intelligence was something that was seen not just in high society such as the conflict between Napoleon and De Stael, but also in the lower class. Girls who showed any kind of superior intellect would often be punished by their mothers or beaten by their fathers for speaking out of turn. This was something that happened when children questioned their father in general, but especially if it was a girl who was right about what she was trying to say. Women who were married and tried to tell their husbands they were wrong about something would also get the same sort of treatment. This was one of the reasons women were scared to be intelligent and thus were scared to attempt to educate themselves further.

This influence over politics lead to future critics, including Mary Shelley, the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft, to critique De Stael's works especially those on Napoleon himself as seen here:

Madame de Staël felt the influence of his power of pleasing, but was mortified to be treated like a mere woman. He, on the other hand, perceiving that she had talents sufficient to persuade and influence men, and that she was likely to exert this power against himself, conceived a dislike, which he afterwards showed in a series of persecutions. (2)

This shows us that despite what men wanted women did in fact have great influence over politics.

On the other hand, Mary Wollstonecraft was not raised rich, nor was she raised in France. She had a fascination with the French Revolution and travelled to France to witness it herself. Going there she supported the ideals, but when she got there, she saw the violence taking place and changed her mind. Though she still believed in the

core ideas of the revolution, she didn't agree with how it was taking place. Much like De Stael she voiced her criticisms, because she was able to be a voice for women who may not have been educated enough to be that voice for themselves -- not just in her criticisms of the French revolution but in her other works as well. Though a formal education was not something attainable to a lot of women, that didn't mean they couldn't find a way to educate themselves beyond the knowledge they got from just living. Mary Wollstonecraft herself was an example of that. The problem however is that many women didn't know that educating themselves outside of a paid for education was an option for them because of how society viewed educated women. So many women likely didn't think education was for them despite their desire to learn. They just accepted what was the social norm and accepted the fact that they were not high enough class to afford it. Not realizing there were ways to get it. Though having an education would not solve all of a woman's problems, it would allow her to find more effective solutions.

Wollstonecraft much like De Stael valued education for women. However, she was realistic about the fact that it wouldn't solve every problem. As she says here:

To prevent any misconstruction, I must add, that I do not believe that a private education can work the wonders which some sanguine writers have attributed to it. Men and women must be educated, in a great degree, by the opinions and manners of the society they live in. In every age there has been a stream of popular opinion that has carried all before it, and given a family character, as it were, to the century. It may then fairly be inferred, that, till society be differently constituted, much cannot be expected from education. It is, however, sufficient for my present purpose to assert, that, whatever effect circumstances have on the abilities, every being may become virtuous by the exercise of its own reason; for if but one being was created with vicious inclinations, that is positively bad, what can save us from atheism? or if we worship a God, is not that God a devil? (5).

She understood that circumstances influenced the type of education a person could get, but that education in itself was important to progress as a society. However, until women proved themselves to be valuable members of society, that progress was going to be slow.

Aside from discouraging women from educating themselves, women appearing in men's works of literature often appeared to be one dimensional, and derogatory. Mary Wollstonecraft took notice of this and commented on the fact by writing:

I may be accused of arrogance; still I must declare what I firmly believe, that all the writers who have written on the subject of female education and manners from Rousseau to Dr. Gregory,2 have contributed to render women more artificial, weak characters, than they would otherwise have been; and, consequently, more useless members of society. (6).

The way the women in these works were depicted were far from what women were actually like, but it was exactly how men wanted people to see women. If people,

particularly other men, saw women as weak and useless there was nothing to fear. The women in those works couldn't rise up and demand to be made a proper part of society. If no women were educated there would have been no one who could criticize the men giving a different perspective on aspects of life to which most men were not privy.

A man during this time could never paint an accurate portrait of a female character in their written works. Because men often didn't take the time to actually get to know the women in their lives in a greater capacity than in the bedrooms. Women were discouraged from talking about their lives, and especially their inner thoughts. Those things were to be kept to oneself or shared with female friends during periods of socializing. So, if a man didn't know what was going on in a woman's mind he couldn't create an accurate female character, he could only capture the superficial outer world to which he was accustomed. This is why it was so important for educated women to criticize the way women were written. It was wildly inaccurate considering the lack of actual knowledge men had on the inner worlds of women.

It was obvious from her own writing that Wollstonecraft could see through the intentions behind the portrayals of women in literature, particularly when she said: "Women are, therefore, to be considered either as moral beings, or so weak that they must be entirely subjected to the superior faculties of men" (7). She was saying that women were people, not just weak beings that are inferior to the men around them. Women had real value, and, if allowed to be people on the same level as men, they could contribute more to society than just doing the housework and sitting around socializing. But the way women were treated by men and other women when they did attempt to educate themselves kept a lot of women feeling like they were less than human.

Mary Wollstonecraft even criticized how Alexander Pope portrayed women in his writing as she wrote here:

I shall be told that woman would then lose many of her peculiar graces, and the opinion of a well known poet might be quoted to refute my unqualified assertion. For Pope has said, in the name of the whole male sex, "Yet ne'er so sure our passion to create, As when she touch'd the brink of all we hate." In what light this sally places men and women. I shall leave to the judicious to determine; meanwhile I shall content myself with observing, that I cannot discover why, unless they are mortal, females should always be degraded by being made subservient to love or lust. (8)

Wollstonecraft herself was an educated woman, proving that the way women were portrayed was not in fact the only way a woman could be.

This was not to say that women weren't passionate and sexual, but that those things were not the only things a woman could be despite the way they were portrayed. Being a woman did not stop a person from being a human. That was something that the writings De Stael and Wollstonecraft criticized seemed to imply That women were only one dimensional and only there to please men, which was simply not true

of any human being. Just like there were men who were incredibly intelligent and well spoken, there were women who were also. Just as much as there were women who used their sexuality to entice men, there were men who were predatory. The point is that no matter the sex of the individual, a human is a human. There were people belonging to both sexes who went on to do important things, such as ruling empires. The key to women succeeding to show men that it was educated women speaking out and getting other women to listen and learn. So, they could also become educated and advocate for their own rights within the political sphere that they lived.

Though De Stael heavily criticized the way women were portrayed in literature, she saw that there was hope for the future of women's education. She believed that one day it would be taken seriously by the people with the power to make that happen, as she said here:

I believe a day will come when philosophical legislators will give serious attention to the education of women, to the laws protecting them, to the duties which should be imposed on them, to the happiness which can be guaranteed them. At present, however, most women belong neither to the natural nor to the social order. What succeeds for some women is the ruin of others; their good points may do them harm, their faults may prove useful. One minute they are everything, the next nothing. Their destiny resembles that of freedmen under the emperors: if they try to gain any influence, this unofficial power is called criminal, while if they remain slaves their destiny is crushed. (9)

Though the comparison to enslaved people is rather bold, the point she was trying to make stands. Without education and laws protecting them, women had no real choice in their futures. Though without the existence of women men too would have had much more difficult lives.

Despite women having very little choice in the things that happened in politics, they did influence the political climates. They influenced their husbands or other male family members. Or the women who were formally educated themselves used their voices whether directly or in writing to influence the state of politics. This was what De Stael was trying to convey here:

Women are the only human beings outside the realm of political interest and the career of ambition, able to pour scorn on base actions, point out ingratitude, and honor even disgrace if that disgrace is caused by noble sentiments. The opinion of society would no longer have any power over men's actions at all if there were no women left in France enlightened enough to make their judgments count, and imposing enough to inspire genuine respect. (10) She is saying that if women who were educated enough to stand up for what they believed to be right simply disappeared from France, that there would be no one to hold the men accountable for their actions.

In conclusion, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Madame De Stael both believed that women should be educated. They both argued that women who are educated have value in society. Despite being from very different socio-economic backgrounds, they both argued for women criticizing the depictions of women in the writings of men. They both pointed out that women who were educated were more fulfilled in their lives and more likely to be an asset politically, despite what their male counterparts would argue. This suggests that class didn't matter when it came to the influence women had on society; it was their access to education that made the difference. Whether it was an expensive formal education or self-study, as long as a woman was educated, she could have profound influence on the world around her. An educated woman who was able to stand up to the men that tried to control them was a woman with power. A woman with power could influence the way the political system was run, and, if that women convinced other women to do the same, real change could happen.

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Imagination and Propaganda: Literature as the Path to Revolution

Alexander Brozek

Mme de Stael was a prominent intellectual during the French Revolution, whilst Karl Marx was the most prominent during the failed wave of revolutions during 1848. As intellectuals in times of crisis, their shared experience of revolution makes them interesting intellectual companions despite their divides across class and time. While Mme de Stael took great interest in culture and literature, Marx's primary interest was political economy. Thus, the two illuminate for each other their respective blind spots. Despite being a wealthy aristocrat who maintained relevance in the new liberal bourgeois era, Mme de Stael's analysis of the potential of imagination and literature are both compatible and useful for analysis within a Marxist framework. Her work informs what is possible in the superstructure presupposing a Marxian sense of consciousness. De Stael views reading as leisure and the alleviation of boredom, while simultaneously the greatest tool for changing morality and influencing belief. From Marx, the relationship between the base and superstructure is identified; furthermore, it can be understood that engagement in literature is itself often an exercise in maintaining contentment with the status quo regardless of its seeming ideology, as literature has become a commodity. Consequently, a revolutionary individual with a mind committed to proletarian revolution on Marxist principles might find a valuable pathway in the combination of these two thinkers. Through a synthesis of these two theorists' work, it will be argued that the relationship between literature and imagination is one capable of developing a propaganda of unparalleled power, if created by a properly revolutionary mind. When given the proper conditions, literature has the potential to disrupt the hegemony of the bourgeoise in the superstructure. This essay unveils how the great potential of the novel might be used for praxis through analysing how literature impacts its readers and creates identities, its current use by the bourgeoisie to codify their identity, the artistic freedom and space necessary to create such work, and the current struggle with literature's commodification.

Since the birth of politics, philosophers and politicians have sought the most effective ways to instill in their people the desired values for their body politic. While around for some time in Europe, the novel was not at the center of such discussions and generally looked upon with a level of disdain. Unlike many others, de Stael acutely recognized the brilliant importance of the novel as that which determined individual morality and in turn, the public one ("Essay on Fictions" 520). She recognized that a form of literature capable of describing so much so intimately had a distinct value to be appreciated. She believed that the novel did not receive the recognition it was owed because of its sole focus on love; time has proved her right

as authors have adopted all those varying themes she suggested as new primary topics (de Stael, "Essay on Fictions" .) For while history cannot touch the lives of men the novel can - history can describe what events may have taken place and why, The novel can tell people what to think of it (de Stael, “Essay on Fictions” 520). It follows then, that since the rise of the leisure class it has been a core principle of their body of literature that it must be wholly palatable to their bourgeois sensibilities. Any issue or topic must be disembedded from its system. Rather, the issue should seem quite individual and capable of being overcome by individual strength. Likewise, should a story end in tragedy it must be from individual weakness. To be palatable, the work must reflect their pre-judgement (DuBois 853). This pre-judgment is the emphasis of the individual and that capitalism is a natural system, a system by which those of merit and good upbringing can make something of themselves. As the solutions must cater to such pre-judgements, any solution is grounded firmly in the world view of the bourgeoise. This is regardless of how noble the author's intentions are.

Consider a contemporary of Marx, one who was among the most critical of the burgeoning capitalist system. The tales of Charles Dickens often follow the most downtrodden individuals of London society. His work shows all the cruelty of the system: debtors' prison, forced migration, starvation, and all other social ailments of the proletariat's poverty. Despite this, so that those of the leisure class continue to read his work, there is always some sort of happy ending. This in itself is not a problem. However, it becomes one when the solution rendering such an ending is always derived from the bourgeois class. By some talent or charitable gift of the more affluent, the protagonist is always rescued into polite civilized society. In such tales the wealthy need not feel guilty, so long as they participate in the system with English spirit and do occasional charity; those deserving folk among the poor will be saved by this charity. By making the solution to the woes of capitalism uplifting some poor individuals through charity, the system goes unchallenged. An individual's life is improved, but the collective continues to suffer unrecognized. The source of the bourgeoise's pleasure in literature is a sense of security, in the reflection of themselves and the values they uphold. Even should the text raise a concern, it presents no real challenge to their imagined order of reality; the reader can find solace in the happy ending, regardless of what else they might have witnessed. While the bourgeoisie find escape in literature from society, it is precisely in literature that society is reinforced and developed - where the view of the bourgeois individual is codified. This codification then, must be in turn provided to the proletariat so that they might form themselves along a class-conscious line. The imagination that spurs such codification must be brought to heel with it.

There is now ample evidence provided by history that literature is a powerful tool to form group identities. In *The Historical Novel*, György Lukács recounts that the mass mobilized armies birthed in the French Revolutionary Wars were products of the innovations in propaganda (873). According to de Stael, these innovations were

primarily in the increased use of the talent that is creating fiction, that which will both give pleasure and enlighten (de Stael, "Essay on Fictions" 518). It is by literature that the French were taught to be French, and it is by literature that the proletariat must be taught to be the proletariat (Lukacs). To hold for oneself an identity, it need not first be reasoned that it is so but first imagined that it exists. This is equally true regardless of if the identity is an individual or collective one, for identity is only something which exists in society outside the self once made possible via the proper material conditions in place for the idea to develop (Marx, "Capital, Volume 1" 667). Naturally then, now that such an identity has been made possible by the revolutions of the former revolutionary class (the bourgeoisie), the proletariat must now be taught of themselves. They must be made to imagine a just future free of unjust systems of oppression, a fully socialized society. They must imagine it is by their collective labour that it might be achieved so that they might discover an identity of collective labour (Gorky). The proletariat must be taught that to be a proletarian is to be part of a revolutionary collective.

For this process of imagining an identity to succeed, the identity must be made one that can be believed in. De Stael recognizes an important truth, that a piece of fiction fully focused on its moral goal cannot be digested or believed, for it cannot reflect real life ("Essay on Fictions" 519). For an identity to become real, for it to exist in fiction, is not enough. Instead, a story must delicately carry its themes through reflecting the natural inconsistencies in human life (de Stael, "Essay on Fictions" 519). Fiction, unlike real life, must make sense. In spite of this, its characters must still reflect the injustice of an amoral world. Proletarian fiction then may have an advantage over previous stages, for the history of class struggle has been one of intense injustice where the moral hero is seldom victorious. As de Stael notes, when everything is so true to life, it is as if the future painted in the novel is suddenly highly plausible ("Essay on Fictions" 521). In making the novel so true to life the proletarian identity becomes a proper aspect of life. Such a battle for the vision of the past, present, and future is present in all genres of fiction; here the battle of the "two great hostile camps … Bourgeoisie and Proletariat" is fought (Marx, "The Communist Manifesto" 662).

Historically, it was the common belief for the Marxist revolutionary that the only acceptable literature for the class struggle was Proletarian Realism (Mirsky). This is on the basis that realism is to literature what materialism is to reality, on the understanding that art must know the world as it is (Mirsky). This form is that of realism with a constant focus on revolution (Mirsky). This, however, is a view which seems quite myopic, or simply antiquated as a result of material change. Certainly, it is not a wholly unfounded concern that certain themes or approaches to literature might rouse some reactionary tendencies in a proletarian. After all, it is this effect that literature can have which is of interest here. Clarifying his and Marx's work, Friedrich Engels also specified that the "traditions which haunt human minds also play a part" (679). But while it is most important to be acutely aware of our

unconscious biases and intellectual inheritances, this should not be at the expense of artistic potential. Simply because certain styles of literature served the bourgeoise in the past does not mean they cannot find uses under the proletariat. Surely great minds are capable of casting off that which is counter-productive to the style to use it in novel ways for the benefit of the people. In that same vein, realism is a style which requires a level of excellence that not all writers hold. A writer lacking in refinement will write realism as if it were nature. As de Stael writes, to reflect nature too closely is to create an almost one-dimensional image, for the harmony of nature is different than that of well-crafted text ("Essay on Fictions" 521). Without the flare of the dramatic, their themes will be muddied and lost, the truth unable to penetrate the heart of the reader (de Stael, "Essay on Fictions" 521). It is agreed that the text should be forward looking to revolution, but realism is not necessarily its exclusive vehicle. Credit must also be given to the intellect of the proletariat as well, for their literacy and education is not what it once was; the proletariat of today has received far more basic education than the proletariat of the early 19th century. Those who have a sense of their class surely hold the discernment to read literature that has a revolutionary core with some pre-revolutionary décor. The amount of masterwork propaganda that might be created by the unbridled imagination of a revolutionary seems worth such a risk. This is especially the case when facing down the totalizing culture of the bourgeoise.

In Marx's day the bourgeoisie was a revolutionary force, removing feudal systems, rejecting religion, and turned everything into a matter of market exchange ("The Communist Manifesto" 663). It remains true that all which has existed before is now solely a money relation (Marx, "The Communist Manifesto" 663). What has changed though is the role which the bourgeoisie occupies in the superstructure. No longer must they cooperate with the aristocracy and monarchs. The Great War all but eradicated the power of that class, and all that has come after has only proved and solidified bourgeois hegemony. The current dominance of neoliberal economic policy which found its rise due to the dwindling power of organized labour makes this all too clear. This greatly changes the bourgeoisie's relation to the themes of literature. Previously, they had to distinctly separate themselves from the outdated notions of the past, like chivalry. A revolutionary energy was necessary to advance their goals. Now, as they stand uncontested in the superstructure, having naturalized themselves and their role in the social order, they might idealize and fancy such notions of former modes of production. What this means then is that the literature of the proletariat must not fight just against the imagined narrative of the bourgeoisie, but all narratives that have come before as well, they have been subsumed to serve the needs of capital against the forces of organized labour: patriarchy, racism, and sexism are systems of organization which continue to be at the service of organized capital. It is not then a concern of the bourgeois republic if women engage in vain pleasantries or know nothing at all (de Stael, "On Literature Considered in Its Relationship to Social Institutions" 527).

De Stael is concerned with the lack of development in the rights of woman; this is something which hitherto the Marxists have also found difficult. The issue that is the rights of women should be viewed as an example representative of the battle over all uses of imagination in literature. The early republic of the Soviet Union was one highly focused on enlightenment for both men and women (Gorky). Despite this, in a country where proletarian art could flourish, the place of the woman in this art was highly reductive (Gorky). This position, much like the aftermath of the French Revolution, was comfortable keeping woman in their former wretched state regardless of their contribution (de Stael, "On Literature Considered in Its Relationship to Social Institutions" 527). While educated and nominally bearing the same rights as men, in art they were to be depicted in the fashion of former bourgeois sensitivities. This indicates that this is likely what was palatable for both author and readership (the authors were most likely men). Facing the same struggle in her day, de Stael suggested that a republic might consider ceding literature to the realm of women, leaving higher philosophy for men (de Stael, "On Literature Considered in Its Relationship to Social Institutions" 527). Consciousness comes from lived experience; much in the same way the experience of the wage-labourer was not a subject present in text, women, subjects who have been present since the very first modes of production, were also not present in text (Marx, “The German Ideology” 660). Though much has taken place in the century since the birth of Soviet theatre to advance the status of women, de Stael's suggestion continues to carry some merit. Though it would not make sense to deny men from participating in literature (in fact, most authors are now women), nor (and de Stael herself did not mean this) that women inversely should not attend to higher philosophy, a Marxist conception of the literary (as read through de Stael) requires that those voices supressed in the old order must be ensured space in the proletarian one. If humans are the creators of their own ideas, ideas which have the possibility to enable material disruption, there must be space for this imagination to occur comfortable with its own unpalatability (Marx, “The German Ideology” 660).

On one hand, this reductive view of women came out of palatability: the place of women in a society is primarily a concern of the economic base. Thus, as can be seen by the push to keep them in their place during the French Revolution, to change their role in society leads to greater disruption than mere mumblings in the superstructure. On the other hand, it is evidence of a literature incapable of adapting quickly enough to the transformation taking place in the economic base. Even those who fought for the revolution were incapable of shaking off the haunt of old ideas; their consciousness, heavy laden with experiences of the past, cannot grasp the new reality in which women were liberated. The proletarian age, much like previous epochs, may write on any age or period they choose. Moreso than the others however, as the only class in history that is not antagonistic, the proletariat must be acutely aware of the nature of the present.

It is debatable if in the present moment there is a singular identifiable group whose position in the economic base is undergoing rapid change (or that such a potential currently exists). If there is such a group, the proletariat must be prepared to accurately depict it in their literature. The same logic applies to innovations in technology, such as the internet. Developments like these are how the bourgeoise continues to revolutionize the instruments of production (Marx, "The Communist Manifesto" 663). If the proletariat is to guide the future through literature, it must be able to respond to the present through literature with equal precision. Such accuracy will provide the proletariat's work with credibility and heighten its chances of believability. This is different than the plausibility of the narrative and the source of prior calls to embrace the realist tradition. While realism is not the only functional form, acknowledging and understanding the current social relations of production is essential to creating effective propaganda.

However, an important concern has hitherto been left unaddressed. It may be argued that in the world of today that even radical thought has a place among the leisurely class; this challenges the very notion that literature can be meaningful propaganda. This concern is in part true. This is a natural product of the commodification of thought and leisure. Today, even Marxism is nothing but a commodity in the halls of academia and their associated book clubs (Ravecca and Dauphinee 42). In former periods of capitalism, the idea was often held as sacred and detached from the market. But the bourgeoisie must profane all that is holy (Marx, "The Communist Manifesto" 663). Today under neoliberalism it wields a double truth. The commodification of the idea is recognized, while simultaneously superficial objectivity is upheld, owing itself to the idea of the market as an "objective, divine, and moral agent" (Ravecca et al. 20). The modern bourgeoisie has zero fear in mobilizing religious powers to strengthen itself; in the same breath it tears religion down. Modern capitalism is also sometimes comfortable providing this space for different voices, and at times will even encourage it as a brand to be promoted (Ravecca and Dauphinee 42). Naturally though, this butchers anything beyond nominal notions of resistance in a text; it is performatively radical (this very paper is not absolved of that either). Because it is only performative, it remains quite palatable and to be sure the more indecent work will still fail to garner the same value as a commodity. Despite this commodification, it would be too extreme a claim to make that this has made Marxist theory something that reinforces or reasserts the bourgeoise. Marxism does not prop up the bourgeoisie in the superstructure; rather, Marxism and other such ideologies at odds with the status quo are simply pacified and packaged to be sold, for the highest end of the bourgeoisie is to make all relations those of money exchange (Marx, "The Communist Manifesto" 663). Nonetheless, exposure to such ideology remains a net positive even if an extremely diminished one. Imagination then, regardless of some small good it might do, has been largely commodified in our current age, stripping it of most of its power

What is to be done then in the present? Certainly, the claim can be freely put forward that under communism, or even the dictatorship of the proletariat, literature and imagination will cease to be commodities. Such a claim is hardly useful though, especially in the context of using the text to assert such a vision of the future. To determine the path forward it is necessary to identify the relation of literature as commodity to the author as commodity; it must be confirmed that the claim remains true in all its aspects. The economic fact that the worker becomes poorer the more they produce remains true: as congealed labour, the more literature that is consistently produced the less valuable it becomes (as commodity) (Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844" 657). It is also true that authors see their work as alien object, conferring on it life; the ideas of the author become ideas of their work, emptying the author out as product of labour (Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844" 657). The author then remains slave to their work for subsistence (Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844" 658). So then, slave to their work, they come to begrudge their labour (Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844" 658). Even the lover of letters will come to only feel themselves whole outside of their work (Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844" 659). The source then, having determined all that remains true, is this: "that labour produces for the rich wonderful things-but for the worker it produces privation" (Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844" 658). The solution then is the solution of Marx, to change the labourer's relation to labour.

The solution of course is not revolution, for this is the vision that imagination will provide; the system cannot be overthrown until the proletariat has class consciousness, and changing the author's relation to their labour is but a step to instilling it on a macro scale. But the principles of the revolution and revolutionary organizing remain useful tools to consider. While not revolutionary, for this would require the seizure of the state apparatus, imagination and its produced literature must be saved from estrangement by the seizure of the means of production. Authors reaping the full benefits of their labour does not stop literature from being a commodity, but it changes the relationship between the author and the art, a relationship which can reradicalize that which has become a mere token of resistance. With the advent of technology, self-publication and the development of publishing cooperatives has never been easier. Another, less likely but equally viable option to end this estrangement is via a generous benefactor, a donor sympathetic to the aims of the socialist struggle in spite of their privileged place in it. Though rare, such socialists willing to go beyond the champagne do exist in the bourgeoise; the finest example of this is also the most obvious, the famous relationship of Marx and Engels. Swas found fitting for the fathers of the movement and there is no evidence that such an arrangement would be improper now, so long as the benefactor is a socialist themselves.[1] Certainly, there is an echo to the charity espoused by Dickens, but this charity is but a first step to dismantling the system. The charity helps achieve the solution, but it is not the solution itself. It is by these pathways that the

revolutionary author can assist the vanguard through instilling class consciousness among their readers written with socialist principles.

In a time when fewer and fewer people are reading, to be able to provide literature as an object free of exchange value becomes all the more important. The proliferation of the library system under Keynesian Capitalism was a direct recognition of this, that a population capable of reading for education and leisure without cost might better internalize their capitalistic conditioning While an attempt might be made to approximate one, it is much more difficult to ascribe exchange value to a public good, one which is used to uphold the economic base. No mass movement, especially a socialist one, can appear to be for the people when the literature building that movement costs money. Of consideration is that while a cooperative will free the author from estrangement to the labour, a benefactor will also make it much easier to provide literature as an object free of exchange value. Free of exchange value, literature might be fully appreciated for its use value. It is critical that literature written with socialist principles is disseminated in line with those same principles.

Literature shapes its readers by speaking to their heart and creating a believable world. Currently, it is the bourgeoisie who have used the form most effectively to recodify themselves, but should the necessary artistic freedom and space to create be provided, and the struggle with literatures commodification overcome, the proletariat might exercise the power of literature as propaganda. Those committed to proletarian revolution on Marxist principles should draw on the lessons from the synthesis of Mme de Stael and Marx: it is through the embrace of literature and imagination that bourgeois hegemony in the superstructure might be disrupted. The revolution of Marx's day may have failed, but with the insights of Mme de Stael there may be a greater chance of success for the next one.

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Literature as an Interactive Site: An Argument Against Plato's Republic

Grayson Kennedy

In *The Republic*, Plato argues that literature cannot depict truth, that it is an imperfect representation of reality. Because of this, literature is a politically dangerous medium where it can seep into a society and poison its people, making them believe in ideas that are not based in reality. I think there is some truth to Plato's argument, where literature does indeed have the potential to corrupt minds and lie to us. That can be seen in our modern world, especially in news stories that like to adjust the truth for more attention, short-form videos that seek to farm engagement and create emotional reactions rather than present the truth, and in political speeches where reality is bent to serve the agenda of the speaker. However, Plato presents an idea of literature where the meaning behind the written word is determined by one divine truth: there is only one true form, and literature is an imitation of that form, so far removed from reality that it cannot be trusted in the slightest. I disagree. In this paper, I argue that literature is not a place dictated by one divine truth; it is an interactive site where reader and writer meet, creating the meaning through their own subjective thoughts rather than following an objective view that all literature is morally wrong. I seek to argue against Plato's belief of a three-tiered hierarchy of truth, and present the relationship between the writer and literature, and the relationship between the reader and literature, to prove just how interactive and dynamic the written word is.

In order to understand that there is no divine truth to literature, we must understand Plato's argument stating that such a concept does exist. To put it simply, Plato believes that there is only one world which truly represents reality, the world of ideas. This world is based on his belief that there is an original version to everything that exists, and that this original version was created by a divine power: "God…did in fact make only one bed, the real bed. Never were two or more beds made by god, nor would they ever be" (Plato 80). This original version is the closest anything can ever get to the truth. Below this is the material world, which is essentially made up of copies of the original. These copies, such as a bed made by a carpenter, are the second closest anything can get to truth, but because "[the carpenter] simply makes a particular bed and not what we call the real bed, the form of a bed," it is not perfect reality (79). Despite this, it is so close to this divine original, in both form and function, that it is more truthful than a painting or a written description of a bed. This brings us to the bottom of the hierarchy, where poets and artists exist instead of carpenters. These people make up the artistic world and are "[imitators] of things that others create" (80). Artists and writers create imitations of imitations that are so far removed from true reality that they are essentially lying to us through these creations.

Because of this, Plato wishes "to declare that the entire tribe of poets—beginning with Homer—are mere imitators of illusions of virtue and imitators as well of the other things they write about. They don't lay a hand on truth" (82-3). There is nothing about what they do that actually represents reality.

It is true that a painting or description of a bed is not a real bed. You cannot lay on it and use it to sleep, nor can you touch it and feel what you expect to feel when you touch a real bed. However, does this mean that an artistic form of a bed is attempting to deceive us and show us a false form of reality? I think not. In a book, a description of a bed might not be something that we can actually see in front of us, but the description of it conjures an image of that object into our minds—that way we understand what the writer is telling us. Literature is an imitation of reality, but that imitation is simply there for us to comprehend what the writer wishes to imitate. This means that literature is an abstract representation of reality meant to invoke some kind of response or understanding, but it is still based on reality. One of the only times an imitation would be lying to us, for example, is if the writer describes something that is clearly not a bed but attempts to tell us that it is. Just because something is abstract—or in other words, an imitation—does not mean it is trying to deceive us. On top of this, as an abstract representation of reality, literature is subject to the whims of what the writer wishes to represent, and what the reader interprets from such a representation. This makes it quite a dynamic site of external forces determining its meaning and morals rather than it being false due to a singular divine true form.

Continuing with that topic, let's first look at what a writer is in relation to the text. To Plato, a writer is an imitator, who daubs "the several arts with words and phrases but understanding nothing" (83). Basically, a writer is someone who smears words onto a page without understanding what they are writing about. Knowledge is not a tool that writers use in their work, and if knowledge is not present, then how truthful could their work actually be? Plato likely says this because of his belief that literature inherently tells lies, in which case it makes sense why he thinks that writers lack knowledge. However, I have already established that literature does not always tell lies but instead gives us an abstract form of the truth. As well, it is interesting to consider this argument as Plato himself is a writer. He certainly seems to think that he knows what he is writing about in *The Republic*, as he speaks with an authoritative and confident air that literature should not be allowed in his metaphorical city. It is clear, then, that some writers do know what they are writing about, but there are definitely those who might not. Just because there are a few who might not understand their subject does not mean that all of them are ignorant; it simply depends on the kind of knowledge they possess and what they wish to write about. In the end, a writer is someone who presents an abstract reality to their readers in order to portray their thoughts and feelings about said reality, often based on the knowledge they possess.

However, what about morality? Plato discusses this a lot in *The Republic* and harbours the idea that literature can harm the people reading it. He provides a few examples of literature that present objectively bad situations, such as domestic violence and war:

Nor should the child be taught to believe that in abandoning all restraint in order to punish the misdeeds of his father he will only be following the example of the first and greatest gods…Nor can we permit it to be said that gods plot against gods and make war upon each other—which is in any case false—if we want our future guardians to abhor even the thought of quarreling among themselves (60).

Through these examples, he suggests that reading about these situations will make the reader think that they should participate in these things because they are presented in text. However, the situation by itself is not the thing that will persuade the reader that such situations are okay, even if it is a god doing it; it heavily depends on how the writer depicts it. If the writer presents war in a way that highlights the gore, trauma, and death that soldiers deal with, then they will be presenting an unappealing version of war. Therefore, the audience will likely not want to engage in actual warfare. On the other hand, if the writer focuses on the glory and exciting action of war, and ignores the horrific reality of it, then they will be promoting it. The same can be said for any immoral actions presented in text; it depends on the message the writer wants to give us, which also depends on the writer's own views on the subject. It is not inherently corruptive to have these situations in literature.

Of course, he also argues that literature is immoral regardless of what it presents to the readers. A writer "corrupts the individual's character with fabrications far removed from reality and panders to the soul's fool that cannot even distinguish big from little" (87). So, literature is created by liars who pander to fools. I have already explained how literature does not always lie to us. A writer may have malicious intent to deceive their audience, but some writers may want to present reality as truthfully as possible. However, we do start to enter a grey zone when we consider fiction. Nonfiction, on the one hand, rarely ever lies to us, not unless the writer is ignorant about their subject or seeks to distort the truth. Fiction, on the other hand, is based on fake situations with fake people and sometimes set in fake worlds. Fantasy is an example of all the above, often showing us amazing adventures with mythical creatures and legendary heroes. Despite these mythic aspects of the genre, does a fantasy author lie to us more than any nonfiction author? Not necessarily. Just like literature as a whole, where its written words seek to represent something in an abstract and arbitrary form, fantasy is a decontextualised version of the reality we live in. Sometimes, a fantasy novel seeks to explore a concept found in the real world, such as colonialism, but places it in a different context for us to consider it from a new and fresh perspective. Other times, it is possible that a fantasy author wishes to completely separate their fictional world from Earth, but it is still impossible to sever that world from the knowledge they hold from the real world. That knowledge will seep in one way or another, and the story will have a theme to

share regarding a real world topic. Fiction may lie to us by presenting a world it pretends to exist, but it does not lie to us about the reality we live in, not unless the author wills it to.

But what of the reader? How do they interact with the text? For this aspect of literature, Plato puts emphasis on children and the fact they are "impressionable and therefore most likely to adopt any and all models set before them" (59). He is discussing the idea that young minds are easier to corrupt, especially if they are given the wrong media to consume. Because of this, he argues that "we can hardly afford to let the children listen to just any tales or fables recounted by just any teachers who happen along. We surely don't want the children to adopt opinions and beliefs that might be largely contrary to the kinds of values we deem desirable for them to have when they become adults" (59). What I find interesting about this argument is that it brings to mind the motives behind book banning in many places around the world. A lot of adults do not want their children to read certain books because it will give them undesirable values. These undesirable values, however, are not inherent to the book, but are instead determined by the reader's interpretation.

Let's take a children's book that discusses the LGBTQ+ community as a relevant example. Someone who leans politically left-wing and possesses values from that side of the spectrum will see no problem with such a book. In fact, they will regard it as a positive sign of progress and think it is good for kids to learn about the queer community so they do not grow up feeling like they are doing something wrong because they like someone who is of the same sex. Someone who has right-wing values will often see such a book as an abomination, that children should never learn of the LGBTQ+ community because it is inappropriate. The more ignorant of them will believe it can turn their kids queer, which is not the case.

I am not here to argue which reaction is correct. This is to prove my point that the morality of a book or any other type of literature is determined not only by the intentions of the writer, but by the worldview of the readers. It is not just their political beliefs that can influence this opinion. It is also the knowledge they possess, along with their religious beliefs—as well as with other beliefs. Someone who is a devout Christian may believe that the Earth is only a few thousand years old according to the bible, so they will likely regard a textbook about dinosaurs as untruthful because it claims the Earth is millions of years old. A flat-earther will think any texts that state the Earth is round are lying. Someone who does not understand what it means to be transgender will believe media depicting transgender people will influence others to change their genders. All these people will see those particular pieces of literature as immoral and corruptive, then turn around and claim literature that lines up with their beliefs is moral and honest.

While it is true that children are impressionable and will adopt the ideas set before them, it is not because the book is inherently deceptive. It is because the reader is a child and does not understand many things. A child is more likely to believe that a fantasy story is real than an adult, who has a stronger grasp on reality. On top of this,

writers can indeed corrupt a society with their works, as Plato states in *The Republic*: "Because he calls forth the worst elements in the soul…he destroys the soul's reasoning part. All this finds a parallel in any city where someone makes the wicked mighty, appoints them the city's governors, and corrupts the city's best elements" (87). Though he uses this as an allegory, his message is clear: corrupt the people and that corruption will spread through the society they live in. Despite this, whether or not literature will corrupt someone not only depends on the goals of the writer, but the person who consumes it. One person will see right through what the writer is trying to say and vehemently reject it, resisting any corruption that might be present. Someone who already harbours similar views of the writer will likely be more susceptible to the underlying message. As readers, we all have our own subjective interpretations of reality that determine how we interact with the writer's interpretation, thus turning literature into a dynamic site rather than the static environment that Plato presents it as.

In the end, it is clear that literature is not inherently good or bad, moral or immoral; it is a site where its meaning is dependent on the relationship between the reader and writer and their own subjective views. Literature is not something that presents a distortion of reality, unlike what Plato claims, and its morality is based on what the writer intends in their work and how the reader interprets the work for themself. These external forces are incredibly important in what literature is deemed as deceitful and corruptive and what is not, regardless of the partial truth in *The Republic*. The written word is not separate from the contexts in which it is written or read; it is intrinsically tied to it through the fact it is an interactive site. Its morality is entirely dependent on this interaction of reader and writer, turning it into a dynamic scene of interpretation.

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A Fragmented Reality: The Challenge of War in the Literature of Louis MacNeice, Keith Douglas, and Elizabeth Bowen

Kiley Bleich

Fluttering debris like untimely confetti from another world, the banshee's scream echoing her final warning, and bodies like distorted mannequins stone still in the streets; a grim picture of the uncanny brought forth by war, the crux of man's capability for destruction and suffering. The trouble of accurately describing war within one's literature is not only due to its unreal nature but also the conflicting emotions which it brings forth in civilians. Along with the horror there is awe, a near indescribable marvelling at the violence along with the insatiable desire to be at the centre of it. Akin to Eve's own temptation to risk her perfect state in the efforts to satiate her own curiosity, so too do humans find themselves fascinated by their own demise and so willing to participate in the making of it. Written during the Blitz of the second world war, an eight-month bombing campaign by Nazi Germany against the United Kingdom, the works "Brother Fire" by Louis MacNeice, "How to Kill" by Keith Douglas, and "The Demon Lover" by Elizabeth Bowen seek to interpret the uncanny nature of war. By analyzing these three texts, one can begin to understand the challenge of writing about war and how each author uniquely approaches the dynamic feelings brought forth by such times.

A hellhound let loose in the streets, carnassial teeth ripping chunks of life from the city and setting fire to familiarity–in the poem "Brother Fire" by Louis MacNeice, published in 1966, the fires caused by the Blitz take the form of a brazen household pet to familiarize the unfamiliar and decode the contrasting emotions caused by war. As a firewatcher on London rooftops, MacNeice held a front row seat to the bombings, finding himself inspired to write "Brother Fire" the morning after an air-raid. The Irish poet and playwright observes a dissociation from the horror of war, describing himself as "half appalled and half enlivened by this fantasy of destruction" (qtd. in Brown 9). So unreal is the display of destruction before him, that MacNeice can barely distinguish it from something of a dream. As has been made clear throughout history, war brings out both the best and worst of our neighbours. In times of peril, humanity is forced to stare slack-jawed into the obsidian mirror and lock eyes with truth. Such emotions brought forth range from complete disbelief at the carnage and inhumanity to utter amazement at the sheer capability of man for such violence. Highlighting these two realities, though perhaps taboo, showcases a gritty honesty of humanity's opposing faces which war time literature perfectly encapsulates. MacNeice writes, "Night after night we watched him slaver and crunch away" (line 5). Despite the harrowing disaster taking place, civilians are unable to tear their eyes away from the gory sight. This emphasizes the natural fascination for

something which we seek to condemn, that being unnecessary violence done by one flesh-lined hand to another. Although wrecked at the sight of the destruction, onlookers see the perpetrator as something akin to themselves, a vision of the world before the senseless fighting brought forth a new order, something like their childhood pet. MacNeice relates that when whispers to "give the dog a bone" commenced, humanity responded, "and so we gave him ours" (line 4). Representative of the way in which civilians have gutted themselves for the war efforts and served heart and soul on a silver platter to the hounds of combat. When describing humanity's twisted lust for war, MacNeice relates to the rabid dog and believes humanity to only echo the thoughts and temptations of the canine, thoughts which encourage one to, "'Destroy! Destroy!'" (line 18). Although difficult to accurately conjure the words which explore these conflicting feelings of abhorrence and wonder with war, Louis MacNeice does well to familiarize readers with violence through the eyes of our domesticated counterparts.

Similarly to themes in "Brother Fire" by MacNeice, Keith Douglas tackles the arduous task of representing the conflicting feelings which surround war in his poetry. Arguably, Douglas is the best man to translate such unreal events to paper, due to his own twisted desire to flee safety and dance upon the stage of war. Keith Douglas was an English poet and soldier with what can only be described as a boyish temptation for danger, taking off against orders during the Second Battle of El Alamein in efforts to quell the itch for battle and squander his feelings of uselessness while stuck at headquarters. In his poem "How to Kill", Douglas attempts to describe the emotional rollercoaster that comes with being a soldier during war times. When describing an enemy soldier from the perspective of his gun scope, Douglas can't help but think of how, "He smiles, and moves about in ways / his mother knows, habits of his" (lines 9-10), a brief glimpse into the absurdity of war, of raising killing machines to the face of someone's son, of going blind to everything outside of the scope. Douglas describes this experience and details how, "The wires touch his face" (line 11). These lines express the corrupted intimacy in war, in taking a man's life, a son or a father but nonetheless a fellow with red blood and beating heart. Douglas utilizes these depictions of subtle intimacy to explore the closeness which occurs amid a battlefield, the raw understanding that he was the last one to see how that man moved in ways only his mother memorized. Regardless of this moment of humanity, Douglas still engages in what he describes as "sorcery" (line 14) and takes the man's life to which he remarks, "How easy it is to make a ghost" (line 18). Douglas expresses the uncanny aspect of war, specifically taking another human's life, in an almost disassociated manner. These descriptions seem to mock the role of God, staking claim as a sort of divine figure due to his ability to wield a gun. Quickly is the tragedy overtaken by a fascination with his own power, his own ability to send a soul to the underworld. With his hands-on experience on the battlefield, Douglas impressively deciphers this quality of fantasy, or make-believe which war often produces.

Approaching the topic of war through a short story rather than a poem like MacNeice and Douglas, Elizabeth Bowen equally attempts to showcase the inner turmoil which comes about in times of war in "The Demon Lover" through a female perspective. As Bowen takes readers on a journey into the mind of a woman gone mad, the format of a short story does well to elongate the experience and allow the protagonist, Mrs. Drover, to be entirely explored. Invoking themes of female hysteria and the lack of control felt as a woman during the war effort, Bowen offers a contrasting but equally honest tale. While MacNeice and Douglas seem on a path towards acceptance regarding the conflicting feelings surrounding disdain and awe for war, Bowen's Mrs. Drover is entirely avoidant. Returning to her abandoned home after being driven out by bombings, the protagonist, Kathleen Drover finds herself in a state of utter confusion and fear. On her hall table Mrs. Drover finds a letter with no postmark, the contents of which invoke such distress that it causes her to look in the mirror and notice, "her lips, beneath the remains of lipstick, beginning to go white" (Bowen, 93). The descriptions of Kathleen Drover's reactions to the mysterious events all revolve around her appearance, be it her worn lipstick, the powder under her eyes, or her thinning throat. Amid a series of uncanny events, Kathleen remains attentive to her own appearance, suggesting an internalized gaze that persists even while isolated, long before the introduction of the taxi driver as an external observer. As the letter was addressed to her from a past lover who was suspected to have died in the first World War, with a demand to meet again, perhaps this invisible observer is his ghostly presence. A haunting figure which lingers in the back of her mind, this faceless soldier with such influence on Kathleen even twenty-five years after his presumed death. This prior loss also undoubtedly brings forth a host of emotions surrounding the seemingly never-ending human propensity for destruction. This letter drives Kathleen to a point of madness and total hysteria, combining her psychological trauma with a supernatural catalyst. Ultimately, Kathleen Drover attempts to flee and hails a taxi which takes off without her input. She swiftly begins to "scream freely and to beat with her gloved hands on the glass all round as the taxi, accelerating without mercy, makes off with her into the hinterland of deserted streets" (Bowen, 99). In this moment of utter terror, Kathleen is described in relation to the glass panel of the taxi, with her face pressed closely to it and gloved knuckles beating upon it relentlessly. Again, we see Mrs. Drover depicted in front of a mirror; her complete horror is reflected at her. Perhaps this reflection depicts the supernatural observer, the persistent male gaze, or the ever-thinning separation between life and death which becomes so clear during times of war. In "The Demon Lover", Elizabeth Bowen examines the fragmentation of body and mind during war times as well as the destabilization of reality, as experienced through the perspective of a psychologically traumatized woman driven toward madness.

It is the descent into madness which perfectly encapsulates the dislocating experience of war which "Brother Fire" by Louis MacNeice, "How to Kill" by Keith Douglas, and "The Demon Lover" by Elizabeth Bowen equally attempt to decipher in their own way through these literary works. MacNeice attempts to explain the

unsettling delight humanity experiences through destruction, an analysis of our most morbid temptations through the lens of a rabid dog. While Douglas admits his own twisted fascination with the divinity in taking a life, he does so through personal experience on the battlefield-- a far more intimate look at the realities of war, regardless of how gruesome. Bowen explores an untold story, one which prioritizes the long-lasting psychological effects of war. Showcasing a woman who has lost something in both wars, one is confronted with the cyclical nature of human violence. Although each writer brings a distinct hand to the topic of war poetry, they equally confront readers with the harrowing and cannibalistic nature of war, and they tell us that we like it.

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VISUAL VOICE

Solastalgia and the Slaughter of American Buffalo

Kya Spillner



Created over multiple days using different layers of oil paint. Spillner created the piece to represent the loss and solastalgia felt in response to the slaughter of American buffalo during the 1800s.

Short Fiction

Stories and imaginative worlds

Firekeeper

Grayson Kennedy

Snow fell from the sky like white static. Sigrid watched the flakes draw closer, but never did they fall below the roof of the tallest building, the temple on top of the nearby hill. They dispersed seconds before, as if hitting an invisible barrier. Sigrid drew his eyes to the middle of the courtyard, where a fire burned in a shallow brazier, surrounded by men as though it were a god. It wasn't the real fire, the hearth housed in that temple tended by men who had already completed their initiation. In a way, this particular flame determined their fate: it signaled the rest of their lives as a firekeeper.

The voice of their instructor ricocheted through the courtyard. By the time it reached Sigrid's ears, it fizzled into a delayed mumble. He didn't dare get any closer, opting to stay hidden on the roof. The last time he did this, he was caught and was forced into a week of penance in solitude. It was forbidden for housekeepers to interact with the hearth in any way and watching the initiation implied intent to do so. He couldn't help it. He had to watch the initiation, as it made it easier for him to pretend to be among the initiates as opposed to the time spent daydreaming while sweeping the temple grounds.

Sigrid could guess what the instructor was saying based on what he saw previously. Something about how the fire is part of you, runs in your veins, and can smell fear. You let it sense fear and you lose control, so you must dampen your emotions. Pain is normal. A little bit means you have discipline, too much means you are weak, none means you are not connected enough. If you can feel it, you can shape it, you can control it, and if you control it the fire will never go out. *Never* let the fire go out, as it will be the death of us all. Sigrid could almost see the shiver run through the men, as if the hearth had been extinguished and the arctic cold had seeped inside.

The instructor stepped aside, and one by one the men approached the fire. Very few of them hesitated, sticking their hands in the flames like they had been taming it for years. Some of them flinched, and pulled their hands out with slightly bubbled skin, but they didn't so much as whimper. They would take pride in those scars. One of them cried out in anguish and drew back an ignited hand. No one offered him water; no one leapt to his aid. They watched as he swatted the appendage in the air and batted it against his robes. Sigrid wrinkled his nose, almost smelling the burnt flesh. Once he extinguished himself, he was escorted out of the courtyard by a full firekeeper. He wouldn't be kicked out, but he wouldn't be let inside the hearth's temple until the next initiation in three years. It was the greatest honor of all firekeepers to see and tend the hearth. Sigrid felt bad for him, then he forced himself to feel nothing at all.

Slowly, the men filtered out of the courtyard, keeping their excitement contained but Sigrid could feel it simmering beneath the surface. He wished he was among them, sharing their achievement, being patted on the back when they entered their new dorms, an upgrade from the trainee quarters they have been in since they were children. There weren't very many people who could control fire. Any normal person would have reacted the same way the man with the burned hand did. Fully fledged firekeepers could bend fire to their will, hence their minor injuries. They were born like this, trained like this, were the descendants of powerful men who had been keeping the hearth for generations. Sigrid was the same. His father was an elder, keeping the hearth for over 50 years, one of the most powerful firekeepers in a century. Only, Sigrid wasn't one of them, and for good reason. He wasn't a man, wasn't born as he should have been, and couldn't control fire. It was his father's greatest shame, not having a son to carry on his legacy.

When the men were gone, Sigrid waited to ensure that no one else was around. Then, he dropped from the roof and climbed down the wall, fingers grappling rough stone and thin ledges. When his feet touched the ground, he crept into the courtyard, keeping to the shadows. After looking around him, he stepped into the open and approached the fire, which was still burning, flickering in the breeze. Sigrid had never seen the real hearth—housekeepers were rarely allowed inside the main temple—but he could imagine this was it. This was the fire that kept them all alive. He could imagine the honour of being in its presence, of being allowed to touch it. He extended his hand, allowing himself to be lost in the flame. The heat was so intense he instantly began to sweat, but he continued forward, fingers reaching for the vibrant reds, yellows, and oranges. The first flame licked his palm, but he didn't flinch. Panic welled inside him, but he didn't stop. He closed his eyes, looking for the fire inside him like what the instructor described. There had to be a connection within him somewhere. His lip trembled as pain engulfed his hand, nerves screaming in protest as he continued to search. Finally, with a gasp, he pulled his hand out and fell to his knees, his arm shaking with pain and adrenaline. He didn't catch on fire, but the way his skin peeled and boiled meant he didn't have control.

He didn't know why he did that. He never did that before. It was clearly a mistake, and he would never do it again. He left the courtyard full of shame, just like the man who had failed, only Sigrid didn't have anyone to escort him to his room.

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Sigrid swept the hallway in silence, listening to the rhythmic swish of the bristles on the stone floor. It was a slow morning, and heavy bags hung under his eyes. He was unable to sleep last night. The pain from his burn bordered on unbearable, but he didn't want to show the healers what he had done. Instead, he dumped a bottle of medicinal alcohol on his hand and wrapped it in a cloth to keep the wound clean. Today, he wore a pair of gloves to hide his deed. It was likely that no one would question it, as it had gotten to that time of year where the cold seeped past the hearth's protection more than usual. It felt more like a cool breeze

than anything else, but it still had a way to put him on edge. What if the firekeepers were failing again?

The hearth failed a few years ago. It was only out for a few minutes, but that was enough for the cold to creep into the bones of the city, killing dozens caught in open areas. His mother died of infection caused by the incident. Her frost-bitten gangrenous extremities haunted the quiet hours of the night when Sigrid couldn't sleep. No one knew exactly what happened, why the fire failed, but Sigrid knew. The firekeepers couldn't keep the fire alive, and they didn't want to admit it. They didn't have the right men for the job.

He tightened his fist on the broom in anger, and his burn throbbed in response. It only made him grit his teeth harder. The burn served as a furious reminder of who he was not, the power he lacked in determining the fate of the people in this city. He wished he could see the hearth. Maybe it acted differently than normal fire. Maybe he could control that but nothing else. Maybe that was just wishful thinking.

A few voices echoed down the hallway, and his rage faded as a cold sweat broke over Sigrid's body. Various scenarios filtered through his mind: they knew what he did. They were coming to arrest him. They were going to throw him in front of the elders for judgement, where his father would be standing in front of him, avoiding eye contact because now he had another reason to be disappointed in his daughter. The last time he saw his father was a week ago, a grey-haired man with a deeply wrinkled face that had walked past him without a single glance. He had been in the hearth's temple ever since. As the voices grew louder, Sigrid suddenly remembered how stressed, old, and haggard his father looked. He couldn't bear the thought of his father seeing him in such a disgraced state.

Just before the men rounded the corner, Sigrid ducked through an arched opening leading to a balcony and hid behind a pillar. As the men came closer, Sigrid closed his eyes, hoping they would not see him.

"This is a disaster," one of them said.

"Not yet," came another voice. "We still have time to stop it from going out."

Sigrid opened his eyes wide. Were they talking about the hearth?

"And how do you propose we do that? Everything we've done has already failed. It's sputtering, volatile, and dangerous, growing weaker by the day."

A loud sigh broke through their debate, a sigh that Sigrid recognized. "Enough with your pessimism. The elders will gather tomorrow night and use their collective power to reignite it. Everything will be fine."

It was Skuld, one of the strongest firekeepers besides the elders. He was mentored by Sigrid's father and passed his initiation with flying colours. The scarring on his hand was worse than the others, but Sigrid heard rumours that Skuld *made*

the fire react like that to his presence. Skuld didn't so much as cry when his hand was engulfed in flames, and he extinguished it without a single shake or breath of air.

"They've even invited me, too. To help." Sigrid could hear the smile in his voice when he spoke. The other two men gave pleased hums.

"They're going to make you an elder before you're 40," one of them commented.

Skuld laughed heartily. "I'm not ready to lose my hair yet."

They all laughed together, and suddenly Sigrid saw them enter his line of sight. His breath froze in his chest when he came eye-to-eye with three men staring at him in shock.

They were going to the balcony. Sigrid should have hid somewhere else.

"Shit," one of them muttered, a shorter man packed with dense muscle. Sigrid was taller than him, but he still managed to make Sigrid feel small. "How much did you hear?"

"Uhm… n-nothing." Sigrid stammered. He grabbed his broom and attempted to leave the other way, but a giant, scarred hand grabbed his shoulder. He turned to see Skuld glaring down at him.

"Spying on firekeepers, eh?" Skuld said. His grip on Sigrid's shoulder tightened. "I thought your father would have had a smarter daughter than you. You were already caught watching the initiation a few years ago, and now you want to get in more trouble?"

"N-no. I was just… cleaning!" Sigrid cleared his throat. "I was just cleaning."

Skuld narrowed his eyes. "I could throw you in front of the elders for this."

"Wait, Skuld," the third man said, tall and lean. "This is Haldor's daughter. Maybe she could be of use."

Skuld barked a humourless laugh. "She'd only be useful if she were born as one of us, but she wasn't. She's just a housekeeper."

"But… we need someone to clean the temple for tomorrow night. Maybe the hearth will recognize the bloodline, and it'll be easier for the elders to tame it."

Skuld gaped at him. Hope swelled in Sigrid's chest. Would he actually be able to see the hearth?

"A *girl* will make the task easier?" Sigrid's heart sank, and he felt a sharp pang in his stomach at the word. "That's ridiculous-" But then Skuld suddenly stopped, as if recognizing something in the firekeeper's words. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply through his nose and then locked his gaze with Sigrid's. There was something urgent in his eyes, a hint

of stress hidden behind anger. “Fine. You’ll clean the temple tonight, but don’t think I won’t be watching you. You touch the brazier and I’ll throw you off the mountain.”

Despite the threat, Sigrid couldn’t stop the smile that slowly stretched across his face. “You’ll actually let me in there?”

Skuld growled and said through gritted teeth, “Yes, but only because we want to see what works. I’ll meet you on top of the hill this evening. Don’t be late.”

The three men continued their walk, Skuld stomping ahead with his hands curled into fists. Sigrid watched them leave, equal parts intimidated and baffled by what just happened. Was he really going to be allowed inside the temple? Very few housekeepers were chosen to take care of it, and now Sigrid was handed the opportunity on a silver platter. Happiness swelled inside him, but the moment he recalled what the men were talking about, it shattered like fragile glass. If the fire went out, people could die, maybe even more than the last time it failed. Sigrid wouldn’t be late.

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As Sigrid climbed the steps leading to the main temple, he took a deep breath to calm his nerves. This wasn’t how he imagined he would see the heart for the first time—he always dreamed of magically becoming a firekeeper, and being welcomed among their ranks—but if cleaning the temple meant he could help keep the fire alive, then he would gladly do it a hundred times over. Because they had entered the time of year where the sun slept for months on end, lanterns lit his way up the path. It wasn’t quite evening yet, but Sigrid wanted to make sure he was there early enough to not miss the duty Skuld had assigned for him.

When he made it to the top, the first thing he noticed was that the temple doors were open. The next was a handful of men standing inside it, hands outstretched towards something Sigrid couldn’t see yet. They were chanting words unknown to him, an ancient language that only firekeepers were permitted to learn to help them tend the flame. Their deep voices resonated through the door, vibrating in Sigrid’s chest as he drew closer. Finally, the hearth came into view, and Sigrid watched from the outside, starry eyed and breathless at the display in front of him. The fire was magnificent, tall and hungry, eating the surrounding air like it was a famished beast desperate for a meal. As Sigrid watched, however, the flame began to flicker unnaturally, like a breeze had entered the room. Sigrid couldn’t feel any wind. The chanting rose in volume, and Sigrid watched in fear as the fire seemed to dim even further. One man’s legs began to shake. The fire then sputtered and flared violently, fighting against their control and sending sparks in every direction. The firekeepers ducked and dove out of the way, avoiding the flames by mere inches. The shaking man’s eyes rolled to the back of his head, and he fell to the ground, limp and breathing heavily. Skuld, who Sigrid didn’t see until now, ran over and rolled him to his back.

"Bring him to the infirmary," Skuld ordered another two men. They lifted the unconscious man by his armpits and legs, and Sigrid moved to the side so they could carry him out the door. When Sigrid resumed his position to look back inside the temple, he jumped away upon seeing Skuld standing before him blocking the view, arms folded, jaw taut. A clump of his hair sizzled and smoked, but he didn't make any move to put it out.

"You're early," he commented. Before Sigrid could respond, he continued, "If you tell anyone what you saw, I'm feeding you to the hearth."

He led Sigrid inside. "What happened? Is it not supposed to do that?" Sigrid asked.

Skuld didn't say anything, but Sigrid could fill in the gaps with the way his jaw tightened. They couldn't control the hearth anymore. It was reacting violently to their presence, like it didn't want them there. Like it didn't want to be controlled. Before Sigrid could get lost in that line of thought, his attention was drawn to the interior around him. The temple was filled with ornate stone, pillars carved with obscure symbols, and fire motifs etched into almost every piece of rock that made up the circular building. In the center of everything was the hearth. It crackled and burned, flickering calmly in its brazier as if it didn't explode moments ago. He noticed there was no one else there besides himself, Skuld, and a couple other firekeepers.

"Where are the elders?" Sigrid thought they would have been there, especially with how he still hadn't seen his father.

"They're resting for tomorrow, which is why you have a job to do." Skuld grabbed a broom and handed it to Sigrid. "You have tonight to clean everything. Do not watch the hearth, do not go near the hearth, and do not touch the hearth. Just clean."

Sigrid opened his mouth to ask more questions, but Skuld fixed him with a withering look. With an awkward nod, Sigrid turned his focus to the temple floor and began to sweep. It wasn't caked in dirt, thanks to how many people entered this place on a daily basis, but it was clear that it hadn't been properly cleaned in a while judging by the amount of dust and ash that covered nearly every surface. How often were housekeepers allowed in this area? Sigrid continued his duty without complaint, keeping clear of the dipped platform in the centre that housed the hearth's brazier. He tried his best to avoid looking at it, but it was the kind of thing that caught the eye far too easily, even just on the periphery. Skuld watched the entire time, either with his arms crossed or passively rubbing his scarred hand.

Eventually, after all the dirt on the upper level had been swept out the door, Sigrid found that he had no choice but to venture into the inner circle. Sigrid looked to Skuld for permission, and with a deep sigh Skuld waved him ahead.

Sigrid hopped down a couple steps, stifling the excited smile that threatened to

appear. On the inside, he was ecstatic to be this close to the thing he had dedicated his entire life to help. Cleaning the grounds and making sure the firekeepers had everything they needed counted as help, after all. Sigrid's excitement was tempered when he noticed that the fire was dimmer than it should have been. At the very least, it seemed weaker than other fires he had seen, even the ritual one that had been used for the initiation. Sigrid forced the thought from his mind as he ran the broom around the base of the brazier, collecting bits of ash as he went. Then, a strange movement caught his eye. The shadow of the brazier, cast by the fire inside it, receded as if the light source had grown. With a start, Sigrid looked up and saw that the fire did indeed grow. It was marginal, but noticeable, and a flurry of butterflies erupted in his stomach. He turned to Skuld, looking for answers, but all he got was a harsher glare than before. Skuld threw his thumb back, a gesture to leave, and Sigrid wasted no time before bouncing up the steps and heading for the exit. At the door, Sigrid hesitated. He looked at the hearth again. It shrunk to its original size, flickering angrily in its bowl. Skuld quickly approached Sigrid from behind, shoving him out the door.

"I told you not to go near it," he hissed. And he slammed the door in Sigrid's face.

Sigrid was left alone, the slight chill in the air raising goosebumps on his arms. Was he seeing things, or had the hearth reacted to his presence? The change was so slight Sigrid didn't know if he was imagining things, but something in his head latched on to the possibility that he himself caused it to grow. Maybe he could help the hearth, prevent it from extinguishing and save dozens, even hundreds of lives. This revelation was stopped when he turned down the steps, and noticed something shiny in the grass. Stooping low, he touched the shimmering object, and he flinched when his finger came back covered in cold water. It was frost.

With a stuttering gasp, Sigrid raced down the steps, knowing exactly what he was going to do tomorrow night.

***

By the time the sun set the following evening, snow began falling into the city. A storm hit. Most of it was stopped by the power of the hearth, but the way it swirled and heaved in the sky above indicated something fierce had flown in. How much more would be able to enter the city in the hours to pass? Sigrid couldn't help thinking about this as he ran through the temple grounds and up the stairs towards the hearth.

A tense hush had fallen over the complex. While news of the hearth's potential failure hadn't reached very far, the way the snow gathered throughout the city was evidence enough.

Frost was spreading, stretching over the walls and the grass, and Sigrid slipped on a few steps as he climbed them. When he made it to the top, the doors were closed,

but he could hear the chanting reverberating through them. It was frantic and rising in volume, carrying the raspy voices of aged men. He couldn't distinguish his father over the chorus. Taking a deep breath,

Sigrid opened the door enough for him to peak inside.

Dread filled his stomach when he saw that the hearth was little more than a small collection of flames dwarfed by its brazier. It barely reacted to the elders around it, refusing their pulls and retaining its shrunken size. The voices were louder now that the doors were open, and there directly across from him was the figure of his father, the fire casting sharp shadows on his frame. His arms shook violently and firelight reflected on a layer of sweat covering his skin. All the men were shaking. Even Skuld, who stood beside Haldor, the youngest of them all, couldn't handle the power of the fire.

Before Sigrid could do anything, the fire erupted, rapidly growing in size and reaching over the edges of the brazier. The firekeepers leapt away, and the fire receded into a size even smaller than before. As some of them extinguished flames that had latched on to their robes and others fell to their knees, the fire shrunk further, threatening to disappear entirely if no one could regain their grasp over it. It was Skuld who caught it first, arms outstretched as he prevented the fire from going out. A cold breeze wafted from behind Sigrid, making his teeth clatter.

"Haldor!" he cried. Sigrid's father took position opposite of Skuld while the other elders struggled to regain their posture. "We need you!"

"We need someone stronger!" Haldor replied as he extended his hands towards the hearth. "It won't accept me anymore!"

"The hearth's just gonna have to deal with us, no matter if it likes us or not!" Skuld replied. The fire continued to pop and fizzle, showing no signs of stabilising.

"It's not working! We can't-" Haldor stopped when his eyes locked on Sigrid's, who didn't have any time to hide behind the door. "Sigrid! What are you doing here!? Leave before you get hurt!"

Sigrid nearly did as he was told and backed out of the doorway as if following an instinct to listen to his father. However, something about the way the fire gasped and flickered struck a chord in him, and he found himself stepping inside the temple.

"Sigrid!" his father screamed. Fury coloured his face, but there was something else behind it, something Sigrid hadn't seen before. Fear.

"I can help, Dad! I want to help!" Sigrid yelled, and he walked closer to the fire.

Before he could make it even a few steps, the fire exploded again, and he covered his head with his arms. Someone grabbed him and pulled him back, and when he looked behind him, he saw his father pulling him away from the hearth.

"You're going to get yourself killed!" he yelled.

"Haldor!" Skuld cried. He was holding the fire by himself, which was now just a fraction of its original size. Sigrid caught his gaze, trying to silently convey to him that he could help, that he could at least try. Skuld pursed his lips together, and after a moment of hesitation, he said, "Let the girl help!"

"My daughter!? Are you mad!?"

"Just do it!" Skuld staggered when the fire erupted for a third time, transforming into a blazing inferno that caused Haldor to fall away from Sigrid. Sigrid cried out in pain as the fire licked his arm, the wound swelling and peeling almost instantly. He pushed forward anyway. He could feel his father's eyes on his back, though there were no further attempts to stop him.

Sigrid walked slowly, lightly, like he was approaching a frightened animal. The fire puffed up the closer he got. A warning. That did not deter him, and Sigrid squinted his eyes as the heat grew to a nearly unbearable temperature. Sigrid became aware of voices around him, but he couldn't hear what they were saying over the roar of the flames. The fire imploded yet again, and Sigrid fell to the ground in a meager attempt to dodge it. It still caught his clothes, burned his hair, and singed his skin. At that moment all he knew was pain; he was sure he was about to die.

He was stupid. He shouldn't have done this. He remembered the fake hearth from the initiation, how it had eaten his hand without any mercy. Sigrid wasn't a firekeeper. He wasn't anything special. Fire didn't bow to him; it didn't respect him like it did to all the other firekeepers, at least up until this night. His bandaged hand throbbed in response to the memory. He couldn't control fire, he couldn't dominate it, he couldn't do anything. However, just before he was about to curl up on the floor to accept his fate, a thought suddenly occurred to him.

The fire didn't want to be controlled. That was clear enough in what he saw tonight, how it fought against the firekeepers' powers. Despite how the hearth had kept the city safe for centuries following this method, it refused to answer to tradition. It didn't want domination. It wanted something else. Maybe it was like Sigrid, in a way: stuck in one form, beholden to convention, but seeking something new.

Sigrid picked himself up on limbs quivering with adrenaline. He faced the fire one more time, tensing against the sharp pain emanating from his burns, and he closed his eyes. Taking a deep breath, he sought a connection inside himself, looking for some sign that he was doing this right. He acknowledged the stakes behind this flame, the thousands of lives that depended on it every day. It had no fuel, nothing to burn on, purely relying on the people around it to keep it alive. Sigrid could help it. He wanted to save its life. A symbiotic relationship like this one required respect on both sides, and that was what Sigrid wanted to

give it.

Behind his eyelids, the light weakened, and Sigrid opened them to see the fire as little more than a single flame in the middle of the bowl. It flickered softly, sadly,

like it couldn't put up much more of a fight. Outside, the wind howled, and what sounded like ice pelted against the walls and roof of the building. It hurt to see something so powerful in such a vulnerable state. Sigrid, overcome with compassion, reached towards it, and dipped his fingers into the flame.

The fire wrapped around the appendages, but his skin didn't ignite. It barely even hurt, only a slight pinch on his nerves. Sigrid scooped it into his palm, where it rolled like a red marble. It slowly burned through his gloves and the bandages, but he felt no pain. He brought it closer to his face, analyzing the small shape closely. It amazed him that something so exposed, so easy to extinguish with water and wind, held the weight of an entire city on its shoulders. Sigrid cupped it in his palms, and he blew into the gap between his hands. Then he let it drop into the brazier and watched as it came back to life.

The fire steadily grew to its original size, and Sigrid could feel it pulling on him as it did so, like it was using him as its lifeline. It was a warm feeling, almost like a hug or an apology, like it was expressing regret for losing the life of his mother the last time it failed.

Sigrid tugged back a few times, ensuring it had the support it needed to regrow, but he didn't have to do much else. Finally, the fire stabilised. The howling of the wind faded away, and outside the snow dispersed into nothing. A warm breeze drifted through the open door.

With a soft smile, Sigrid turned around and flinched when he saw that everyone there was watching him. He forgot he wasn't alone. Their eyes were wide, mouths open, shocked beyond belief that someone like Sigrid could have saved them all. Skuld's face was shockingly neutral, though behind the expression Sigrid sensed a hint of acceptance. Haldor approached him first.

Sigrid stiffened, expecting to be reprimanded or scolded. He did something he wasn't supposed to, and even though he succeeded, he knew it was unnatural. Then, Haldor did something Sigrid was least expecting: he pulled him into a hug. He didn't say anything, but words weren't necessary. Sigrid could feel what Haldor wanted to say. It was an apology for not noticing Sigrid's potential long ago just because he didn't fit the image.

When Haldor broke away, smiling down at Sigrid, another firekeeper spoke up.

"What are you?"

Sigrid looked at him, then trailed his gaze across all the others. They were expecting an answer, an explanation for what they had just witnessed. What Sigrid did was unprecedented and went against everything they believed. Sigrid hesitated, but the warmth of the fire on his back gave him the courage he needed.

"I am a firekeeper."

Children Are the Only Ones Who Blush

Mikayla Hanlon

In the nursery, I had a lot of time to think. My job wasn't so much to entertain or even to take care of the baby as it was simply to make sure that it kept breathing. Periodically, I would rise from the rocking chair in the corner of the room to stand over the crib for a while, watching the soft rise and fall of the baby's chest, wondering at what could possibly be going on in its brain, in its body. I would try to catch a bone suddenly fusing under the skin, ends popping together like puzzle pieces. Then I would return to my chair. There have been worse jobs.

…

The number on the slip of paper in my hand was written in loopy, uncommitted script. "Nanny wanted", the flyer had said. I hadn't ever worked with children before – in fact, I found them intimidating, their fingers and mouths always in need of wiping, their teeth growing in and falling out at odd intervals. But I had been a child, once, and I thought that might be experience enough. I dialed the number. The woman who answered asked me strange questions: did I consider myself a responsible person, she asked, was I comfortable with solitude and long silences, what was my favourite novel. She wanted to know if I might come by her house the next day for an interview. I agreed, dumbfounded. She said she would see me at two, and I heard the click of the receiver. When I called back to tell her she hadn't given me her address, she picked up the phone on the first ring. "Hello?" she said. I thought I could hear her smiling.

I was prone to taking long walks through affluent parts of the city, then. I loved turning from a busy street onto a preternaturally quiet residential block, silent and empty as if the neighbourhood had simply fallen out of space. When I came upon the woman's house, I was startled to find that it was one I had walked past several times, had even stopped to admire. I felt like a trespasser. The sound of my knuckles on the front door was like nothing I had ever heard. The woman who answered my knock was slight and young, with bright eyes and a frenetic energy about her. She was always moving, gesticulating wildly, shifting her weight from foot to foot, unless she wasn't. Then, she was very, very still, and her wide luminous eyes bore into you, as if she were inspecting your organs. She ushered me inside. Her house had no furniture.

"You have no furniture," I said.

She stared at me for a moment (how do my kidneys look?), then she laughed, a lovely, high sound, like a bell ringing in heaven.

"I guess I don't," she said, "but I won't tell if you won't." Then she winked.

The woman walked into the empty living room and, as if forgetting that it was empty, looked around in confusion before deciding to sit cross-legged on the floor. She did look much like a child then, this strange grown woman sitting on the floor of this large, high-ceilinged room, and I had the insane thought that maybe she was the one I was meant to take care of. She leaned forward and patted the space in front of her, motioning for me to join her on the hardwood, and I moved towards her languorously, feeling even then as if I were crossing some threshold through which I might never be able to return.

I got the job, in the end. I was to start the next Monday. I felt strongly that I had been the recipient of some unearned goodwill, or else the victim of a practical joke. Surely, my answers to the woman's questions about my experience (none) and basic first aid training (also none) had been less than satisfactory. Still, she had called later that same day to give me the good news.

"The position is yours!" she exclaimed.

"Wow, I… thank you," I replied, stunned.

"Well, you could sound a little more excited."

While I waited for Monday to arrive, I did the sorts of things I always did. My friend Vivian called to check up on me.

"So, what is it?" she asked. "The woman has no *furniture*?"

As I raised my fist to knock the second time, I was overcome with dread. I felt the animal urge to turn and run, to keep running, to disappear, to become someone else entirely. I looked up to find the woman watching me through the front window, her face open as an egg. Her mouth formed something between a smile and a grimace as she opened the door, muttering hello and gesturing for me to come in without quite meeting my eye. The living room was still empty, but it seemed to have taken on a new warmth, somehow. Or maybe I was just imagining things.

"I know, I know," the woman said. "You're thinking, 'how can she possibly live like this?'. Well, don't worry – the couch is on its way, and the rest of it."

"I wasn't—" I began.

"No, I get it, it's unsettling. There shouldn't be an echo in your own home. What am I, a bat?"

The woman led me up the stairs. On the landing, I caught a glimpse of an unmade bed through a partly open door. I imagined the woman getting ready in the evening, donning a silk eye mask, sleeping deeply, dreaming in lush, vivid landscapes, and then awakening, too concerned with the tasks and decisions that made up her life to bother fluffing the pillows or smoothing the covers. I felt the urge to lay down in the impression she left and pretend that I simply was her, enjoying all the trappings of the charmed life she surely led. Across the hall was the nursery. Inside, the woman showed me the crib, the chair, the bookshelves.

“It’s nice up here,” I offered. “Cozy.”

“I’ll do whatever I can to make the idea of sleep more appealing,” the woman said, leaning over the crib.

I laughed.

She turned to me. “Do you think you’ll be alright up here?”

“Yes, of course,” I replied, looking toward the wall of shelves.

“What do you like to read?” she asked.

I was excited by her interest in me, even if it was only for the sake of politeness. “Anything, if it can make me really feel something. Happiness, sadness, anger, fear… I just want to be affected.” Why was I saying all of this?

She looked at me curiously. “You feel very deeply, don’t you?”

I was shocked by how quickly she seemed to have figured me out. “I guess I do.”

“I could sense it. I’m just like you,” she said, and grinned.

A pit formed in my stomach. I wanted it to be true. I wanted badly for us to be the same.

“I’ll be around today while you get settled in, just in case you need me,” the woman said. Hastily, she added, “I’m sure you won’t, of course. I’m sure you’re entirely capable.”

I didn’t think she was sure. I wasn’t. Still, I nodded in a perfunctory sort of way.

“Okay, then. I’ll leave you to it,” she said, and began to pull the door shut behind her.

Suddenly, I panicked. I didn’t want her to leave. “Wait,” I said.

She turned in surprise. “Yes?” she asked, eyes wide.

“Um…” I was embarrassed by my impulsivity, my inexplicable desire. “I just wanted to ask… why did you choose me? For the job.”

There was a peculiar glint in her eye.

“What a strange girl you are,” she said, and closed the door.

Then I was alone, save for the baby sleeping deeply in its crib. I sat unsteadily in the rocking chair. In the woman’s presence, I became somehow incapable of pretense or performance. I was completely disarmed by each glance, each unconscious gesture, and I felt that she somehow knew intimately those parts of myself I wished desperately to keep hidden. She was so unlike anyone I had ever met.

“Help yourself,” she had said earlier, gesturing to the crowded bookshelves in the nursery. “Feel free.”

I felt nothing like that.

Vivian and I went to see a movie. It seemed to me to be about nothing but a large rock, and I was astonished to realize, as the story was nearing its end, that the woman next to me was weeping. I guess something had happened with the rock, something of great importance that I did not understand. One of the actresses in the film sounded like my new boss. When she turned to face the camera, though, nothing about her was the same. I felt disappointed, and then ashamed. As the lights came up, I felt briefly blinded, and Vivian took hold of my arm to guide me out of the theatre.

Solid, dependable Vivian. Sometimes I felt that she might have been the only thing tethering me to the Earth. We often met at odd hours, times when no reasonable person could be expected to be awake and we walked together through parts of the city both familiar and foreign, always winding up at one of our apartments, like kismet, or else at some coffee shop that remained open late into the night. Once or twice, we had walked until dawn, and I had watched Vivian's hair become illuminated by the rising sun and felt a sort of pleasant churning in my stomach. She was worldly, and jaded, and knew a lot about the history of photography and the French New Wave. She spoke in such an even, low tone that in listening to her I felt I had returned to infancy, cradled in my mother's strong arms as she sang gently in her solemn way. Vivian insisted upon wearing an old brown leather jacket everywhere she went, fringe sprouting from the sleeves and back like party streamers. She smelled of coffee and patchouli, and beneath, something earthy, like she was simply more in tune with all of it than the rest of us.

That night, we took a long, unnecessary route back to my apartment building. The streets we turned down were dark and quiet, and I could hear the fringe of Vivian's jacket rustling as she moved. She seemed preoccupied, though I always found her inscrutable. I could go a whole week thinking that she was furious with me when she was just trying to "maximize her communicative resources" by only speaking when she felt it necessary.

"How was your first day?" she asked me.

What could I possibly say? "It wasn't really what I expected," I said.

"What were you expecting?"

"Well… I guess I don't know."

She laughed.

"The house is really nice," I said.

She said nothing.

We were silent the rest of the way home. On my porch, my sight having been restored, I asked if there was something on her mind. She looked up at the softly glowing sky for a long time. I looked up too, to try to understand what it was that had captured her attention so totally. The sky looked the same as it always did.

Vivian turned back to me. Her mouth opened, then closed again. "What did you think of the movie?" she asked. I had the sense that this was not what she had intended to say.

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "It rocked."

She laughed, and kept laughing, even as she receded into the not-quite-darkness.

One morning, standing at the woman's door, I found myself staring down a lion. When the door opened and the woman's face appeared where the lion had been, the two seemed to merge, and, for a horrifying second, the woman bared sharp teeth and held a brass knocker in her mouth. This seemed to me to be some kind of warning.

"Come in, come in!" the woman said.

I was unable to move. The woman looked quizzically at me, then over at the lion.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Do you like it?"

I was silent. The woman laughed as if I had said something very funny.

By then, the house had been fully furnished and decorated in sterile white. You had the feeling that if you laid down on the couch, you would immediately be prepped for surgery. The woman's husband had arranged the whole affair, I had come to understand, and the furnishings, wall hangings, and light fixtures had been installed all at once by some unseen interior design firm working in record time. I tried to imagine going around the corner for a carton of milk and returning to find your house completely transformed. I was often shocked by the things some people seemed to want. Watching the woman skirt the huge glass dinner table and sculptural-looking chairs as if something were about to jump out at her, though, it occurred to me that maybe this was not what she wanted at all.

I followed the woman up the stairs to the attic once again. In the nursery, I could see glimpses of arm, foot, torso through the wooden slats bordering the crib.

"I have some errands to run, but I'll be back before you're finished," the woman said.

"Okay," I said.

"Okay," she replied, and smiled warmly. She started to leave, then turned back. "My husband might drop by at some point. He won't come up here, though."

"Oh, should I go down and introduce myself—"

"No," she replied swiftly. "I think it might be better if you didn't," she added with a sheepish smile.

"Sure," I said cautiously. I was mystified and a little frightened by this sudden change in her demeanour. It was jarring to see someone so completely self-assured look so uncomfortable.

"I'll see you in a few hours," she said.

I nodded; words having escaped me.

I felt my own naivete like a hand around my throat. I was so young, so unsophisticated. What did I know about the inner workings of adult relationships? Maybe some people were afraid of their husbands, and that was just how it was. In any case, the woman would certainly not want my comfort. I had nothing at all to offer her, I knew. Still, I sat dutifully in the attic of her big, empty house, trying, through sheer force of will, to turn myself into someone different – someone wiser, worldlier, someone to be confided in. If I wanted it badly enough, I thought, maybe my wish would come true. I would change. I would be whoever she needed me to. I would.

Vivian and I found ourselves, as we often did, walking around, passing a takeout coffee back and forth, each taking a miniscule sip before pushing it back into the other's hands. It was our way of rationalizing the shared caffeine habit we could not seem to kick.

"Guess what I did last night?" she asked as I took the paper cup from her.

"Don't make me guess."

She looked at me mischievously. "I went to a chess club."

I barked out a disbelieving laugh. "Seriously?"

She nodded.

"God, I can't even picture it." Vivian was maybe the least tranquil person I had ever met, to say nothing of her unsportsmanlike habit of flipping Monopoly boards and lobbing losing hands across tables. I had even seen her break a badminton racket in two.

"That is not fair," she said. "I can be very Zen when I choose to be."

I looked at her skeptically.

"Anyway," she said, rolling her eyes, "I didn't win a single game. It was kind of embarrassing. Actually. One of my opponents couldn't have been more than eight."

I smiled. "I play chess with the woman I work for, sometimes. She has a nice set. With the marble pieces and everything." Sometimes, when she came upstairs to relieve me, she would ask me to play a match or two. She thought hard about each move she made, the sharp lines of her face becoming even sharper, her brow furrowing and lips pursing in concentration. I lost every game.

Vivian looked at me curiously. "You must think a lot of her."

My cheeks were hot. "She's just very unique," I said, feeling strangely guilty.

We didn't speak of the woman again.

Later, while saying our goodbyes, Vivian grabbed my hand and squeezed tightly, surprising me. The expression she wore was unreadable. She looked like someone I had never met.

As I was about to leave her house one afternoon, the woman pressed a small, cold object into my hand. “For you!” she said cheerfully. It was a key, glowing in my palm as if warm with potential. I could have wept. Here was a piece of irrefutable evidence that I was a part of the woman’s life, that she trusted me, that I had been welcomed into her home. I clutched the key against my chest the entire way home, grinning stupidly.

When I picked up the phone that evening, I was surprised to hear the woman’s voice. “Hi, honey,” she said. I willed myself to say something.

“It’s me,” she continued. “It’s Jane.”

The woman asked me if I wouldn’t mind coming in an hour earlier the following day. Automatically, I told her no, of course not.

“Thank you,” she sighed, “you’re a star.”

That night, I dreamed of great, burning comets streaking across an endless night sky, galaxies unfolding in unimaginably vivid bursts of blue and purple, white-hot suns collapsing in on themselves in spectacular displays of light, all of it pure and bright and perfect.

In the morning, I climbed the porch steps enthusiastically, key in hand. Suddenly, the front door flew open and a man in a pinstripe suit pushed past me, not noticing or maybe not caring that I was there. He looked irate, wiping his hands on his trousers as if he had just touched something filthy. Mutely, I watched him get into his car and drive away. I had never seen or met Jane’s husband, but I had thought about him a lot: I wondered what he did for work, what his interests were, and what his life was like with Jane, though I was never brave enough to broach the topic. Despite my fascination, part of me wanted my time with Jane to exist apart from anything so banal. Besides, when Jane brought him up, her face clouded and a strange darkness crept into her usually twinkly voice. I thought it best to let it be. Now, though, confronted with the flesh and blood reality of him, I was underwhelmed. It made no sense to me that this man was the person Jane saw fit to share her life with, to have a child with. He was completely unremarkable. He didn’t check his mirrors before he backed out of the driveway.

I entered the house cautiously, as if I might be walking into a trap. I found Jane in the nursery, sitting, unmoving, in the rocking chair, staring at something in middle distance with her head in her hands, her cheeks streaked with tear stains and her eyes even brighter than before, somehow. I felt an almost irrepressible urge to reach out and touch her blouse, her hair. She looked up at me and smiled laboriously, raising a finger to her lips. I knew she was telling me not to speak, so that I didn’t

wake the baby, but I wanted desperately to believe that we now shared a secret, something weighty and important that would bond us forever.

"He sounds like an ass," Vivian said.

"Never one to mince words," I replied, smiling.

"Well, he does! What was the thing she told you the other day?"

"Oh, about the watch?"

A few days before, Jane had come into the nursery to ask me if I had seen a gold watch anywhere. She spoke in a deliberate, measured voice that didn't quite completely camouflage the panic simmering beneath. I told her I hadn't seen it. Her voice quickened feverishly as she explained that her husband had lost the watch he wore every day, that she had searched the entire house for it, that he was convinced that she had hidden it and that there was nothing she could do to change his mind. She rested her head in her hands, breathing deeply, then looked up at me uneasily.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said all of that," she whispered.

"Don't apologize," I said, feeling frantic, wanting to be of use. "I'll help you look for it."

"No, you don't have to do that," she said. "I'll figure it out."

I could tell she was embarrassed and regretted involving me, so I thought it might be better to pretend nothing had happened. Neither of us had brought it up since. I had, however, told Vivian an unspecific version of events, but only because she had noticed my sour mood that night and demanded to know what had caused it.

"The watch!" Vivian exclaimed. "What kind of person can't be trusted to keep track of their own watch?"

"They just seem like such different people. I can't imagine how they got together."

"Well, they say opposites attract. I have only ever been interested in people who were exactly like me, though. So, who knows."

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Late," she replied.

"Oh god," I laughed, "I should get home." I looked up at the street sign. We were only a few blocks from my building. "I guess this is where I leave you," I said, frowning. I started up the street, then turned and called out, "Goodnight, my someone!"

"Parting is such sweet sorrow!" she called back. Those were the sorts of things we found funny, back then.

I sometimes wondered why I was so content to sit in this woman's attic all day, doing nothing. Most people, I thought, would be curious about what lay behind the many closed doors of the home, or would wonder why, in the unusually grand house, so much of the stuff that made up a family life was relegated to the tiny top floor. Crossing through what was meant to be the living space, as I did every day, looking around, I had the impression of a showroom. Nothing was to be touched. Everything was posed, primped, fluffed, varnished. All the real living, I thought, was done up here.

Jane cracked open the door, startling me. Seeing her face triggered a dizzying combination of giddiness and uneasiness.

"Sorry!" she mouthed, putting up her hands as if in surrender.

She inched across the room and, apparently deciding that the baby was sleeping deeply enough, said in a low voice, "How are you?"

"Good… great," I said. I put down the book I had been reading. Jane peered down at the cover, recognition alighting in her eyes. I felt caught. Standing over me, now, she lifted the copy of "Jane Eyre" from my lap.

"Oh, yes," she said. "I used to love this book, you know. When I was younger." She laughed. "I imagined that I was her twin: the two Janes," she said.

I felt a crushing fondness for her. Imagining that Jane, who kept vintage crystal in a display cabinet in her dining room, who owned silk Turkish rugs, who wore strings of pearls and wool slacks, had once been a lonely, daydreaming child – it was too much for me to bear. I nearly fell over.

She laid the book onto the table beside the rocking chair. "Now look at me," she said absentmindedly. "The crazy lady in the attic."

"Then what does that make me?" I said with a laugh.

Her eyes widened in what looked like horror. "I don't know," she said, finally.

I was sitting on my porch reading when Vivian appeared at my feet, smiling lavishly.

"Up for a walk?" she asked.

I said yes, of course, why, it does look like I'm in the middle of some terribly important business here, doesn't it. She laughed and held out her hand. When I took it, something in her seemed to give way.

Into the silence, I whispered, "Is something wrong?"

A sad, wry smile flickered across her face. "No, no, nothing," she said. She paused for a long moment, then looked me in the eye and said seriously, "Have you ever wondered what it must feel like to be one of those people who can hold their breath for half an hour?"

I laughed. “I don’t think anyone wonders about the things that you wonder about,” I said.

Her eyes grew big as dinner plates. She put her lips on mine, then, and when she pulled away, just as quickly, I stood shocked and unmoving, the scent of wet earth filling my nose. I must have looked terrified. Vivian stumbled backwards down the steps, the look in her eyes like that of a wounded animal hurt by the person they had loved most. Wordlessly, I watched her retreat, mouth hanging open as she hurried down the street, disappeared around the corner, the lingering feeling of her lips on mine like a brand. How could I have missed this? Yes, Vivian could be coy, and withholding, and even, at times, cruel, but I could not reconcile what I knew of her with the fact of what she had just done. How long had she kept this from me? How long had it loomed over our pre-dawn conversations, our laughter, our shared air, like some deflating parade balloon? I felt foolish. Dropping harshly onto the step, I wiped at my mouth and pressed my palms into my eye sockets. Behind my closed lids, pulsing a demented, punishing rhythm, was Jane, Jane, Jane.

The next day, I let myself into the house and climbed the stairs mechanically. When I opened the door to the nursery, there was Jane, holding the baby, swaying gently and humming along to the sound of Joni Mitchell’s lilting soprano drifting from the record player in the corner. It was an almost unimaginably perfect scene. She looked so content, as if there was nothing in the world that came so naturally to her as being this child’s mother. I couldn’t imagine myself ever looking so right holding a baby. There was a photo of me in one of the albums my mother would trot out at family gatherings, having had some cousin’s child thrust into my skinny arms seconds before. The baby was chubby and oversized, and I looked terrified to be holding it, as if we might both topple over at any second. Jane turned and noticed me standing in the doorway. I blushed. One of us always seemed to be watching the other.

“Oh, you’re here!” she said, and motioned for me to come to her.

I walked over slowly and trepidatiously. I felt, as I always did, like an awkward interloper in her world.

“Here,” she said softly.

She was extending her arms to hold the baby out to me. She looked so relaxed, so sure. I willed my hands not to tremble. I moved very close to her, so that I could feel the warmth of her breath on my cheek, and took the baby into my arms, holding the neck against my shoulder just the way she had. She must have noticed how frightened I looked.

“You’re a natural,” she laughed.

I laughed too. “Little Green” was playing as I rocked the baby in my arms under her gentle gaze. *Child with a child pretending…*

Some time later, the baby yawned cartoonishly. We both laughed, and I laid the baby down onto the daisy-yellow sheets of the crib. Jane appeared beside me. I could smell her perfume, floral and sweet.

"It's really incredible, isn't it?" she said. "Every day is just like the others and then, out of nowhere, there's a stranger in your house, and you feed it and bathe it, and nothing is ever the same."

The situation she described sounded sort of gruesome, but she spoke so lovingly. "You're a wonderful mother," I said.

She laid her hand on mine, feather-light. "You know…" she began. I tensed. I had the feeling of the tide receding before the tsunami. "All I wanted as a child was to be a long-haul trucker," she said pensively. "I had one of those CB radios, you know, and I would lie on my floor all day trying to hear a voice on the other end. I couldn't sleep without the sound of the static. I thought, one day, I would be that voice for somebody else. I would travel to places I couldn't even name." She sounded wistful and sad. "I wanted to get away so badly."

I felt unimaginably close to her. I wanted so much to understand her the way I felt she understood me, to be able to relate to her in some meaningful way. I wanted to see everything she had ever seen. I turned to look at her, my heart in my throat.

"And what about now?" I whispered.

"Now…" She was quiet for a moment. "Well, now I have something keeping me here, don't I?" she chuckled darkly, eyes fixed on the baby. "And I wouldn't want to put you out of a job."

Neither of us moved for a long time. Hope wriggled inside of me, a living, festering thing.

When Vivian finally called me, I was relieved. We hadn't spoken in weeks, but she seemed determined to act as if nothing had changed. Of course, everything had.

"How's your baby-watching job?" she asked me.

"Oh, fine," I said. The day before, Jane had given me her copy of "Mrs. Dalloway". I had spent the night poring over her notes in the margins, tracing the loops of her 'l's, the curves of her 's's.

"How bizarre is that, anyway? I can't imagine you taking care of somebody's kid."

Strangely, I felt self-conscious. "I don't know, maybe I'm not so bad at it."

Vivian laughed sharply. "I'll believe it when I see it."

I laughed too, half-heartedly. "Well, Jane says I'm a natural."

"Oh, right." After a beat, she continued warily, "I'm sorry, but is she… I mean, is something going on there?"

I flushed.

"No! No. What?" I did not sound very convincing.

"When you talk about her, you just sound… I don't know. Kind of moony."

Painful, visceral embarrassment coursed through my body, filling me with unpleasant, sticky heat. I wanted desperately for the version of myself that Jane had come to know to stay cordoned off from the decidedly underwhelming person that I was the rest of the time. I wanted, too, for her to stay where she was, uncontaminated by anything at all that happened outside of my entering her house each morning and leaving each afternoon. More than anything, I felt that the time we spent together, our conversations, the way she sometimes held both my hands when saying goodbye – those things were not meant to be spoken or even thought about. If any of it were to be held to the light, I feared that the fragile grasp I had on Jane would slip completely, and I would lose her forever.

"Vivian…" I tried in vain to think of some wisecrack, some imitation of how we had once spoken to each other.

"No, it's fine. It's totally fine. I had no idea, is all," she trailed off.

"It's really—"

"I'll see you," she said brusquely, and hung up.

I had spent the weekend trying to think of something clever and observant to say about the book that Jane had loaned me, and trying not to think about my conversation with Vivian and the series of unanswered calls that had followed. I had taken to daydreaming about how the scene might play out: maybe Jane would be so impressed by my wit and insight that her perception of me would shift totally, instantaneously (this change would be physical – maybe a decisive head tilt and a squint), and, overwhelmed with feeling, would ask me to please run away with her, caution to the wind, baby be damned! When I opened the door to the nursery, though, there was only the baby, sleeping sweetly. The air felt unusually charged. I padded across the hall to Jane's bedroom. Peeking through the cracked door, I could see her lying on her side, her back to me, her knees against her chest. I was astounded by how childlike she could make herself look.

"Jane?" I said softly as I entered the room.

She didn't reply. She might be sleeping, I thought. I stood for a moment, suspended awkwardly in the middle of the carpet, then turned to leave, disappointed in my unrealized fantasy. As I was reaching for the door handle, she murmured something too quietly for me to make out.

"What was that?" I asked.

She turned to face me. Her eyes looked hollow.

"He's gone, I think," she said plainly.

"What do you mean?"

"He's gone."

I didn't know what to say. Suddenly, her mouth split into a wide, delirious smile.

"He's gone and he's never coming back!"

She began to laugh, the sound rising and swelling until its manic noise seemed to push against the walls of the bedroom. Then, so quickly as to make it unclear where one ended and the other began, her laughter turned to sobs, great, wracking sobs that shook her entire body. She curled into herself. I rushed to her side, then moved to sit behind her on the bed, running my hands over her hair the way my mother did when I was a child. It made my whole body ache, seeing her so despondent.

"Jane," I said softly.

Her sobs quieted, then stopped altogether. She turned to face me. Her eyes were so bright.

"I feel terrible," she whispered nearly inaudibly, "because I'm so relieved."

Something cracked open inside of me. "It's okay," I said, lowering myself down to lay beside her. "It's okay."

She smiled weakly. "I'm glad you're here."

"Of course I am," I said. Where else could I go?

She reached out and held my hand. "You're an angel."

It was the scent of her hair, the feeling of her skin, the stars in her big, sparkling eyes. I pressed my lips to hers. Her mouth tasted of warm, salty ocean. When I pulled away, she did not look shocked, or disgusted, or elated, or any of the things I had thought or wished she would feel. Instead, I saw in her eyes a penetrating, knowing look, and, on her mouth, a sad sort of smile.

"Oh, honey," she said. She laid her hand on my cheek, so gently I thought I might cry, and shook her head. The kindness in her eyes was devastating.

And hadn't I always known it would happen like this? Of course, of course I had.

For a moment, I let myself pretend, sunk into her bed, surrounded by the scent of her, warmed by her body heat. I laid my hand over hers and squeezed it gently. I closed my eyes, letting the feeling of her soft skin on mine burn itself into my memory. Then I had to get up, descend the stairs, open the door, step out onto the silent street. All around, snow was falling in fat clumps. The world was awash in white light. Everything could be made new again.

Everything.

The Spider (L'araignée)

Samantha Lord

Soon to become yet another unwilling victim of the spider's jaws, the fly struggled.

Unaware that the aggressive, desperation-fueled impulse to contort its figure would alert its captor, the fly fought stubbornly for its life. It could not understand the gravity of its circumstance but the creatures' unwavering libido for survival caused it to punish itself until its exhaustion. The ommatidia that made up the insect's eyes rolled violently, while fear replaced the hemolymph which customarily pulsated through its dorsal vessel. Poetically, the arthropod's heart beat with trepidation in lieu of blood. The fly did not react with its mind. Instead, it struggled and twitched fervently without volition. Fighting for its freedom. Fighting to stay alive. Fighting for what it has and will ever experience.

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It was Canada Day, around 2009, in a trailer park. A little girl with bug eyes separated from her cousins. Her enormous eyes bulging as she fills her pockets with pebbles. Her attention; that of a five-year old child, however, was recaptured almost as quickly as she has been distracted. The young girl soon became obsessed with the silken lines between two bridge posts of the trailer deck. The miraculous web had been carefully spun the night before by an angelic spider and was still adorned with a few drops of morning dew. The beads formed perfect spheres around the lines, separated ever so slightly, enough so that the water could not pool together and weigh down the delicate strands. The girl did not feel afraid of the web, it did not disgust her, which made the situation all the more stranger when she stopped, and abruptly whined.

"A spiderweb! Yuck!"

Alerted by the young girl's false tantrum, her aunt replied:

"Aren't spider webs just beautiful?"

As if provoked, a fierce look of anger flashed across the young girl's face. Her brain, having barely aged itself from a toddler to a small child dwelled temporarily in the confusion before her pouting lip parted and she retorted.

"I don't like the webs one bit."

The aunt sighed before patiently responding to her combative niece.

"The spiders' home doesn't hurt you now does it?" Just as the little girl began to accept the elegant web as something which could be beautiful, her aunt reached through it, destroying the spider's work and sending the beads of dew back to the yard. This moment was too much for the little girl to comprehend. The creature's

home and livelihood had been dismantled for her comfort. She found herself feeling relieved at the absence of fear formerly brought on by the web.

Yet even now, as she reached the age of twenty-seven, with a toddler of her own—she never forgot the spider's web.

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As the sun escaped below the cusp of the horizon, the barn spider sat on the highest

corner beam of the hayloft adjacent to the family barn. Over the years, he, his father, and all the arachnids that had lived before him had seen the farm change. It once consisted of grueling hours of labor, where men were whipped into compliance, their copper skin cracking from the pain of the heat. The land on which the farm stood was soon divided and tended by many different farmers, bordered by fences, each block of land housing its own farmstead. The spider sets out at dusk, painstakingly weaving silk thread after silk thread, connecting them into regular octagons. He tirelessly toils away all night, never stopping to rest, thinking only of the marvelous web he will have created by the morning. As the sun rose over the eastern hills beyond the barn, the spider lifted his eyes from his work. His web has been spun, and despite his exhaustion, he glances at his final work before crawling back unto the rapture where his eight eyes closed firmly, and the spider falls asleep forever.

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On Turtle Island, the young children of Mi'kma'ki gather at the feet of one of the

nation's few living elders, Resting Bull. The Mawio'mi festivities are about to commence, and

Resting Bull, known to the settler's Government of Maine as Brennan Sylliboy, began to guide the children in making dreamcatchers. As he looks out onto the crowd of youth, Resting Bull experiences a great sense of solastalgia. He is home, but it is not the home that it once was. Mother Earth is dying, and "we, the people" are responsible. As they worked, Resting Bull imparted on them the story of dreamcatchers from the Ojibwe Nation. It is a story Resting Bull has shared many times, and one he hopes to share many more. It is the story of Asibikaashi, the Spider Woman. He told the children how Asibikassashi wove the web, just as they did in their dreamcatchers, to protect the Ojibwe people and how it now protected all Indigenous children. The elder explained how the dreamcatcher's web caught all the negative spirits which might try to enter the dreams of the children as they slept. The good dreams, he explained, would not get stuck in the cords, they would instead trickle down through the sinew and enter the children's heads through the dreamcatcher's feathers. He gave each child a bead for the center of their dreamcatcher to represent Asibikassashi in the middle of her web, watching over them. Resting Bull watched as one boy struggled to tie the ends of the sinew around his branch. The look of resilience which cast across the boys' face, as he stuck his

tongue out of the left side of his mouth to focus, not saying a word. The image before him triggered a memory of his own son, Fierce Muin, sitting in the dewy grass on the banks of the river as Resting Bull—who was at that time known by Fervid Bull—told him the story of Spider Woman. His son was long gone from disease, one of the many which spread rapidly once the Government of Maine had began withholding vaccines from the nation. Resting Bull found himself wondering how the story of Asibikassashi might have changed from when he first told his son. Despite how he, and many other elders fought to preserve the stories of his people, he had to admit that the story of the Spider Woman was fading from his memory.

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Within the four brick walls of Paul J. Crutzen Elementary School, a smiling teacher

guides her students through a song. The children sit with their legs folded on the worn and aged alphabet carpet. On good days, there are no more than eight of them, the youngest barely four years old and the oldest no more than ten. The children are malnourished and some are disabled. It is a distressing sight; their situation is bleak. The teacher feels sorry for her students, but mostly for herself. She herself is only eighteen. She too is hungry. She too is tired. She too is cold. Despite all this, the children sing:

The Itsy-Bitsy Spider

Climbed up the waterspout.

Down came the rain and

Washed the Spider out.

Out came the sun

And dried up all the rain

And the Itsy-Bitsy Spider

Went up the spout again.

Behind her eyes, somewhere deep amongst her thoughts, the teacher wondered when the spider would give up climbing the pipe. Watching over the children as they mouth the lyrics and repeatedly fold and unfold their small hands to imitate the climbing spider, she wonders if they will ever recover from being washed down the spout. If she, or the children, will live to see the spider climb again?

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It was August 1969, at an all-girls' Catholic summer camp in Haliburton Highlands,

Ontario. A bright-eyed girl, her hair still in the braids her mother had done for her before she left; braids, which should have been brushed out days earlier, and thus were collectors of small twigs, sand, and mosses. The girl lays on the upper-bunk, awake, and stares at the raptors above her. Amongst the long, low breaths of her

cabin-mates, her short, shallow breathing stands out. Each night, as the girl tried to fall asleep, the camper was taunted by a spider that scurried around above her bunk. The spider kept mostly to itself, but every so often it leaned close to the girl's face, dropping its weight effortlessly so that it became suspended above her head. Curious about his nightly visitor, the spider soon grew accustomed to the girl's presence. Although the cabin slept seven, this nervous little girl seemed to be the only one affected by it. It was her first time away, and she could not call for her father. She could not disturb the counselors or her new friends, so instead every night, hoping to sleep, she covered her face with a blanket, pretending the spider wasn't there.

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The spider's heart raced as it ran against the concentrated beams of heat emitted by the magnifying glass. The rays narrowly missed the spider as the pavement ignited around it. Above, a boy laughed, galloping after the spider, amused by the arachnid's speed. Fear coursed through the spider's body as it passed the still-trembling corps of the spider ahead who twitched, back to the pavement, legs pointed skyward. The living spider considered giving up and succumbing to the same fate. As it felt its leg begin to sear with pain twisting in the heat, it was forced to make its choice. In the blink of an eye, as if it were nothing, the spider sacrificed its leg and escaped from the menacing child on the other seven.

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From her web, she waits, watching. She is hungry, her stomach clenches, chewing on her own stomach gases, and she gazes, envious of the sweet allure her web does not contain. Flies quickly gather around steaming piles of excrement, and the spider struggles to contain her frustration.

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Back at the farm, a young spider stumbles upon the decaying body of the barn spider yet to be disturbed from its original resting place in the ravines. The young spider seizes the opportunity and settles into the dead spider's web. Using its web, the young spider draws in more flies, that he could ever stomach. Despite his success, the spider is lazy and never repairs the holes the flies create in the web. Over time, the web becomes ineffective, but the slothful spider does not see a need to maintain the web it inherited. The barn, like the web, begins to fall into disrepair. The rivers dry up and the crops stop sprouting. The animals stop reproducing and the people stop appearing. Soon, the web deteriorates, and the spider, now middle-aged, no longer knows how to repair it. Finally, the spider falls into the ravines where it too can sleep forever.

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The spider is now aware of the fly struggling in its web as the vibrations confirm its

suspicions. The spider moves closer to the fly, even though the fly is still unaware. Whether free or not, it is still trapped like the spider, condemned by its own jaws. One way or another, it is hungry, whether it is this fly or another that must struggle and sacrifice itself. We are not only the victims but also the perpetrators of our own misery. The fly fought for its freedom, fought to stay alive, and fought for what it would never have again.

Gone

Victoria Dean

Snow falls slowly outside the living room window. Trapping all of the greenery under a blanket of white. My coffee from the morning has grown cold, white unmoving froth floating at the top as though it's been sitting there for days. Dramatic.

The Christmas tree in the corner beckons to be watered, its limbs slowly shrivelling and wilting as the days go by. Memories flash through my mind of a time where our tree would be decorated in so many ornaments you could barely see the green. Now it stays empty, almost dead-looking as it stares back at me. I'm not sure why but I relate to this tree. Forgotten, alone, no one here to take care of it. Although none of those things are true. So why can't I shake these feelings?

I get up and leave the living room no longer wanting to think about it. My dad's boots litter the front porch. *I told him so many times to put them in the closet.* Each pair I pick up tires me, as though I am a child who can't lift more than a pound of weight. But I am not a child, so I pick them up and put them into the closet slamming the door shut before they are able to escape to gnaw at me once again.

I send my dad a text reminding him to get the mail on his way home. The text doesn't go through. Confusion clouds my mind before I come to the realisation that his phone must've been cut off. Money has been tight lately, so he usually chooses gas money overturning his phone on. Not bothering to hope he gets the mail anyways I shove on my ragged sketchers and leave the house.

The street is quiet; the occasional bark of a dog or the playful screams of children fill the eternal silence. The snow crunches under my shoes as I slowly make my way towards the mailbox, rubbing my hands together to conjure up any sort of warmth. Pearl, our next-door neighbour is already there grabbing a large parcel out of the bottom box. As I approach, I nod my head in acknowledgment. She turns to look at me before her eyes begin to fill with a kind of sorrow.

"Oh Steph, I hope you are doing okay." She says sadly. Her statement confuses me, but I chalk it up to her feeling lonely and depressed this winter season. I smile and nod to show her that it is okay that she feels like this.

She shuts the mailbox door before walking back towards her Christmas lit home. My fingers fumble with the keys before unlocking the box. Newspapers, electric bill, and an ad letter for funeral services. I think about giving this to Pearl, since you know, she'll kick the bucket soon enough. But that doesn't seem very nice, so I refrain.

Back in the house I walk through the dark hallway, my dad's bedroom door is closed. Meaning, he got home while I was out and has already gone to bed. I wrap myself up in all the blankets on my bed in order to stay warm. He must have

forgotten to start the fire tonight. That's okay though because what's a blanket good for if your house is too warm?

I close my eyes and allow my mind to drift, although these past few days I can't seem to understand my thoughts. I try to picture something light and easy to fall asleep to but the face in my daydreams is all white as though they wear a mask. Instead of thinking too long about it I turn on the small TV at the edge of my bed and fall asleep to a fake Christmas style fireplace.

Chapter 2: Fuel in the Fire

January 5th, 2026

I wake in a cold sweat. My nightmares seem to fuel my emotions lately, although I can never remember what they are about. I crawl out of bed and head straight for the kitchen where I find a note.

Scribbled in sloppy writing it says, “Gone for a while, going to try to get us some extra cash- Dad” Gone for a while? Whenever he's ‘gone for a while’ he's gone for days at a time slumming it with his drugged-up friends and gambling our disability pension away.

Frustration sets itself into the grooves of my bones making my fingers twitch. I told him time and time again to get away from the drugs, to leave it all behind so we can live a good life together and finally make something of ourselves. And yet here he is again completely ignoring my demands for him to stop.

Without thinking I grab hold of his moldy liquor glass on the counter and throw it at the wall. The cup shatters to a million pieces leaving a dent in the dry wall. Not that it isn't already torn up from when he would stumble in coked up and smashing himself into it. I think of all the possible things he could be doing right now with the money that I needed to get us groceries today.

My skin heats contrary to the cold stiffness of the house. I grip the counter painfully until I have to let go. *Why would he leave me like this?* I don't understand. I feel my throat begin to close, suffocating me, feeling the need to just scream and lash out. Now I will have to go out on the streets again, begging, and try to come up with some sort of cash in order to support us for the week. I open the fridge to find his still uneaten meatloaf that he told me to save for him. Its pungent smell hits me in the face. Just another thing that he leaves around for me to clean up. I take the loaf and shove it into the heaping trash bag that already overflows onto the kitchen floor. The trash that I told him to put out on the street. Red hot anger consumes me.

“Why can't you do anything for this house!” I grab hold of the trash bag and whip it at the same wall where I smashed his glass. Plastic, spoiled food, beer bottles, and everything in between covers the floor in slop.

“I hate it here, I hate this house, I hate everything!” I scream it out in frustration not caring that the only answer I get is a bang on the shared wall with our neighbour telling me to shut up.

If he wants to play this game, then I will play it too. I trudge through the mess towards his ‘emergency’ stash in the ripped couch cushion and waste no time pouring the white contents into the sink before drowning it with… Nothing. *Water does not flow from the tap as it once did.* I slump to the floor not being able to do anything else with my anger filled limbs. My hands shake violently; I do the only thing I know how to do. Lash out. I smash my fists against the wet floor, grabbing hold of any trash I can get my hands on and throwing it all over the kitchen.

When I am finished with my tantrum three hours have passed. The time just slipping away. My arms ache with soreness and fall limply to my sides. I crash onto the couch letting my mind take me back to the faceless figure that seems to haunt me. If I had any energy left in me, I would yell and scream at the figure in my mind to go away. Instead, my breathing evens, the anger still stirring but slowly pushing itself back into its cocoon. Once my mind settles, the world fades to black.

Chapter 3: Hope to God

February 4th, 2026

The days pass slowly; the snow buries me in this wretched house. Memories of my once family slowly fading into the depths of my mind. My father must've come back after I destroyed the kitchen because the coke was half gone out of the sink and the food on the floor had been messed with. He probably saw the mess I made and left for good.

I sit staring out of the window waiting to see him pull into the driveway with a pint of ice cream in his hands like when I was young. When there was nothing in this world that he would not protect me from. Then, the drugs came along after my mom left. After that I wasn't his first priority anymore, but he still continues to be mine.

I look at the stack of unopened bills on the coffee table. They put the eviction notice on the door a while ago, I guess they forgot about me, just like he did. I open the first bill and turn it over to the blank side. Pushing the mug of coffee, I made long ago to the side. I never liked coffee. So why did *I* make this cup? The thought leaves as quickly as it came when I grab my pen and begin to write. Word after useless word I scribble as fast as I can stumbling over letters, but I manage to get it out.

Dear Dad,

Please come back, this isn't like you. You've lost yourself and you need to come back please. You can't keep going down this dark road you seem to find yourself on. Please for my sake come back. I need you. I need you to come back. Without you I have

nothing left. So, pick yourself up. Get out of your own head, realise what you're doing to me. And just come back, live a normal life. We can get past this, but please realise what you're doing. You have to realise what's really happening, please. -Stephanie Jones

Maybe If I am a bit more formal, he will see how serious I am? I grab the letter and put it back into its original envelope. I jot down the address and run out to the mailbox. I write my name on the other side of the paper, so he knows it's from me and shove it down the mail chute.

Back in my chair I stare out waiting for the mailman to take my letter. To give it to my father so he can finally come back. Hours go by, and hopelessness settles in, making itself at home in my mind. So, I write more letters. I open the entire stack of bills and write in each one. Begging, pleading, tear drops coat the paper smearing the ink from my pen. The day blurs from my mind, my memory of the last letter fading when I open a new one. The more I write the more I realise this act isn't making me feel any better. However, it's the only thing I can do. I feel powerless, with a dry pen in my hand and ink smudged all over my fingers.

I grab the stack of letters and begin to write his address on them, before running out and shoving them into the mail chute all at once. Night passes achingly and morning comes. My eyes burn against the sunlight reflection off the snow. Just when I am about to shut them and seek out the rest, I desperately need the mail truck pulls up next to the mailboxes. I quickly shove my sneakers on and run outside.

"Hey, hey you! I put some letters in there. I need you to be extra careful with them. It's very important that they get to the recipient." He stares at me with confusion before nodding and saying.

"Yeah of course it's our policy that we handle all mail with care ma'am." No, he's not understanding, this isn't just any mail this is extremely important. I fall to my knees and begin to beg. Once again feeling powerless.

"Please, please, please, promise me that these will get to my father, you have to promise me please this mail is extremely important." I clasp my hands together in front of me in desperation and hope that he will do what I ask.

"Okay, I will make sure they get to the right place. I promise." He replies. His tone is not one of sincerity, but I hope to God that maybe he just has a monotone voice. I haul myself up off the slick wet ground and thank him before walking back into the house.

Tiredness blankets me, I barely make it to my bed before collapsing. My faceless figure is once again here to greet me. And once again I do nothing to shoo him away. Instead, I allow sleep to overtake me, clinging onto the hope that dad will get my letters.

Chapter 4: Philophobia

April 2nd, 2026

I lie on my side in my bed. Picking at the remaining skin around my nails, they don't sting as much anymore, as I hastily chew away at any spot that isn't already reddened or bleeding. Just to feel... Something. The pain comes and goes, it's more absent than it once was. Once I finish with my thumb there's nothing left to pick. My fingernails are caked with dirt and dried blood, I want to get up, I want to wash my hands. It's been weeks. Weeks since my last shower, weeks since I last brushed my teeth, properly combed my hair other than when I run my hands through it and clumps fall out with little to no tug.

The wind howls outside my small window, the snow has long since melted, I guess. Not that I've been downstairs long enough to eat more than some stale crackers and whatever juice from a pineapple bits can I can find in the cabinet.

My body has completely shut down, my bones protrude from my sides, I counted 12 on each side. Sometimes when the days grow too long and I run out of things to think about I run my fingers down my side, relishing in the feel of the bumps and grooves. The cramping in my legs stopped hurting after about the third week, just giving up on the hope that I would finally get up and use them. My body is slowly deteriorating. I tried at first to care, to want to get better. However, I, like my legs, have also given up on that thought.

One thing that hasn't yet subsided is the stinging in my eyes. Whether it's from the bright light shining through the window or the tears that cannot seem to stop from streaming out. Sometimes I cry for no reason at all, maybe I just feel sorry for myself. Maybe it's the fact that I know he's better off out of this house and away from me anyways. Thoughts rush my mind daily, when I am awake. Thoughts like the fact that he's really gone. He's not coming back; he's found a new life without me. Maybe even a new daughter. One who could support him, one who could have helped with the medical bills, one who wasn't a burden. I try to shut them out, I try to believe that I am more than that. Yet the little voice in the back of my mind, a voice that sounds an awful lot like my own, tells me it's all true. That I am worth nothing, that I am a plague to all of those around me. My mother left, I have no close family, I have no friends, and now my father is gone too.

Even Pearl decided to leave me, collapsing from a heart attack just the other day. I saw it through my living room window, her small hand clutching her chest as though she could rip the pain away and come out fine. I wish I had her courage to try, even when she knew what the outcome would be she still... tried. I could have helped; I could have gotten up and ran to her. Instead, I stared, waited, hoping to God that if I committed a sin such as not helping someone else maybe he would take me too. Her caretaker found her the next day, she dropped to her knees and wept. And as they hauled off Pearl's body she looked at me through my stained broken window.

Looked at me as though I did not exist, and if I did, she had no care. Then she left, just like he did. That was the last time I stayed downstairs for more than ten minutes. Maybe if I hadn't been there watching her, my bad karma would have left her alone.

Sometimes I wish that it was me, that I had been the one to collapse instead of her. That someone would finally take some pity on me and just end this useless life of mine. I try not to think of it too much, but sometimes I just can't help it. If I continue this lifestyle I am going to die anyway, and now I have nothing left to live for. So, what's the point? I try to shove the impulses down, but they stay dormant in the back of my mind as I try to drift off to the only place where my mind doesn't torment me, sleep.

Chapter 5: Acceptance

April 14th, 2026

Pearl's funeral is today. Since God wouldn't kill me for not helping her, I hope going to her grave and looking at her family, the people she cared for will kill me in itself. Guilt doesn't flood my system like it once might have. But I don't feel good about it either, there really was nothing I could have done. However, Pearl was always kind to me, and she would've rushed over with her knobby knees and bad hip in a hurricane just to comfort me and stay by my side, until death swooped in to claim me. Which is why I seek out any resemblance of humanity here. To see if being at her funeral and at her grave site will finally give me the feelings I have been searching for for so long. If not, then I will walk home and pay for my sins there.

So here I stand, wearing a black shirt and black leggings. The nicest outfit I could muster. Looking down at her freshly covered grave trying to conjure up any sort of emotion. I fall short and call it quits. A bottle of pills and a beer wait for me then. I will die today, and I can't make myself feel sad about that. My sneakers crunch the leaves under my feet as I walk out of the graveyard and away from my last hope.

Just as I am about to reach the exit another fresh grave catches my eye. It draws to me, beckoning me to go look at it. It won't hurt to stop by for a second, right? This grave is a bit older than Pearls; the grass has begun to slowly overtake the soil. I take in the small cross sitting at the head of the grave. The breath in my lungs is suctioned out.

Here lies *Malcolm Jones.*

Father.

Brother.

Husband.

July 1st, 1973 - December 27th, 2025

May your soul rest easy.

I finally feel something as my knees hit the ground splitting open and my lungs burn with the need to scream. *He's... Dead?* My body shakes violently. I grip onto the ground looking for any purchase, but I receive none. Tears stream down my face, snot clogs my throat, I heave myself up off the ground and crawl to his grave in desperation.

For hours I weep. Waiting for the tears to conclude. Waiting for the pain to go away, I've been numb this long. It feels as though the feelings that I have suppressed have not gone away, only strengthened until the dam finally reached its breaking point. Eventually after the day goes by and the sun begins to set the tears subside and pain the leaves temporarily. I reluctantly pick myself up and walk back home, in search of more answers. Answers that I have had in my head all along.

As I open the door the house feels fuller than before, like somehow, I've let in some kind of energy that fills the space. What that energy is, I am not sure. I open the closet to my left and let all of his boot's spill onto the floor like a wave of rushing water. Instead of picking them up or getting angry like I used to I simply step over them and head upstairs.

His door creaks open as I press my hand to it. Old rock band posters cover the walls, along with his collection of license plates that we used to steal off cars. A picture of him holding me up like an airplane with giant goofy smiles on our faces sits on his bedside table. His room is messy, the floor covered in stains and clothing, his bed half made with one lone pillow on it after he heard me complaining about my pillows not giving me any support. Because that's the kind of dad I remember him to be. The one who would give you the shirt off his back if he felt you needed it more than he did. The room grows blurry as tears streak down my cheeks.

A knock on the door startles me, I wipe my face off and rush down the stairs. When I open it no one greets me, except a stack of letters sitting on the welcome mat. Letters that are addressed to me. *Although not exactly written for me.* I take my time reading them realising that maybe they were meant for me. I read one of me begging him to open his eyes and see what's in front of him. To realise, realise, realise. Somewhere deep down I know that these were never meant for him, they were my mind's last effort to get me to see what I wasn't seeing.

"I realise now." I say to nobody. He didn't leave me, at least not on purpose. He died just days after Christmas. Days before I began to worry. I have been grieving someone who is dead, even if I hadn't known it yet. My brain's way of coping I assume. I never once thought it could have been death. I had myself so convinced I could never be loved properly so I made up my own story to fuel that thought. He never came home, he never messed around with old mouldy food on the floor, he never licked up the cocaine left in the sink. We've always had mice problems, yet I had to convince myself it was him. I had to convince myself that the letter I found wasn't the one that he had placed there months before, telling me he was going out

to get extra cash. Which he never actually did. Because instead I woke up before he was out the door. And together we spent the day painting rocks and talking about music.

The funeral ad that I received that day in December sparks my memory. I grab it off the counter and begin to read it. The outside is addressed to me; it isn't an ad at all. It is a letter from the funeral home. Inside reads a small note.

Dear Stephanie,

We here at Anthony's Cremation and Funeral Services want to say we are very sorry for your loss. We understand how hard it can be to lose a family member especially around the holiday season. As someone who has been in this community a while I am especially saddened to see that Malcolm's name was on our list for burial. Malcolm was an amazing man, and I know he went through a lot of hardship in his life. Which is why I am offering to cremate and bury him with our funeral package free of charge. I hope that this will lessen some burden on your end as I know that money can be tight around this season. If you have any questions or concerns just let us know. I will see you on January 12, 2026, for the funeral service.

Take care,

Tony

Knowing my father was cared for and buried by someone he knew brings me a small comfort even though I wasn't there. But it also hurts to know that the answers to all of my questions were just sitting here on the counter this whole time. My heart breaks knowing I could have been there, but my naivety kept me from the truth.

“Dad, I don't know if you can hear me. But I won't let this happen again. I will do better, for your sake. I love you” I say it out into the universe, hoping that somehow, he knows how sorry I am. I hope that he can find it in his heart to forgive me. But first I must forgive myself.

My eyes grow tired as darkness takes over the sky. And when I close my eyes, I expect to see the faceless man once again, instead I am met with the face of my father. He doesn't speak, and neither do I. He just nods and gives me a look that says

"There's nothing you could do in this world that I couldn't forgive.” Maybe that's just me trying to convince myself once again, but this time I really truly believe it. Finally, he fades away from my mind. Leaving me with emptiness once again. However, this time I don't sit and dwell on it. Instead, I take pride in it and allow rest to find me. Allow hope to find me. Hope to grow and hope to find myself without needing him.

CLOSING VISUAL VOICE

Ribbon Skirt

Sasheen Regalado



A richly constructed textile artwork combining appliqué, painted/printed imagery, and decorative embroidery.

ArT

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