

# Warren 2020

Warren 2020



# Warren

Bloomsburg University  
Student Literary & Art Journal

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*Bonfire Nights*

By Jailyn Franzzone

# This year's edition of *Warren* is dedicated to the man whose passions always burnt brightly: Dr. Terrance Riley



To the publishers and readers of this year's *Warren*. I'd like to thank Terry's students and colleagues for encouraging him in his love of learning. When you were excited about some new writer, music, idea, or some new take on some old novel, etc., he'd write a little note to himself to investigate further. Pretty much any hour he was awake, he was also reading, writing, discussing ideas, listening to the radio, or watching tv (usually news or old movies). He ate his lunch standing up at the kitchen counter, reviewing the newspaper. He loved our drives in the countryside, but especially ones when the Metropolitan Opera was on the radio. His favorite exercise was using a stair-stepper at the YMCA, because he could exercise and read at the same time (and watch tv). He was a rare bird, to be sure, and was proud to teach at Bloomsburg University all of his 29 years with this school. He was one of the kindest and funniest people I've ever known. Thank you for keeping him interested and interesting!

-Janet Locke (Terry Riley's wife)

*\*A true gentleman and a scholar.*

*\*A kind and humble soul.*

Thus began the stream of tributes posted to my Facebook page after I announced that after a brief battle with lung cancer, my dear compatriot, friend, and office mate Dr. Terry Riley had passed away on November 23, 2019.

*\*Terry Riley is the reason I became an English major. He spent so much of his free time working with me on revisions of a paper that was eventually accepted at a literature conference, which then was the impetus for my first trip west. He gave me CDs of classical music because he said "I needed it" and he was right. When he choked up reading excerpts of *Hard Times* aloud in class, everything came together for me with where I was in life. He was the nicest person I've ever met.*

Terry was the first person I said hi to every morning for the last eighteen years. Since he got up at 3:30 am every day there was never a morning when he didn't have the light and heat on when I arrived on campus. He would call out "Good Morning" and I would answer, "Dr. Riley I presume." We would both laugh even though it was a dad joke and we did it too often.

*\*I am really sad to hear this news. Dr. Riley was one of the most impactful people I've ever had the pleasure of knowing. My life is better because of his classes and the bonafide wisdom he would impart every day. He was one of my favorite people, period.*

Though I had been teaching for a long time before I met him, his utterly student-centered teaching style had a huge influence on me, in ways I am only now beginning to understand. I listened to him conference with students and the degree to which he was present and encouraging was astounding. Students inevitably felt seen and understood when they left the office.

*\*I am heartbroken. He was a truly genuine teacher. I looked forward to his class every session. He was so unique and you could see and feel the passion he had for what he was sharing with you and in so doing, you'd absorb it like a sponge. What a tragic, tragic loss for BU.*

Terry Riley came to Bloomsburg University in 1990, and directed the Writing Center until 2002, when he returned to full time teaching. His specialty was British Romanticism but he had a wide range of interests including 19th century technology, super heroes, and old, low-tech sci fi movies. Relevant here is that he was advisor to the literary magazine on and off from 1992 to 2000.

*\*He taught one of my favorite classes... I loved making him laugh.*

Terry touched the lives of thousands of students. He could easily be remembered for his brilliance, his incredible work ethic, his humor, or his focus. But I think if there was one comment left about him that he would be the most proud of, and the part of his legacy that I will attempt to carry on to honor him it's this:

*\*I have rarely met a person who was so unerringly kind to all.*

-Dr. Claire Lawrence

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# Literary Essay Entries

## “Atwood’s Incredulity”

Anna Jaskiewicz

### BAILLIE AWARD FOR THE LITERARY ESSAY 2020 WINNER

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard defines postmodernism as an “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard xxiv). A metanarrative is a word coined by Lyotard that describes certain narratives among society that have become legitimized over time. Postmodernism works to swerve away from these metanarratives and prove that they ought not be accepted as the norm within society.

Within her works, Margaret Atwood challenges specific metanarratives including the patriarchy, Capitalism, and Christianity. The fictionalized characters within *Alias Grace*, *The Penelopiad*, *The Blind Assassin*, and *The Handmaid’s Tale* exist as victims of the aforementioned metanarratives. Atwood uses the personal narratives of her characters to alert readers to the dangers of these metanarratives and warns humanity against accepting these grand narratives as truth.

Arguably the most noticeable metanarrative that is exposed and combated within Atwood’s works is the patriarchy. Unlike Christianity, the patriarchy as a metanarrative is a tad more ambiguous of a term. In short, a patriarchal society is one that is ruled by men and only male members of the society may hold the power positions within the society. Of course, in the base sense of the term, modern day America is not considered a patriarchal society. However, the male dominance and quest for power that stems from past patriarchal times have trickled into today’s common mindsets.

Atwood writes the novel *Alias Grace* not only to share the perspective of the celebrated murderer, Grace Marks, but also to expose some of the more disturbing aspects of the patriarchy. Atwood uses Grace and her situation as a means to show the dangers faced by women who attempt to combat this metanarrative in a time before it was regularly being questioned. One aspect of *Alias Grace* that shows how the patriarchy oppresses Grace is how she is consistently reduced to a piece of entertainment, news, or study for all the men in the novel. In a first-person reflection about the newspaper coverage of the Kinnear murders, Grace recounts, “But they called James McDermott my paramour. They wrote it down, right in the newspaper. I think it is disgusting to write such things down” (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 27). Grace is noticeably disturbed that the public has reduced her to McDermott’s secret lover. In addition to being labeled as a paramour, Grace is also given other labels and Dr. Jordan reduces her to edible bits as their relationship forms.

As the novel continues, it becomes apparent that Grace may have a psychological disorder. Arguably, Atwood chooses to give Grace a complex personality disorder in order to show readers how a poisonous patriarchal society could negatively affect a woman’s sense of identity. In *The Canadian Postmodern*, Linda Hutcheon provides some reasoning that may help to explain Grace’s personality disorders,

“She destabilizes or de-centres the ‘normal’ notions of subjectivity – female subjectivity: becoming defines being” (Hutcheon 142). Although Hutcheon is discussing *The Edible Woman* here, the analysis can be applied to *Alias Grace* as well. Grace loses her sense of self as the novel continues; every man in her life has had a different perception of her and, therefore, a different expectation of her. To Dr. Jordan she is a subject of study, “As long as I say something, anything at all, Dr. Jordan smiles and writes it down, and tells me I’m doing well. While he writes, I feel as if he is drawing on me.” (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 69). Grace is a victim of the patriarchy because she allows Dr. Jordan to partake in the fashioning of her own identity. In agreeing to work with Dr. Jordan, Grace’s individuality, or sense of being, is at risk of being overpowered by patriarchal society’s recreation of her and her story.

Even though Hutcheon doesn’t directly use the term “metanarrative” within this chapter, she is pointing to a toxic commonality found in society that Atwood directly addresses within *Alias Grace*. Hutcheon outlines the negative repercussions that this metanarrative has had on women for centuries, “Both Atwood’s feminist and postmodernist impulses work to question the very nature of selfhood as it is defined in our culture: that is, as coherent, unified, rational...women have traditionally been denied access to this definition of self” (Hutcheon 144). Atwood’s *Alias Grace* accurately depicts a woman who was denied her sense of self dually because of her gender and her questionable sanity. However, it can be argued that Grace’s questionable mental state directly stems from her inability to maintain a sense of self due to her unfavorable place in a patriarchal society.

Similarly, in Atwood’s novella, *The Penelopiad*, the problematic patriarchal tendency to reduce females to a one-dimensional level is openly addressed. In the introduction, Atwood notes that *The Odyssey* depicts Penelope as the, “quintessential faithful wife, a woman known for her intelligence and constancy” (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* xiii). The key word “quintessential” must be noted as a sign for readers that Atwood will be working to debunk this typical metanarrative in society by using her characterization of Penelope. The novella is narrated in part by Penelope herself as well as by her twelve servant maidens who are also subjects of exploitation in the patriarchal society, “Subverting the standard version, *The Penelopiad* reveals the hidden gender- stereotyping in the older narrative, deconstructing the narratives of patriarchal culture and thus challenging the very basis of meta-narratives of male ideology.” (Khalid & Tabassum 27). It is unlikely that anyone during Homer’s time had an issue with *The Odyssey*’s gender-stereotyping. However, now that *The Odyssey* has become known as a work that supports the patriarchy, Atwood takes it upon herself to deviate from the old narrative in order to present the female characters’ views of the story.

*The Penelopiad* recaps the harsh decision made by Odysseus and his son, Telemachus, to hang the twelve maids. In Atwood’s version of this myth, readers learn that the maids were nothing but loyal to Penelope, therefore, their murders were tragic and unnecessary. In the Underworld, Penelope is constantly haunted by the injustices done to her maids because an affirmative word from her may have changed their fate. The maids liken themselves to shadows that follow those who have done them wrong, “We’re the serving girls, we’re here to serve you. We’re here

to serve you right. We’ll never leave you, we’ll stick to you like your shadow, soft and relentless as glue. Pretty maids, all in a row.” (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 193). The shadow imagery and continuous themes of haunting within the novella point to the way metanarratives tend to stick around within society. Although the patriarchy is less oppressive than it once was, Atwood uses *The Penelopiad* to expose the way patriarchal views still hang in the air today.

Another metanarrative that Atwood continually works to deconstruct within her works is Capitalism. With Capitalism comes class divisions between those who are wealthy and those who are poor as well as the extreme examples of those two classifications. In Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* there are characters that represent the upper-class and there are characters that represent the lower-class. It is in the novel within the novel where readers see two characters, one from each end of the socioeconomic ladder, come together in a romantic relationship.

During the romantic relationship, of what later is revealed to be between the lower-class citizen Alex and the upper-class citizen Iris, Alex tells her a story of a young blind assassin. Within one of these installments, Alex explains what can be interpreted as the ideologies of those belonging to the lower-class:

Some of the best things are done by those with nowhere to turn, by those who don’t have time, by those who truly understand the word *helpless*. They dispense with the calculation of risk and profit, they take no thought for the future, they’re forced at spearpoint into the present tense. Thrown over a precipice, you fall or else you fly; you clutch at any hope, however unlikely; however – if I may use such an overworked word – miraculous. What we mean by that is, *Against all odds*. (Atwood, *The Blind Assassin* 256).

Through the character of Alex and in his narrative, Atwood is calling attention to the failures of Capitalism. As an economic system, Capitalism always requires that there be a bottom of the totem pole.

*The Blind Assassin* works to demystify the Capitalist system by showing the financial struggles and hardships faced by the lower class through the character of Alex. As he works on another sci-fi piece to publish Alex thinks to himself:

Why does he crank out this junk? Because he needs to – otherwise he’d be stony flat broke...He had bigger ambitions once, more serious ones. To write a man’s life the way it really is. To go in at the ground level, the level of starvation pay...To expose the workings of the system, the machinery, the way it keeps you alive just so long as you’ve got some kick left in you, how it uses you up, turns you into a cog or a souse, crushes your face into the muck one way or another. (Atwood, *The Blind Assassin* 280).

Alex’s thoughts here can be likened to Atwood’s own; Atwood is working to discredit the system of Capitalism by giving readers a tragic figure through her characterization of Alex. The biggest critique of Capitalism as a metanarrative is that it eats away at artistic expression; if monetary gain is the driving factor of a society, humanlike qualities will cease as we all become more machinelike over time. Alex longs to expose the disillusionments of Capitalism within his works, unfortunately, desperation drives him to produce works that will sell. This is the supply and demand nightmare of Capitalism that Alex, and all authors, must face. Atwood

attempts to uncover this failure of Capitalism by detailing Alex's lifelong struggle, anguish, and eventually his tragic demise.

While Alex is made to represent the lower-class within *The Blind Assassin*'s commentary against Capitalism, the characters Richard and Winifred are meant to embody the attitudes of the upper-class. When it is discovered that Laura was working at a waffle stand at the Sunnyside Amusement Park, Iris offers a critical aside about the type of people Richard and Winifred are:

Sunnyside was where people went in the summer, then. Not people like Richard and Winnifred – it was too rowdy for them, too sweaty...Richard and Winifred would not have wished to be in such close proximity to other people's armpits, or to those who counted their money in dimes. Though I don't know why I'm being so holier-than-thou, because I wouldn't have wanted it either. (Atwood, *The Blind Assassin* 324).

Although, throughout the novel, Richard and Winifred are depicted as arrogant, snobby members of the upper-class, Iris recognizes that she herself has developed a pretentious air about her as well. Of course, this denotes just how intrusive this corrupt metanarrative of Capitalism can become.

Years before Atwood directly addresses the topic of Capitalism through Alex's narrative, she touches on the issue of Capitalist class structure through Grace's experience in *Alias Grace*. In *Reading, Learning, Teaching Margaret Atwood*, P.L. Thomas expertly ties in the exposure of both metanarratives, the patriarchy and class divisions, within *Alias Grace*:

*Alias Grace* also does not fail to raise issues about class and gender, both literally in the 1800s setting of the novel and indirectly in our lives today. Grace is imprisoned by her life circumstances long before she finds herself in prison, for example. Having come from Ireland, Grace is denied education and expected to subjugate herself to both men and her employers. (Thomas 91).

Thomas draws attention to Atwood's depiction of Grace as a victim of the Capitalist hierarchy. She is already low on the social totem pole because she is a woman, but her status as an Irish immigrant adds to her subjugation. Atwood includes other characters within this novel that further exemplify the issues of Capitalist class structure.

Arguably, one of Mary Whitney's main roles as a character within *Alias Grace* is to symbolize those who participated in rebellions against harmful class structures. Grace describes Mary's beliefs on the subject, "it angered her that some people had so much and others had so little, as she could not see any divine plan in it" (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 150). Mary's anti- Capitalist sentiments can be compared to those of Alex's from *The Blind Assassin*. It is implied in *The Blind Assassin* that Alex's rebellious passions against Capitalism were powerful enough to thrust him into the Spanish civil war, which leads to his death.

In comparison, Mary Whitney is exploited by a man, whom she thought to be a lover, and was left by him to solve her unexpected pregnancy on her own; she passes due to a botched abortion. Mary warns Grace, and indirectly, warns readers against upper-class men, "The worst ones are the gentlemen, who think they are

entitled to anything they want" (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 165). It is implied here that the attitude of entitlement derives from the pampered life of the upper-class. In this passage, Atwood is suggesting that the upper-class greed and entitlement does not stop at monetary gain, but rather, this toxic mindset seeps into other aspects of society such as romantic or sexual interaction, which can lead to the exploitation of women; this exploitation is detailed by Mary's emotional and physical suffering.

After Mary's passing, Grace makes the decision to leave Mrs. Alderman Parkinson's. The short scene speaks volumes about the importance of reputation for the upper-class citizen:

Mrs. Alderman Parkinson did not protest, but instead had me into the library and asked very earnestly once more if I knew the man; and when I said I did not, she asked me to swear on the Bible that even if I did, I would never divulge it, and she would write me a good reference... [She] gave me a present of two dollars upon leaving. (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 198).

This interaction with Mrs. Alderman Parkinson highlights the upper-class members' obsession with maintaining a dignified reputation. Additionally, the gifts of a good reference and the two dollars represent Mary's worth being reduced, by Mrs. Alderman Parkinson, to nothing more than a slight monetary inconvenience. Although Alex's and Mary's deaths are different by nature, they were both indirect victims of exploitation by the Capitalist class structure.

Class comparisons are also a prominent theme within *The Penelopiad*. The twelve maids draw a direct comparison between the affluent Prince Telemachus' birth to their own, "Helpless as he was helpless, but ten times more helpless as well, For his birth was longed-for and feasted, as our births were not. His mother presented a princeling." (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 67). These lines within the chorus reflect the differences between socioeconomic classes that were apparent long before Capitalism was named. The twelve maids also represent victims of Capitalist class structure as they recognize they will never be as welcomed or respected within society as a wealthy prince.

The third metanarrative that is displayed throughout Atwood's works is Christianity. Atwood does not attempt to claim there is no God, however, she exposes the hypocritical and political problems of Christianity and its followers. This metanarrative is uncovered most noticeably throughout *Alias Grace* and *The Handmaid's Tale*.

There are multiple passages within *Alias Grace* that suggest a disdain toward Christian practices. After Mary Whitney's death, Grace makes a claim that would be in contention with Christianity, "But surely the form of prayer does not matter, and the only distinction God makes is between good will and ill; or so I have come to believe." (Atwood *Alias Grace* 197). Christianity harbors many specific rules and practices, which followers are expected to comply. Through Grace's personal comments about religion and Christianity, Atwood suggests that this aspect of Christianity is nonsense. Additionally, Grace's commentary is used to expose the hypocritical thoughts and actions of the followers of Christianity:

They are hypocrites, they think the church is a cage to keep God in, so he will stay locked up there and not go wandering about the earth during the week, poking his nose into their business, and looking into the depths and darkness and doubleness of their hearts, and their lack of true charity; and they believe they need only be bothered about him on Sundays when they have their best clothes on and their faces straight, and their hands washed and their gloves on, and their stories all prepared. (Atwood, *Alias Grace* 254).

Through Grace's experience and unfavorable commentary, Atwood is sharing common critical views about Christians. As Atwood points out throughout her works, people will consistently rely on Christianity and use it to justify their prejudices toward others who do not share the same faith.

To expose Christianity as a toxic metanarrative is not to prove God's inexistence, but rather, it is to expose the unjustifiable weaponizing of the religious belief. In the introduction of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood clarifies the religious theme of her work, "So the book is not "anti-religion." It is against the use of religion as a front for tyranny; which is a different thing altogether." (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* xviii). Atwood works to expose this misuse of Christianity, and the issue of taking Scripture out of context, within her 1986 novel.

Within *The Handmaid's Tale*, the new society, Gilead, represents as a dystopia where Christianity is forced upon the public at a time when humankind is fighting to survive. In an essay titled *Life without certainty: Margaret Atwood's ambiguous words*, Rachel Thorpe agrees that Atwood is working to debunk the misuse of the Christian metanarrative within *The Handmaid's Tale*:

Atwood's works, and her personal beliefs, appear to reject entirely the Christian metanarrative...Echoes of Scripture run throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*, but they are twisted and obscured...Atwood is simply echoing the message that the postmodern world has imbibed from a misrepresented and distorted reading of the Bible. (Thorpe 3).

Atwood uses the dystopic setting of Gilead to reveal a possible future for society if Scripture isn't kept within its context as a work of literature.

Atwood's warning against taking Scripture out of context can be seen by the repetition of "Context is all." throughout Offred's narrative. The first time she uses the phrase is in reference to her description of the first time the Commander asks her to play scrabble, "This is one of the most bizarre things that's happened to me, ever. Context is all." (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 144). In this instance of the phrase, Offred is asserting the idea that context is everything and can be likened to Atwood's warning to avoid taking Scripture out of context. Later in the novel, she remembers a conversation with Moira and thinks to herself, "Context is all; or is it ripeness? One or the other." (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 192). Offred's uncertainty the second time she makes use of the phrase has a strong implication: her uncertainty could be the result of the brainwashing effects of the Gileadean regime, which values the "ripeness" of fertile women above all else. Furthermore, this mental breech into Offred's original thought of "Context is all." and its' resulting muddled version proves how the toxic belief system of Gilead has negatively influenced Offred. It is through this aspect of Offred's experience that Atwood warns

against taking Scripture out of context and not letting others' ideologies infiltrate one's own beliefs.

The Christian metanarrative becomes debunked by *The Handmaid's Tale* as Atwood reminds readers that Scripture, and Christianity as a whole, began as nothing more than linguistic constructs. At the end of *The Handmaid's Tale* when Offred is unsure whether she is being saved or taken to her death, she summarizes this ideology, "That is what you get in the end. Faith is only a word, embroidered." (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 292). Here Offred is calling attention to the strength of Christianity as a metanarrative. If people kept Christianity within the context of its own literary realm, then it would not hold the power to continuously impose itself on humanity as a metanarrative. Therefore, Christianity would no longer provide people the right to endorse religious prejudices against others.

Although it may be uneasy for some to think of a world where Christianity is diminished to a simple story, Lyotard offers some semblance of peace on the matter of forgotten metanarratives. He philosophizes that humans exist only within the limits of their linguistic interaction, "That is what the postmodern world is all about. Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative. It in no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity." (Lyotard 41). To agree with Lyotard, Atwood's ability to deflate Christianity as a metanarrative would not push humanity back to a time of barbarity. However, as seen in the creation of Gilead, taking religious claims out of context would, in fact, set back basic human rights for women.

Throughout the personal narratives of her characters, Atwood exposes multiple toxic metanarratives within her works. It is through her characters that she provides examples of how people may choose to combat these metanarratives within their own lives. At the very least, she attempts to get readers to notice and think critically about the metanarratives at play within today's society, for if these metanarratives were to be completely abolished, what would be left for Atwood to write about?

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# Poetry Entries

## “How to Grow”

Kirsten Crawford

SAVAGE POETRY AWARD 2020 WINNER

1.

When your grandmother is a flower child,  
you learn to love the daisies and cacti  
of Eve's gardens. You weave  
chains of creeping charlie  
and black-eyed-susans just the same. Weeds  
and thorns can be worn  
for pain or pleasure,  
or both.

Speaking of peace pipes  
and poetry and peyote,

I found the wonder  
in worlds I was not meant to.

I blossomed, idolizing the flowers  
imagined into her hair, petals  
burnt. She is a flower,  
blood as green as the leaves, heart  
bleeding the colors  
of her rose bushes, and her spirit  
as golden as the sun she seeks.

2.

There is nothing more addictive  
than watching a man fight  
for your pack of Newports.

Throughout an unexpected night,  
amidst graffiti walls and smokey introspections, I  
caught your screwball-y smile  
a total of *seven times*  
before you said the words,  
“Can you find your cigs?”. Under the influences,  
the first time I heard  
the way your voice sounded  
in my direction, sickeningly-sweet

wilting honeysuckle, I  
could only manage a shy smile.  
I found remedy  
within the strength of your knuckles,

blooming black-blue  
lilies before my eyes  
as you walked me to the car.

You opened my door and my heart with so little  
as, “I need  
to see you again.”

3.

*“I know you think this world is too dark  
to even dream in color,  
but I've seen flowers bloom at midnight.  
I've seen kites fly in gray skies  
and they were real close  
to looking like the sunrise,  
and sometimes  
it takes the most wounded wings,  
the most broken things  
to notice how strong the breeze is,  
how precious the flight.”*

4.

When the doctor told us  
you chewed through your oxygen mask  
during the night, I felt  
for your terrors. The demons  
gnawed their way through. Life  
became the everyday chore.

Days were spent  
dedicated to tangled breathing  
tubes and simple household tasks.

When you sent me to your garden  
alone, I saw your smile beaming  
beside me- hands buried in the dirt,  
as we planted the first seeds  
in your sunbed. A woman  
who holds so much life  
within her garden, sunshine  
for the spurs and strawberries alike,

was now bound  
to the confines  
of her sidewalk pavement.

COPD and depression  
were your diagnoses. The pharmacist said,  
“vicodin, meloxicam, morphine, spiriva, albuterol”.

We watched the sun dim  
from behind your irises- and I sang,  
for your roses, "live, live, live."

5.

Your desire for dope was finally quenched  
by something far more pure,  
far more addicting  
than any needle:  
the garden of a girl seeking sin. Years of weeds  
consuming wooden floor panels  
and adrenaline matched in potency  
by the drugs you inhaled  
with every step- resolved in the love  
for a blossoming flower child.

My desire for meaning  
was quenched  
by the ability to change,  
to save a life.

6.

*"Before I die, I want to be  
somebody's favorite hiding place,  
the place they can put everything  
they know they need to survive,  
every secret, every solitude,  
every nervous prayer,  
and be absolutely certain  
I will keep it safe.*

*I will keep it safe."*

7.

Arguing with you  
was like talking sense and poking sarcasms  
at a cactus.

Your opinions were strong  
and sharply-equipped against my denials.  
Fruitless resistance would only echo  
in my own smoke-shrouded thoughts.

My garden you helped me to cultivate  
was starving in the hands  
of my anxieties, my insecurities,  
my ill-kempt weeds, and my inability  
to assume responsibility

of my own neglect. I could not accept  
that would we had grown,  
through my bitter cold winters  
and blistering summers alike,  
was at risk  
of extinction. The breeds  
of daisies, butterfly bushes, sunflowers,  
creeping charlie, dandelions, grasses,  
blackberry bushes, cherry tomatoes, and chives-

this hybrid of thorns and petals  
and the full color spectrum- this heart  
you helped me to tend- had been drained  
of its meaning. I poisoned myself  
and intended to keep on doing so,  
so long as I had a garden  
of my own blurred intentions.

When my stubbornness finally uprooted  
this haven we created,  
when I stepped out of the door  
with no intentions of looking behind me,  
I only thought of my ignorant fantasies

of how I would grow  
my own fruitful garden, high  
on sunshine and smoke.

Every day without your hands  
in the soil beside me, helping me  
tend my weeds  
and every day without  
the smell of your hair lingering  
on the tip of my nose  
after I kiss your head- every day,

through the thorns and peace pipes, I ached  
for my garden of pure and true.

8.

I traced the newly sowed tracks  
on your arms  
and watered the barren grounds  
with enough tears to drown  
the driest wastelands. The thorned crowns  
you wove for me  
were too much to bare  
without bleeding myself dry  
as well. I would not allow

myself to become a leaf, crumbling  
and spreading my dead  
pieces in the wind  
as you had already  
began to dissolve  
into brittled-brown  
veins of what once used to be

alive. Your screams  
and narcotics  
poisoned the garden  
I finally thought I began to reclaim  
as my own. The life  
I had found within  
only thrived on the muddy truths,  
smoke-saturated skies,  
and the poor thistle bush  
I wanted so desperately  
to find a garden of his own.

There is a place for you,  
amidst even the most rich of soils.

You are more  
than ugly acts  
and drug-induced mistakes.  
You are not  
the harm you have done.  
You are the color you create amidst  
all the black-blues and dingey browns.

I know you have a needle in one hand  
and my photograph in the other.  
And I know, you're only asking for me  
to find the strength to bury the venom  
deep underground,  
somewhere you will never find it,  
so that one day we can bask  
in the weeping willow  
of your well-versed game of chase  
finally at end.

But I will  
not continue  
to pollute this garden.  
I will not tend  
to your opium demons, in my soil, any longer.

The flowers, I am feeding

and singing to, will  
not stand nor bend  
at the contamination of their roots.

9.  
*You will never be let down by anyone  
more than you will be let down  
by the one you love most in the world  
it's how gravity works  
it's why they call it 'falling'  
it's why the truth is harder to tell-  
every year, you have more to lose,  
but you can bury your past  
in the garden by the tulips  
water it until it's so alive  
it lets you go  
and you belong to yourself again."*

10.  
I slept in your bed the night after  
you tried to kill yourself.  
My knees dug holes in the comforter  
as my heart ached  
to be nestled within the softest spot  
of your wrinkled palms.  
My sunflowers and climbing roses  
arched their necks  
to bask in your sun,  
the smell of your head  
on your pillows, and the pictures  
warming your walls.

Your old poems and my garden  
were watered  
by my regrets and crying daisies.  
My garden was finally growing  
by pure soil and intentions,  
all to be drowned  
by the longing for your hands buried  
familiarly beside mine.

Though, I did not suffer. I am learning  
to flourish amongst monsoons and forest fires.

I know your world seems too cold for gardens,  
but we have both seen crocuses  
bloom from blades of frozen grass.

II.

When I heard you killed yourself,  
my gardens mourned  
for your tainted grounds.

My black-eyed-susans  
and dahlias hung their petals in shame.

They cursed their colors  
in sight of your deserted soul,  
each emptied breeze  
shook their disheartened bodies.

Your poison had finally won,  
drank you dry,  
and left the ground hardened  
and dirtied.

Streaks, tracks, and cracks  
formed roadmaps on your battleworn skin  
so that they would all finally see  
your disease-

infected  
until nothing of substance  
could survive. I

could only wish  
my flowery foundation was enough  
to quench your unsatisfied disorder.

12.

*“What I know about living  
is the pain is never just ours.  
Every time I hurt,  
I know the wound is an echo.  
So I keep listening*

*to the moment the grief becomes a window,  
when I can see what I couldn’t see before.*

*Through the glass of my most battered dream,  
I watched a dandelion lose its mind in the wind  
and when it did, it scattered a thousand seeds.”*

**“Age”**  
**Bryant LeBeau**

Age

Too frail  
    too weathered  
Frost steals his footing  
    a collapse on the sidewalk

They pass  
    stepping by  
No second look  
    for a crumbling man  
    on shaky bones

A young girl  
    takes his hand  
Too frail  
    too young  
    to lift the man

She gives him strength to stand alone.

**“42”**  
**Mackenzie A. Witt**

*What's the meaning of life?*  
The number forty-two  
is my default response for such  
a loaded question. How am I to know,  
at the ripe age of nineteen,  
what my purpose in the universe is?  
For nineteen years, I have stolen  
Douglas Adams' witty reply to that  
painfully existential inquiry.

Where do I even begin?

I could start with the times that I've  
tripped over my own two feet and fallen  
flat on my face  
in public,  
which scared me into monitoring my gait  
so it never exceeds a brisk stride.

Or, I could take you back to the spring  
of junior year when I got my braces off, and  
I had to teach myself how to smile comfortably again,  
this time without metal obscuring my teeth for the first time  
in over a year.

Let's start with a scavenger hunt,  
so I can find all of the pleasant -  
and incredibly unpleasant -  
things that I've picked up along the way.

I have found beauty in  
the most peculiar places;  
in a conference room at ten o'clock at night,  
getting high on the fumes of Texas paint markers  
with people that had been total strangers to me

less than a week ago while we gave our hall decorations  
color and life;  
in planners, filled with my scribbled script  
in at least five different colors;  
in the rickety wooden seats in the library,  
particularly the one on the fourth floor  
by the window overlooking the sunlit street.

I have found anguish in failed  
friendships with people that took advantage  
of my unwavering kindness  
and my struggle in telling people 'no';  
in a rushed romance with someone who  
got angry at me because I told them  
they made me uncomfortable,  
and they didn't like that;  
in the cobwebbed, blackberry corners  
of my mind; in the self-inflicted hunger and  
sleep deprivation that riddled my body  
and brain for weeks that felt like years;  
in the bully in my head that found immense  
joy in stealing mine away.

I have new-found love for  
myself on some days more so  
than others, because even though  
I've come to adore my  
squishy thighs, love handles,  
pudgy tummy, and chubby cheeks,  
sometimes it's hard to remember  
why I started liking them at all;  
for the serenity and safety of living alone,  
and not having to coexist with someone  
who only partially respects me and my living space;  
for embracing the unknown  
and the mysteries that the future holds;  
for accepting my emotions for what they are,  
and not berating myself for what they should be;  
for early bedtimes; for risk-taking.

*So, what is the meaning of life?*

With all of the stories and experiences and quandaries  
that I've accumulated over the years,  
I can hardly provide a sound response,  
given that I have more living to do  
than I already have.

When you ask me again,  
I will recall all of the beauty,  
and love, and anguish,  
and all of the messiness in between.

Naturally,  
I will respond with the number  
forty-two with the biggest  
shit-eating grin on my face,

because how am I to express  
the sheer amount  
of everything and nothing  
that I have learned in a  
mere nineteen years?

**“Deer”**  
**Alyssa M. Davis**

You stand at the edge of the road waiting to cross.  
Wide eyes stare, dart wildly  
as headlights rush towards you,  
helpless, paralyzed with fear.

Wild eyes stare, dart widely.  
The cold hand grabs you by your spine, dangles you like a toy,  
makes you helpless, paralyzed with fear.  
You do not cross.

The cold hand grabs you like a toy,  
holds you against your will from destiny.  
You do not cross,  
Kept from the leap into the unknown.

Your destiny, against your will, is held just out of reach.  
But, as those headlights rush towards you, you could take yourself  
anywhere on a whim  
if the cold hand did not keep you from the leap into the unknown.  
You stand at the edge of the road waiting to cross.

## “Writer’s Block”

### Alexis M. Mucci

You may read this for a lot of reasons.

Perhaps you would sit with this poem  
In the dark of the bedroom,  
Its words serving as a light  
That you don’t want to follow  
Because you’d rather sit at a bar  
And see how many shots can burn  
Your throat or let your dark  
Be brightened by the next episode  
Of that Netflix series you meant to catch  
Up on.

Perhaps you would find this poem  
In the library while its words mingled  
With the *clack, clack, clack*  
Of the neighboring keyboards.

Perhaps you let black ink sail  
Underneath these letters  
In a straight path to nowhere  
And think about how she  
Utilized the color blue and barren trees  
To create a metaphor for loneliness.  
If you look away from this poem  
For even a brief moment,  
I won’t mind.

The truth is I wish I had a story to tell  
That would make you want to read ahead,  
But I don’t.

I want to tell you that my house is a mess,  
But we keep it neat and tidy with love.

I want to tell you about the time a boy’s lips

Tasted like strawberries against my own  
Then how the taste turned sour,  
But that hasn’t happened yet.

I want to tell you about the emptiness  
Loss can bring, but it drags me down  
Before I gather the nerve to speak.

I want to tell you about the love and happiness  
I feel on a daily basis, but the words  
Grow knotted into a black ball of mumbles  
That my brain can’t untangle.  
So I’m stuck in front of  
This white space that begs to be tattooed  
With words that could change the world.

Sure, I could tell the story  
Of the girl who ventures into  
The storybook of her dreams to save  
Her family and forgive herself  
For not stepping up  
To save someone close to her,  
But that doesn’t want to be written.  
*Wait until the time is right.*  
*Don’t start now*, I say.  
Besides, who wants to read that anyway?

I could tell the story of the family  
Whose world falls apart  
Because they’re all too stubborn to change  
Yet they can’t see what makes them happy  
When it’s two feet in front of their noses,

But the craft of cohesive plots  
With detailed landscapes and complex characters  
Is *really hard*.

I could tell the story of the two brothers  
Or the two mothers  
Or the two lovers  
Or the two best friends  
Or all of the above.

That is, if you want to hear them anyway.

I'm used to the words, *Unfortunately*,  
*We have chosen not to publish your story*

*Or That's too silly for my taste*  
*Or God, don't you ever shut up?*

Who knows?

You might have said one of those  
While you read this.

I don't mind if you did  
Since they're all true.

But if even one of you is interested  
In the words I have to say,  
You have to go to the cave that's far from here  
Where the path is littered with treasures  
Of every shape and size,  
Knock on the wall beside you,  
And call out, *Hello*.

## **“Excuses”**

### **Liana Amadeo**

A slap in the face and I stumbled, believing I knew what this was.

A man stood before me that I might've known, but gone was all connection.

I understood then, in the end, I would leave without pause.

A hand came up to caress the burning cheek, soothing just like gauze,  
forcing me to stop and consider my subjection.

A slap in the face and I stumbled, trusting I knew what this was.

Wet cheeks lead to sweet words and you could almost hear the applause.

The mask slid back into place and suddenly I was offered affection.

I understood then, in the end, I would leave without pause.

Pushing my face into your chest I accepted the love because  
never before had I tried so hard only for you to expect perfection.

A slap in the face and I stumbled backward, hoping I knew what this was.

I accepted pain without true cause,  
telling myself repeatedly I needed your protection.

I understood then, in the end, I would leave without pause.

Later that day in the mirror a scarlet gash like a shattered vase.

A scar to display the pain, plain on my complexion.

A slap in the face and I stumbled backward, believing I knew what this was.

I understood then, in the end, I would leave without pause.

## **“The Old Guitar”**

### **Gavin M. Fox**

The strings ring sharp. Tones cut through calloused air  
and swimming dust. The dryer harmonized.  
Her visage haunts the space with crimson hair;  
the subject of plucked tune, epitomized.

An heirloom merely two steps down its line,  
once comfort to an airborne man of war,  
now croons its tune to comfort love of mine.  
The nylon fiddle calls my paramour.

It's split from bridge to bottom, warped with age;  
the pegs protest attempts to grow retuned.  
But frets unchanged since hands had first engaged  
with fingers raw and restless; once marooned.

Like light which hangs antique; the evening star,  
so lives our songs, through you: The old guitar.

# ***Color Plates***

The following pages reflect a variety of artwork from undergraduate students at Bloomsburg University.



***We Can't Breathe***

**Kasey Halbleib**



*Shallows*  
Brittnay Stephenson



*Tiny Dancer*  
Allison B. Connelly



*Wallflower 1*  
&  
*Wallflower 2*

**Amber E. Loomis**





***The Hidden Gem***  
**Brielle Bolinsky**



*A Chance  
of Snow*

**Savanna M.  
Krusinsky**



*Tranquility*

**Jailyn Franzone**



***By The Garden***  
**Kacie A. England**



*s p a c e d o u t*  
**Viktoria L. Romania**



***Innocence***  
**Rebecca Thomas**



***Fairest***  
**Rebecca Thomas**

# Non-Fiction Entries

## “Flirting with the Devil” Addy Sacouto

PETERS AWARD FOR CREATIVE NON-FICTION 2020 WINNER

I don't remember ever coming out of the closet.

One day I was the good Roman Catholic girl my parents and my priests had raised, the model god-fearing and fag-hating Christian they always wanted me to be, and the next day I... wasn't. I doubted the Holy Ghost's encouragement, the Son's divinity, the Father's existence, and they never bothered to prove themselves to me. From there, I started to doubt a lot of things: Maybe I wouldn't go to hell for masturbating after all; maybe hell didn't even exist; and hey, maybe batting my eyes at a lady wasn't the worst thing in the world.

~~~

My mother put me through fourteen years of Catholic school. This has proven to be the worst investment—financially, emotionally, spiritually—she has ever made in me.

I was four years old when I suffered through my first day of preschool. I didn't realize then that over the next year I would learn the words of prayers and not the words of my country's anthem. We sang the choruses of “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so” before we even learned how to read that thousands-year-old book. This indoctrination seemed innocent at first; teaching some toddlers that some magic man in the sky loves them is harmless, right? But teaching those same kids, a few years later, that this sky man had a plan for them, that their entire futures were mapped out in this dude's palm, was less comforting.

God had a plan for me. According to my teachers and my parents, who had never told me they were apparently experts in divination, I was going to be a doctor. God wanted me to save people, and he had given me the smarts to do so. He wanted me to marry a nice boy and have one or two kids and we'd live in a cute little suburb of some big city and we'd be rich and successful.

Eventually I realized how absolutely boring that sounded, so I told my teachers and my parents and their god to fuck off.

~~~

I was ten the first time I met a gay person.

My best friend at the time, Brennen, had something to tell me. He acted uncharacteristically secretive and weird, and I didn't understand why. Then he told me what his high-pitched voice and flamboyant lifestyle had told many other people before me: He was gay.

I didn't understand. He said he liked guys, that he never wanted to be romantically involved with a girl. And I didn't understand because I didn't know why it was a big deal.

Until I told my mom.

“Wait, so he's a fag?”

Such a harsh word for such an innocent thing, I thought. I said, well, no, he just likes guys. He's gay.

I watched as her entire demeanor changed. She asked me how his parents took it, told me what a shame it was, told me how grateful she was that her girls weren't like that.

That moment reminded me of the words she'd told me multiple times on car rides from school. I must have been in second grade or so the first time she told me, but the many times since committed the exact wording to memory:

“If you ever bring a bitch home, you won't have a home to come back to.”

It was the first time I understood what unconditional love was, and the first time I realized I never did have that.

~~~

Once Brennen realized I wasn't going to treat him any differently for being attracted to men, he started opening up to me more. Over the years we talked about what we found attractive in guys, and we learned that our types looked similar. It was nice being able to compare notes with someone. When he found a boyfriend, he ran to me to gush about him. I was genuinely happy for him. I didn't understand how the church could condemn such an innocent, loving smile.

~~~

My sister made a close friend in college, and when he visited the house for the first time, my parents found his voice to be jarring. He had Brennen's voice, the shared accent of gay men. Linguistically it fascinated me, but it disgusted my parents. It was in the way he held his words, the way he sang his sentences, that marked him different, but somehow more different than my grandmother's Puerto Rican accent or my grandparents' Portuguese one.

John talked openly about his sex life, even to the high schooler I was. I listened intently, especially as he detailed the grossest moments of his intimate encounters. This was a new world to me, a world so vastly different than those described in the straight smut I'd read. Gay sex, according to his stories, was so much more intimate, and with how stigmatized and secret it was, so much more special. I silently urged him to tell me more.

~~~

My first boyfriend was straighter than a ruler. Born into a devout Christian family, he was the exact kind of person I had learned to fear. Yet, he was gentle about his religion, didn't dare try to repair my failing faith. When I confided in him, surprisingly, he did not shun me.

I told him I thought girls were pretty, really pretty. I told him I understood why lesbians were the way they were. He asked me if I thought I was bi, and I didn't know how to answer.

Of course I wasn't. I loved my family; I would never do that to them.

But a part of me thought of Brennen, of John, and of how happy they both were when they talked about the men they were with. A part of me wondered, in a different life, if I could talk so lovingly of a girl somewhere out there for me.

~~~

One day, my mother and my sister were talking in our kitchen about John. Mom then announced, "John wants to be a girl." I overheard this, like I overheard most of their conversations in our hollow house, and I became confused by it. My sister, evidently, was too: "What does that mean?" "It means," my mother replied, as if it should have been obvious, "he wants to be a girl.

He's a fag. He likes boys."

I wanted to point out the contradiction in her statement, but I didn't know how to. As far as I knew, John wasn't trans, and my mother had no business deciding what he wanted, anyway. But, like most conversations about sexuality with my mother, I knew my silence was safer than having her think I might have been one of them. I wondered what she might have done to her failure of a daughter if she knew.

~~~

After I broke up with my boyfriend, I made new friends to help try to ground myself. He and I would come to be friends again later, but in the moment, I needed new people to talk at while I recovered from his absence.

I met her online. She was named after a flower, the fairest rose, but I thought her far prettier than anything nature could create. We talked every day, about everything. She and I had a lot in common: a penchant for writing, persistent anxiety and eating disorders, and a painful quirkiness that made most conversations more awkward and amusing than they had to be.

I don't remember how long it took for me to formally call it a crush. I remember sitting in Latin class, learning the restricted language of the church, and day-dreaming about her. Talking to her about a game I'd been playing or a show I'd seen was far more interesting than trying to learn a dead language, even for me.

After class, I couldn't resist the urge to tell someone about her. Walking from Latin to Literature, I started gushing to one of my friends about the girl I had fallen in love with. Her reaction, which I should have suspected, was still difficult to answer to:

"Wait, so you're... you're...?"

Confined in the walls of a Catholic high school, surrounded by Bible-toting teens and the priests who guided them, she didn't even want to utter those three letters.

"I like guys," I told her, a justification, a plea of, "Look, I'm not all bad."

~~~

If a man also lies with a man, as he lies with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.

That stupid line from Leviticus 20:13 was taken out of context, plastered on bumper stickers and shouted at anti-LGBT rallies and spilled from the lips of my eleventh-grade theology teacher.

It was a much hated class, the thirteenth theology class I had taken in my life, and it was taught by a teacher everyone hated even more. Mr. P was an evil man. According to the rumors, he'd tried to become a priest but had failed, and now taught theology to unwilling and apathetic high school students. He was harsh and manipulative, and he had the displeasure of teaching us about the sacraments.

In the Catholic church, there are seven of those: baptism, reconciliation, confirmation, eucharist, anointing of the sick, matrimony, and holy orders. Most people have at least four of those forced upon them.

We'd gotten through the first five, and we were now talking about the sacraments of vocation: matrimony and holy orders. Holy orders, Mr. P told us, was only for the men who felt such a connection to the church that they chose to become deacons, priests, bishops, cardinals. Matrimony, he said, was for the rest of us.

In one particular class, he showed us an article about a florist who had refused to cater to a wedding of their long-term customers because the husbands' marriage went against their religion.

The seventeen- and eighteen-year-old kids in the class were outraged. We didn't understand how someone could be so stuck-up as to deny their trusted customers service on what was supposed to be the biggest day of their lives. But Mr. P, he was outraged at our outrage.

He and one of the more outspoken kids in the class got into an argument about it. They talked about gay rights, and the student brought up some excellent points, which Mr. P shot down childishly using his authority over her. He told her that gay marriage "isn't marriage" and "Don't call it what it isn't." When she began to debate this, he told her, directly, to shut up.

By that point, even if I didn't know what I was, I knew I wasn't straight. And there was a teacher telling me, unless it was to a man, I would not be able to get married.

I didn't speak up with my classmate, but I felt her pain. In that moment, I felt lonely, hated, like I didn't belong in a world against love.

~~~

When John tried to commit suicide, my sister called him stupid. He'd overdosed, and she'd said he even tried to die the "girly" way, true to his character. I never did get to ask him why he tried to die. I didn't think to. I guess I just understood.

~~~

When I told her I loved her, I wrapped the letter in a thousand apologies. My lady of the roses apologized to me, too, but she did so for breaking my heart. It would be weird, and I was stupid to believe any differently. I suppose it just wasn't meant to be. My love was wrong, dirty, and I was a fool for thinking it valid.

~~~

"So you're bi."

English class was a good time for deep conversations. Talking about sexuality was more exciting than talking about the symbolic implications of Heart of Darkness.

"No," I answered.

"But... you like girls and boys."

"Yes," I mumbled, "but I don't like labels. Bi seems so... rigid." She didn't understand me. Perhaps I didn't understand myself.

~~~

The first time I heard the term pansexual, I figured it was another one of those made-up Tumblr sexualities. I Googled the word, because even if I do think most of those sexualities are too similar for distinctions, I wanted to be respectful and familiar with the terminology. Google gave me a technical definition:

/pan'sekSH(əw)əl/ adjective

i. not limited in sexual choice with regard to biological sex, gender, or gender identity

It sounded interesting, so I researched it further. Pansexuality was the sexual attraction to people no matter what was in their pants or how they identified. In fact, the mantra in the community was "hearts, not parts."

The more I found out about it, the more I realized that was how I treated sexuality all along.

~~~

I decided I would never tell my mother I was not straight. This didn't bother me nearly as much as I thought it should have.

When I started to come to terms with all the abuse she'd dealt to me in my childhood, I stopped caring about how much of my life she knew about. She didn't need to know about my attraction to girls, just like she didn't need to know about my first two boyfriends, either.

But every story I read about "the gay experience" talked about an overwhelming fear of coming out to family. I read stories about families identical to mine, and I read about heartbreak and depression that came with proclaiming an identity to them. I didn't understand. If families were so homophobic, why tell them anything?

Every story I read was the same. A kid realized he was gay, he told his parents, he

was disowned. I knew that would be my fate, so I didn't understand why I would ever utter a word to my mother.

But other people seemed driven by a need to tell their families, their friends, as if by staying in the closet they were somehow not really gay. Pansexuality fit me perfectly, but if I had never really been in the closet, could I have been gay at all? I had only dated boys anyway; maybe I was just faking it for attention.

But then I thought of my lady of the roses, and I wondered why I felt like I had to prove my sexuality, like it wasn't some deep-rooted part of me, like it wasn't something I was allowed to embrace and own unapologetically.

~~~

When I had my crush on my rose in high school, I confided in one of my friends. This friend described himself to all who knew him as "big, gay, and beautiful," so I figured he would understand better than most.

I told him after school, on our way to a club. He just looked at me and said, "Yes! I knew you were gay!"

This intrigued me. I asked him why, and he stammered and stumbled over his words before finally saying, "It's just my gaydar."

I panicked. Was I not as straight-passing as I once thought? What if my mother found out? Just how much was I letting on?

But then I thought more about it, and panic gave way to contentment. I figured being gay was something I didn't feel I had to hide.

~~~

I renounced my religion before high school, but I couldn't quite get away from it until I graduated. For four years I had different teachers, laymen and priests and nuns, talk at me about a god they claimed hated me. Leaving that and moving out of the house of my overly religious family remains one of the most cathartic things I've ever done.

My high school friends, save for the one, all assumed I was straight, but in college I made sure to squash that early on. I openly talked about pretty girls and being gay, and none of my friends had any room to guess at my preferences. To all who asked and most who didn't, I sang my sexuality.

But I guess it never felt real. I had still only been with guys, had still never even kissed a girl. What made me pan, anyway?

But then, one night, in the basement of my dorm, in a questionable game of Truth or Dare, I got my validation.

Her lips weren't as soft as I'd read they would be, and I was blindfolded, but by the time it was finished a part of me changed. It was a few seconds, some quick peck

in a game that demanded it, but I had kissed a girl. And no, maybe it was nothing like my first kiss with a guy, but it was something.

Several months later, when it happened again, it felt more genuine. Same place, different lady, in front of a room filled with our friends. She held our kiss longer, and I drank in the fullness of her. She let my fingers trace her curves, and I leaned into her touch. After twenty years of being told this was wrong, I finally felt like I had gotten something right.

~~~

A flag hangs on the front of my door, the pink, yellow, and blue stripes flaunting my pan pride. I feel confident now, more than I ever have before in any label I've ever assigned. I don't need to prove my sexuality to my family, my friends, the church, myself. This is who I am.

And maybe it's wrong. Maybe I'll wind up flirting with the devil in my afterlife. But you know, that's alright, because I bet she'd welcome me with open arms and flirt back just as confidently.

# “Pandemonium”

## Kristin Boyles

PREPARE FOR DOOM, says the news headlines I skim every day on my Facebook feed, my Instagram, my TV, my YouTube suggestions page.

PREPARE YOURSELF FOR DOOM. There are pictures of my stepsister’s new family, someone’s dog, and a selfie from Disney World. Sprinkled in between are headlines that read – now, I might be paraphrasing slightly – PREPARE FOR DOOM.

Viruses are spreading. Could there be a new plague? The climate is changing. The president should be impeached! No, he shouldn’t. Yes, he should. Tensions are high between countries. Symbolic clocks are being pushed forward because we are afraid, afraid, afraid.

I close the websites. I set my phone off to the side or I open up a gaming app. Sometimes I open up an app that is kind of like WebMD except it won’t automatically diagnose you with cancer. Just type in your symptoms, answer a few questions, and you’ll get a list of possible conditions, sicknesses, and diseases that people who reported your same symptoms have had.

99% of the time it’s nothing serious, I promise.

My mother is a nurse. I asked her, “So, what do you think about this new virus spreading?”

She said something like, “I’m not concerned. It’s a coronavirus. Do you know how many of those there are?”

I, in fact, did know, but only because I had read an article about it the previous day.

Earlier, I opened up my YouTube app, of all things, and found a (clearly clickbait) suggested video that asked in big, bold letters if we were ready for the next pandemic?

I’d be more concerned of dying from the flu than from this virus, but thanks for asking.

I’ve mostly stopped watching the news; I cannot bring myself to tune in to the six o’clock or have a newsfeed on the home-screen of my phone. I skip a variety of articles that appear on my social media, but with good reason.

The people who write these headlines, make these videos, and choose the images used for posts intentionally invoke fear, concern, and worry – not to, like you’d assume from the news, actually inform anyone of anything worthwhile.

What's worthwhile is forgotten, left out, squeezed into one tiny sentence at the end of an article or the caption of a picture. People who spend their days picking up trash in the street, people who see someone who is lonely and talk to them, people who compliment their friends, people who make someone laugh, people who sit down at the retirement home or in a daycare or at a library and read or sing or talk to those who are there, people who use silicone straws, people who advocate for mental health, people who fight for body inclusivity, people who create art that moves others to tears, people who send "good night" texts to their families or friends or significant others, people who are designing new technology that will help us in more ways than one – the list is endless, yet we don't give recognition to any of it.

The only kind acts that get any acknowledgment are the ones that go viral and even those are few and far in between.

Our world is filled with much more love, goodness, kindness, and compassion than these journalists, scientists, reporters, and influencers give us credit for. They neglect to remind us that there is still an overabundance of good left on this planet.

I'm tired of being neglected.

I'm tired of being force-fed negativity.

I'm tired of being lied to and fear-mongered and seen as unloved and unforgiving and unknowing.

I'm tired.

While I may be somewhat of a pessimist, I sure as hell am optimistic about one thing in particular: human's capability for love. As an individual who works with the general public and attends college, I see acts of kindness, love, and genuine goodness every single day. Friendships are forged, relationships are built, teachers become mentors, little kids smile and talk to some grown-ass kids and they aren't afraid.

I'm not in the business of denying that our world has its issues. But, I'm also not one to sit back and watch as a constant barrage of negativity distorts our view of an awesome, wild, lovely, kind, wonder-filled world.

It's time to give up the charade; I'm done buying it.

# Fiction Entries

## “Heading West”

### Clayton Newton

FULLER FICTION AWARD 2020 WINNER

“You sure you wanna do this?” Joe asked.

“I’ve been waiting for this for longer than you know. Besides, they need people like me down there, and, I won’t be stuck under this infinite pig shit overcast any-more.”

“Aint nothin wrong with the pig shit!” Joe said while checking the bottom of his boots.

“Yeah well no offense, but I hope I never smell it again.” Then Joe gave me a big hug and wished me safe travels.

When I got on the plane the flight attendant let me pick any seat I wanted. He said a big party canceled last minute, so I picked a seat in the back next to the window. I had never been on a plane before and the tight rows made me feel trapped. I strapped in and examined the little window to my right. The right engine roared to life and shot powerful heat waves. I thought I saw a piece of tape on the wing. The old plane lurched forward down the runway. Moments later I was soaring in the night sky toward Louisiana.

Spencer Gilman was my team leader at AmeriCorps. He was responsible for making sure his team was working their hours which mainly consisted of mucking, the process of removing all garbage and rotted wood out of the home. It was back breaking work and there was a lot to do. Spencer claimed raising awareness was a vital piece in saving New Orleans and thus, he spent most of his time taking photos of his crew while they worked.

We had three more hours and three more rooms to muck and the whole team was already frolicking around the rest of the neighborhood making their way back to base. The house was an old ratty one, everything in the place looked like garbage to me. Tall plastic plants collected dust and spider webs. The wall paper was drooping and discolored. I had to move one of those heavy dinosaur TVs to the front lawn for pick up.

“Can someone give me a hand with this thing?” I shouted. “Hello?” Nobody responded. Well this would be nothing new. If I could hoist the thing up and carry it out, I’d call it a day. I got down on one knee and tilted my head forward creating a space between my shoulders for the tv to balance. It tipped off the stand with loud, creaky plastic complaining under its weight. It was heavier than I expected. I stood up slowly, lining my width with the doorway. I took heavy quick steps through the door and into the kitchen. As soon as my right foot hit a puddle, something gave way under me and I dropped. The tv smashed behind me sending broken glass all over the room. My armpits got caught in soggy wood, I was stuck

in the floor. My legs dangled in what I guessed was the basement and I was eye level with the dirty tile floor. I tried to pull myself through, but there was glass everywhere and I couldn't find leverage.

"HELLO?" I shouted over and over. I didn't know what to do. There could be anything in the basement, maybe something sharp or tall. My strength was starting to give, I couldn't hold myself at this odd angle anymore. I only had one option: drop through. I exhaled everything out and fell like a sack of potatoes through the floor, landed on a wet couch, and then plunged backwards into three feet of chilly, black water. Rats squeaked at me as I stood up. The water smelled like rot and sewage. I dripped up the stairs and reached for the door, it was locked. This was just perfect. All I needed was someone to bust open the door from the other side or slide a ladder down through the hole. I slammed my shoulder against the door over and over. It didn't budge. I was shivering, alone, and trapped in this god forsaken basement. I grabbed the door handle with two hands and shook it like a wolf shakes a rabbit. Nothing happened.

"FUCK!"

For the next hour I waded through the ratty basement until I managed to stack the dryer on top of the washer and climb out the hole I made. By the time I made it to basecamp my team was eating dinner together.

"There you are. We were wondering where you've been. Did you go for a swim?" Spencer thought this was hilarious.

"Didn't think to send someone back to our work site? Maybe I was still working like the schedule said."

"Kev thought you went back alone. I thought you wer-

"Fuck off."

I stormed off to the showers. All he had to do was send the people working on my house back to the only place that made sense for me to be. Idiot.

For the next couple weeks, I didn't do a shred of work if Spencer wasn't working. When he wasn't taking photos of us working, he was "inspecting" the houses for safety. After his inspection he would exit the house with a handful of valuable items and give us the all clear. It wasn't long before I referred to Spencer as our "Bandit Leader" since most of the team started picking up his tendency to inspect the homes. There was only a fraction of honest work completed a day.

When we went back to base camp, a sturdy elementary school turned into an AmeriCorps barracks, we normally stayed within the campus playing poker or watching movies. I got along with the other volunteers for the most part, but we never got much closer than Facebook friends. One evening a lanky guy with curly blonde hair brought a volley ball net back from the city. He was struggling to resurrect the poles the first time I saw him.

"I'm Wes," He stuck out his hand. "How's it hangin' man?"

"Henry," I answered. "I'm alright. "Did you find this net out there?"

"Sure did. Would you mind giving me a hand? I would ask my team, but they said they'd only play if I set it up."

"You're crew too huh? I don't know how our team leader got his role."

"Well brother, looks like we're in the same boat. Where you from?" Wes said and handed me the other end of the net.

"Illinois. Carthage, Illinois. Not much to talk about unless you like pigs."

"Carthage. Never been," Wes pulled his nose up like a pig. "You ever seen California? I'm from SoCal except nobody calls it SoCal from SoCal. Anyway, wanna be on my team?"

"Uh, yeah sure." Then he tossed me the ball.

We played volleyball that day, week, and month until it became standard culture at camp. Wes was probably the best player. Everyone wanted him on their team. We spent most of our nights together either exploring the ruins of New Orleans or talking about girls and the future and our families. He had a lot of good memories with his. They seemed strange to me, a bunch of happy California folks. It made me wonder why he liked living away from them.

"I got some bud from some old guy in overalls in one of the shelters. Let's get out of here after dinner. I'll swing by your room when the coast is clear." Wes initiated our handshake and flashed the weed out of his pocket for me to catch a glimpse.

Newspapers said gangs were flourishing with the lack of police in the city. New Orleans issued a curfew not long after. If AmeriCorps found us out past curfew, with weed, we would be in deep shit. I waited about half an hour until I heard a "tap tap" on my door.

I threw on my black hoodie and cracked open the door. Wes had his hoodie drawstrings pulled so tightly only his lips stuck out.

"The supervisors all chattin it up in the lobby, lets get out of here." He whispered.

"Waiting on you dog." And we speed walked to the little bathrooms at the end of the hall. Wes opened a window in the boy's room and made a foothold with his hands. I got half way out the window and reached my hand down to him. He paused and shook his head.

"You're Gimli. I'm Aragorn." He waved me out.

I flipped him the bird, hopped down and watched him struggle for a moment until he fell out head first.

"Okay good shit." He brushed himself off. "Let's get out of here man."

"Excuse me." A woman's voice snapped behind us. We slowly turned around and faced a lady in her pajamas smoking a cigarette. It was a supervisor I recognized from orientation.

"What the hell are you two doing?" Her cigarette shaking in the dark.

"Well," said Wes. "we have family in town here. I'm Brett and this here is my brother, Gim, I mean Steph. We're on our way to see them now in the north shelter."

"If you wanted to go see family why didn't you fill out a leave and get it approved by your supervisor. It's past curfew boys."

"Right well they just got into the city, they traveled all the way from New Mexico and our supervisor, well he's not as understanding as you. We were just going to zip up there help them unload their things and zip back, no problems."

She took a drag of her cigarette and blew it at Wes. I nodded my head and tried to look innocent.

"If you get caught I never talked to you." She flicked her cigarette in the grass. We both zipped our lips and backed away out of the school's lights.

"Wow, I thought we were fucked. Brett and Steph? I thought I was your brother."

"Dude I don't know, yeah I can't believe she bought it. I think I know the way from here."

We snuck in the shadows and kept away from other cop cars until we came to the base of a large parking garage.

"Okay, were going up there." Wes pointed to the top. We climbed the thing in ten minutes and had a massive view of a deserted city.

"Hey Steph, lighter?" I tossed him the lighter and climbed up on the edge next to him.

"So." He sparked the joint. "What do you think, man?"

"Yeah, this is a sweet view. I can see the top of the superdome over there." Occasionally a group of suspicious guys would scurry across the streets below.

"No, man. I mean what do you think you're gonna do. This AmeriCorps shit isn't it. People just washed up here. I want the real thing, man. Live action."

"You're right. This isn't what I expected, but I don't have a lot of options. I'm not going back home and without this I wouldn't have a place to live. It's not like I can afford a plane ticket and fly back to my parents. I'd rather be out here honestly." I wasn't sure where AmeriCorps would take me, but I had Wes and I didn't mind

my living conditions. However, I felt like I was wasting my time here. The organization was underfunded and ill managed. I was getting tired of it all together.

"You ever heard of Hotshots?" Wes passed me the joint. "They fight wildfires all over the country. They're always fighting fires around New Mexico, California, Arizona. Looks like some real ass kickin dudes out there. I talked to a buddy of mine who joined for a season. 40k in his first six months. Man, I could use 40k by Christmas."

"That sounds legit." I never thought of firefighting, but it sounded like a real challenge. It'd be nice to have a decent income, too.

"Good cause I already applied. I can print out another one when we get back." "What? You already applied?" I wasn't gonna stick around this place without Wes.

He had a twin brother that came to visit one day. They were a strange pair. Wes had a kind of contagious energy around him. He was always getting people involved in pranks and making them laugh. Evan was frail and quiet. He made Wes look muscular, which he most definitely was not. That night in the cafeteria Evan started talking about a girl he wanted to marry.

"Course I'll be your best man." Wes was beaming. "I'm making Henry here my plus one. That alright bro?"

I couldn't remember the last time I was invited to something. I wondered who would want to be my best man. Joe wasn't much for talking in front of crowds and my cousins weren't close with me at all. I wouldn't know anyone at this thing, but a free meal and something new to do would be more than enough reason.

"I'd love to."

That night we got leave and Evan drove the three of us an hour out of New Orleans to a town that had electricity. We stopped in at a local bar and before I knew it I ordered my first drink. Wes and Evan were talking for a while, but I was content watching the bartender turn "Do like dat dere" into a pint of Busch Lite. Eventually Wes got into a round of pool and Evan sat next to me.

"Can I get you a drink? What're you drinking?" Evan asked over the music.

I had him taste it because I couldn't remember the name. He waved at the bartender.

"Two gin and tonics please." She gave him a funny look. "So, Wes is a wild one, isn't he?"

"Yeah he is. Loves getting us in and out of trouble."

"Sounds like my brother. Where are you from again?"

"Uhh Carthage, Illinois. It's not well known."

"No. Never heard of it. You know where Anchorage is? It's in Alaska. That's where my girlfriend and I live."

"Oh yeah? All the way up there? What do you do up there?"

"My girlfriend's family owns a ski lodge. It's a pretty tight gig. I live in the lodge for the workers. Right now, I'm doing the EMT program, so I can rescue skiers and what not. We have a trip to the hospital almost every day"

"Sounds cool, well, skiing sounds fun. My family never took me skiing or anything so.."

"Neither did mine man, it's too expensive." He raised his glass. "You and Wes should come up sometime. I could probably get you in for free."

"That'd be a lot to learn man I wouldn't want to slow you all down."

"Don't worry about that." Evan burped. "I learn every day there. It took me like two days to figure it out."

The thought of skiing in Alaska and fighting fires in California started to make me nervous. These guys wanted me to try things I had no experience in at all. It was exhilarating. I always knew leaving home was the right thing to do.

One year after sitting on that parking garage, Wes and I had established ourselves as Sacramento Hotshots. It was us two and about thirty other guys that spend our days hiking through the wilderness, eating MREs, and setting up camp, which really consisted of us hanging a tarp over some branches and sleeping in the dirt. The initiation process was simple: keep up. The guys we replaced were veterans, so the crew wasn't easy on us, and they weren't too thrilled with Wes's physique. He had to do around two hundred pushups every day to get his weight up. He had a hell of a time with the forty-pound packs, too. He was too tall, and his body refused to put on any extra weight. I thickened up mostly in my legs and back. We started looking like real mountain men because we hardly ever saw regular citizens or bathed in anything besides creeks and rivers. We had successfully fought five fires so far. Our crew was on track to break the record for 48-hour shifts in a single season with four already.

After a long hike one day we decided to make camp at the turn in the river. The crew dropped their heavy packs and started untying their boots.

"Hey Skippy." Dorga gave Wes that nickname because he thought he smiled too much. "Wanna make three grand right now?"

Wes looked suspicious. Challenges from Dorga usually weren't fair.

"You beat me in a wrestling match and I'll give you three grand. I beat you and you carry my water pack all day tomorrow." Dorga smiled cause all the other guys were watching, and Wes hadn't said no yet. He was a veteran on the squad and was built like a brick house. He was bow legged, bearded, and notoriously took on

the hardest jobs. The other guys started egging him on.

"You really want to lose three grand? I'm undefeated." Wes rolled his shoulders like he was going to box.

"HA. You've never fought a day in your life. Square up, Skippy."

It was on. Dorga and Wes circled each other like wolves. Dorga faked a couple take downs and Wes skidded away. The guys kept pushing him back into the middle. Everyone knew how this was going to end, but it would have been worse if he turned it down from the start. Dorga backed Wes up against the circle. With nowhere to go, Dorga shot in low to take Wes down, but Wes expected it. He shot out a knee and connected with Dorga's face. He fell to the ground stunned and Wes hopped on his back and put him in a head lock. Wes squeezed with everything he had. Dorga rolled but he couldn't stand up with Wes's long awkward weight. He stopped flailing and it looked like Wes was going to win. Dorga went purple and then went limp. Wes let go and jumped up in the air. The crew roared in disbelief. He ran over to me and started our handshake. Right before his hand touched mine, two meaty arms clamped around his waist and lifted him high into the air. Dorga turned him around in a circle for everyone to see how helpless he was.

"I never tapped!" He roared and then slammed Wes's head into the dirt, knocking him senseless. I flinched in pain for him. The crew cheered for their champion. Wes rolled over dizzy with a face full of dirt.

"Nice job man." I said, "Can you see me?"

"I thought I won." He moaned.

"No, you didn't. You never should have taken a cheap shot like that." Wentzel, Dorga's best friend, stood behind me. "But god damn it you almost beat him."

Wes gave a pained smile.

It was mid-July, the height of fire season. We'd been called onto a vicious fire in New Mexico. It was 7:00 pm when we got the emergency call. We hopped in our trucks and by 8:30 pm we could see the black smoke billowing up in the distance. Our crew captain, a burly guy with enough hair on his body to earn the nickname "Squatch," briefed us at the outskirts of the fire.

"Alright gents. We need to cut a line on a steep incline so, as always, make sure you watch your footing. We're putting the entire crew on the east side to prevent the fire from reaching the stream at the base. EPA says we must protect the endangered trout in this stream. We'll be cutting a line at a higher altitude to avoid working around the steep ravines in this region of the mountain. That means whoever cuts the line around the dangerous terrain needs to make no mistakes." Squatch looked at Wentzel and Dorga.

"We'll take it." I motioned at Wes. Squatch looked surprised.

"You think you can handle this? Dorga, Wentzel, flank those two. No mistakes."

This was an opportunity. If we could pull this off, we would finally earn some respect. We formed a line and began hiking toward our positions in the mountains. Wentzel moved over to hike by me.

"You're lucky there isn't a town at the bottom of this mountain. Squatch would've never taken that risk. Don't fuck this up."

We had to take a risk at some point. We were way ahead of the fire anyway. This was a perfect scenario.

"Hey man are you sure about this," Wes said over the radio. "The wind is picking up. Look at the smoke, over." He was right. A large shift of wind could push the fire down our throats.

"Same risks as always," I said. "This time we got fish to save. Don't worry man. I got your back, over." I was hoping Wes could step up to the challenge. He needed the respect more than me. "Call me if you need help, over and out." I fired up my chainsaw and started clearing my line. The trees were dry but dense for New Mexico's forests. It took me about an hour of sawing to clear my line. Six months ago, I could only cut for ten minutes at a time. My arms and back were quivering from the strain. I wondered if Wes was doing okay.

The smoke had encompassed us by then. I couldn't see flames yet, but I could hear roaring fire and trees dropping in the distance. The wind was forcing the smoke and fire down on us blocking our vision and filling our lungs. We could only rely on our radios for communication now. The smoke made it difficult to find each other. I flipped onto me and Wes's personal channel.

"How's your line," I asked over the radio.

"Almost there," Wes huffed. "Smoke's gettin thick." He needed to pick it up, but I was also behind. If I didn't burn the fuel off my line in time the fire would push right through and Squatch would have me by the neck. I sprinted back to my drip torch and started my burn. I could still here Wes's chainsaw in the distance. He wasn't moving fast enough. Dorga was probably pinned to his area like the rest of us, he couldn't help either. The trees up the mountain erupted like a fireworks. Once flames licked the lower leaves the top of the mountain went up like the head of match. I started jogging with the drip torch towards Wes. My legs were burning now, and inhaling smoke made me gag. My eyes were streaming, and I spit black into the dirt. I was almost to the end of my section when I heard crushing wood above me. A burning tree toppled from up the mountain creating a domino effect. The flaming tree smashed into the ground like a Molotov cocktail igniting everything around it. The fire beat me. The heat was so strong now I couldn't face it. I had to run backwards and signal my crew that the line had been breached. A cardinal rule of Hotshots is to never let the fire behind you. But mother nature showed her strength. Dry terrain and sweeping winds could push a fire at twenty miles an hour.

"Breach in line. Breach in line." I shouted over the radio. I half slid half ran down the mountain. I had to navigate around the steep ravines to our rear, but the smoke made it nearly impossible to see more than twenty feet in front of me. The footing was treacherous. A fall on this mountainside wouldn't end quickly. I radioed twice more before I got a response. I couldn't tell who it was, but the crew started chattering over the radio, so I knew there was a full retreat.

We never managed to regroup in time below the ravines to cut a new line. The fire rolled down the mountain like an avalanche. Squatch tried cutting a line in front of the creek, but his efforts were hopeless. We hoisted our gear over our heads and waded across to regroup on the other side. We failed to save the stream. Squatch did a head count and came up one short, he was furious. I couldn't find Wes. Dorga was kneeling on the ground rinsing off his face, it was beat red.

"We have to go back in there for him."

"I tried." Dorga said. "I tried pushing toward him, but... the heat." His bloodshot eyes stared back up the mountain. Embers hissed in the water and flames ripped higher up the trees, enraged at the barrier between us. If I could dive in the creek and sprint through the weakest flames, I could make it through the fire wall and into the scorched forest beyond. Wes could be immobilized, trying to move.

One bottle of water could be the difference between life and death. I dropped my saw and checked for deep water. There was one dark spot below thick roots near the bank. Just before I took off my backpack a hand jerked me back by my collar.

"Don't be a dumbass." Dorga pointed into the creek. A trout turned in the current, one gill bent upwards, his little white belly signaling what we've done, his species would boil.

We fought the fire for two straight days before we could get a stop. It expanded along the stream for miles devastating the trout. By the time we hiked up to Wes's section he would've been at least 40 hours without water. The protocol for being surrounded by fire was to dig a hole, put the blanket on and wait it out. The crew nicknamed the blankets "Easy Bake Ovens" because most wildfires reached degrees way higher than the blankets could handle. We found him at the base of a ravine with his shiny fire-retardant blanket stuck to him. He knew what it meant when he put it on. His boots had melted off his feet. The x-rays revealed he had shattered his left leg and left collar bone, most likely falling down the ravine. There were other signs of severe blunt force. 90% of his body was severely burned, but the blanket kept his flesh from burning away. He died under his blanket. Did he try radioing for help? Did he try our private channel? We waited next to his body for 45 minutes until the helicopter came. It felt like an eternity. I wonder how long he waited for me.

Dorga got a leave from the hospital to come with the rest of the crew to his funeral. The casket was closed. His brother, Evan, was in the arms of his fiancé. There was a picture on the casket of Evan and Wes in elementary school. Wes was holding his brother up like an armful of firewood. I felt empty, paralyzed in front

of Evan and his mother. She gave me one look and changed her teary eyes into a soft smile.

“Did you know my son?”

I couldn’t get words out of my throat, so I nodded. She wrapped my whole body in her arms. Her heart beat steady, coercing mine out of its stillness. Her blouse was soft on my cheek and smelled deeply of lavender and homemade food and bed time stories and gardens and hope and the weight of an entire generation. I balled it up in my fists wishing I could leave my body and wash away in her soul where I would find Wes waiting, eager to string up a volley ball net and pick teams. How could I thank her for everything she’s done for me? How could I repair the damage I had done to her life?

“He was my only real friend.”

Two weeks after the funeral Squatch asked me to take some time off Hotshots. He didn’t see the emptiness of Wes in the crew doing me any good. So, when our crew finished another fire and we stopped in a hotel for the night we ended up down in the lobby bar. I couldn’t drink. A couple guys tried to talk to buy me drinks and cheer me up, but I couldn’t find it in me. I felt bad turning them down, so I headed back to my room. While I stood there watching the elevator lights, a small group of boy scouts dressed in green and tan jumbled up behind me, ecstatic about which room they were going to get. Their energy was contagious. A younger couple ushered them together.

“Where are you taking them?” I asked.

“To Snowbird.” She responded. “We’re getting them ski badges with ski instructors. And my husband and I can ski all day while they take care of them.” She grinned.

“That sounds nice.”

The elevator opened, and the troop rushed in past me, hooting like it was a ride at Disney. The doors closed behind them and I listened as the ruckus floated away until it was quiet again.

# **“The Wallpaper—an ode to Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short fiction, ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’”**

## **Kacie England**

**“John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage.” - “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Charlotte Perkins Gilman**

It was seldom that we found the time to go out these days, and I was eager to see all the paintings at the art gallery. I walked with my lover, a man that I met just out of university. His hand clutching mine, we wandered into the entrance of the lonely gallery, a place that mirrored a ghost town, vacant except for the frames resting on the high-ceilinged, white walls, a space that somehow made you feel even smaller than you might have already. He warned me before coming to the gallery that I better not cause a scene. He says these things often, but of course, one expects that in love.

After giving our tickets to the gentleman in the foyer of the museum, we started in the High Renaissance district, a square of the collection faithful to Biblical, mythical renditions of unhappy women. There’s something sad in their faces, and it almost says, *I’m here and I’m supposed to be happy, as that is how the brush intended to paint me.*

Ambling room to room, I was devoured by Titian’s “Sacred and Profane Love.” The painting shows two women with a baby Cupid lodged in the center of them, almost too chubby to move from where he rests in between the ladies. One woman is Venus, the other a mere bride, though they seem to be identical in face, mirroring each other. I stood in awe, turning my head to either side, wallowing in the strokes. I stared so intently at their expressions that I could have sworn one of them smirked at me through the corner of her petite lip. I don’t consider myself much of an art buff, but damn was this one pretty.

“Do you have to look at each one?” he questioned with a furrow in his brow. In a way that only I would understand, he tightened his fingers robustly around mine, and I received the message in a way that other art connoisseurs might reckon to be telepathy; I was to move onto the next piece.

Shuffling past a few paintings, framed eyes felt like they were following me, oil paint pupils tiptoeing behind as if they were art thieves, and when I finally couldn’t bear it anymore and would turn around, the eyes hid behind a gallery pillar. If it were up to me to stop the culprits, they would have stolen “The Last Supper” right from under my nose.

I landed in front of a large painting of a man holding a book. The man was large, so large that the book was overshadowed; the forlorn face the man wore was abrasive to the viewer, and it made me think that maybe his novel was a sad one. As I backed away from the portrait, I began to look harder. Neatly placed on top of the book’s binding were his hands, and with my close examination, I knew I saw them

move, wiggle a little around the spine. Springing back from the line that signifies how close one can get to the art without being condemned, I shook my head around, hoping to clear the commotion in my brain. I had too many coffees today, that's it. Too much caffeine can make you a little jittery.

"What are you doing? I already told you that if you do this we're leaving," he commanded. And with a jerk of my own wiggling fingers, I was forced to leave the book man behind as he watched me leave. As I was jerked away, he looked worried, but so did I.

"What is wrong with you?" asked my lover. I didn't answer, for I had no good answer to give. One expects that in love, of course. If you don't have anything thoughtful to say, then it's best left quiet.

*Don't look so scared.*

"Who said that?" I whispered.

"What are you talking about?" he questioned, throwing down my hand that he held so firmly.

*Over here. Why so afraid? I'm not going to hurt you.*

"Don't you hear that??" I muttered, panicked.

*I can't even if I tried. I'm stuck in this frame.*

"I swear to God you ruin everything! Come on. I'm not letting you ruin this too. We're going to the next exhibition," he spat at me in a rage so silent, as he didn't want the paintings to hear. I knew he didn't want to make them suspicious.

"Don't worry I don't think they can hear you," I persisted to whisper. "You're quiet enough."

*I can hear you.*

My eyes darted from security camera to security camera, then to the eyes of every portrait. With my own eyes beginning to water, wetting out of fear and confusion, I found her.

"For the love of God, what are you talking about? I don't want to disturb the other guests that's why I'm being soft. Just wait until we get home and I won't be soft anymore."

*You shouldn't be with him. He's bad news. Get out before it's too late.*

And then I met her eyes. She was jammed in a baroque frame, trapped in canvas, a solitary woman posing nude, speaking to me. I ripped myself from the grip he had on my hand and leaped forward into the open gallery hall. Spinning in

circles around the stark white walls covered in paintings I saw them all moving. Landscape scenes with thundering waterfalls cascaded onto the floor, Perugino's "Combat of Love and Chastity" bulleted arrows in my direction with no mercy, baby Jesus depictions lunged in my path with malice as Our Lady followed behind in a swift chase at my heels. As I spun in circles, the whites of the walls fused with the paints in a fog so thick that I dropped to the gallery floor. Titan's Venus seized my gaze, and she and her twin mocked me, throwing themselves to the earth while Cupid flew over them, pointing at me.

*Leave this place!*

"I told you not to cause a scene!" he howled, detaining me while I was down on the marble floors of the gallery. "I told you!"

I rocked back and forth in an attempt to rip myself from the restraint. The paintings watched me as if they had been warning me and this is my punishment for noncompliance. I looked up at the nude woman clutching the frame that traps her, quivering as she sees me held down. Pushing stray locks out of her face, my stomach plummets through my bones. She's me—the painting has my face, a mirror image. My double gapes at me on the floor, and breaking myself from the grasp of my lover, I run towards her.

*No! The other way! Through the door!*

"Get back here now! I told you!"

*He's right behind you!*

I hurdled myself towards my framed copy, passing the painted line on the floor that denotes viewer boundaries. My body crashed into the painting, completely hinging the piece from the wall. The frame cracked, sending the canvas that contained my duplicate self flying across the gallery hall face up, and my doppelgänger is still. In a matter of seconds, bells chimed, lights flashed, and large men with the word "art security" flooded the room, and with the help of my lover, they seized me, holding me up by my arms.

As I was escorted out of the gallery, I watched my framed self shiver on the ground, her eyes filled with tears.

"Just wait until we get home," said my lover.

And he laughed at me, of course, but one expects that in love.

**"But I MUST say what I feel and think in some way — it is such a relief! But the effort is getting to be greater than the relief."** - "The Yellow Wallpaper,"

Charlotte Perkins Gilman

## **"The Clubhouse"**

**Anna Olivier**

It was hotter than normal that late July day. On the news they were saying it might be a record summer. We were in the Clubhouse smoking cigarettes Nolan got from his uncle and shooting our mouths off, talking about Kalie Manson's tits and baseball. Nolan had built the Clubhouse with his dad out of scrap wood from his construction company. The pieces were all different shades and thicknesses and the roof was just some scrap metal slopped on top. It was leaky but good enough.

I took a quick drag from my cigarette, getting right down to the filter. I only smoked around Jeremy and Nolan. I wiped the burning end along the side of the puke-stained wood wall, enjoying the way the sparks jumped up and the black smear that followed. "We're spending the night tonight, right?" Jeremy asked. "My mom will be pissed if I come home wasted or anything." We all nodded, and I added the empty pack of Camels to our proud collection of cigarette packs mounted in the glass case on the wall.

"My uncle Jim Bob gave me some weed today too, real cheap," Nolan announced. He was always selling us stuff and I was pretty sure it was shitty weed, but we didn't mind. We also had a couple six packs cooling in the river where Nolan's mom wouldn't find them, and we had our little radio with Jeremy's collection of old CDs. That was all we really needed for a good time.

Until the clubhouse, we rarely slept over Nolan's. The one time I did in the fifth grade. I remember the noises I pretended not to hear on the other side of Nolan's dirty white bedroom walls. His dad was awful when he got drunk but then the next morning, he would make eggs and sausage. He'd smile at me from where he stood at the stove, cigarette dangling from his mouth, saying "Have a seat, Carter. You drinking coffee yet?" and it was like last night never happened. My parents didn't like me hanging out there, but they couldn't do much about it. Nolan and I had been friends since Kindergarten. My dad said people usually ended up like their parents. He didn't say it real mean or anything. He just said it like it was a fact. He said even if they wanted more than anything not to be their parents, all the more chance they would be.

"I guess I'm going home. My mom wants me back for dinner," I said, getting up off the cement bucket that doubled as a chair. "Can you pick me up tonight, Nolan?" I added. Nolan nodded.

I was seventeen and still couldn't drive. My parents kept pushing it off. I don't know if it was some nostalgia crap about their boy growing up or they just really didn't want me out on the roads. Either way, Nolan was always toting me around, but I don't think it bothered him much.

I jumped down the rickety steps to walk home. Nolan lived in the woods outside town, about half a mile from my house. The walk was nice in the day,

especially in the summer when the thick, green leaves provided a soothing cover from the sun. I passed Mrs. Bradberry on her way to prayer meeting. Her long jean skirt swishing loudly as she sped walk past me. She gave me a dirty look and made an almost inaudible clicking sound with her tongue as she passed.

In eighth grade, Nolan and I had killed her precious cat Whiskers and I don't think she ever forgave us. It was an accident. We'd been playing with the set of BB guns Nolan got for his birthday. We'd been aiming at Whiskers' face expecting to miss but we were better shots than we thought. We brought Whiskers to Bradberry's door. Nolan said that was the noble thing to do. I remember how she sank down in the doorway sobbing over the damn thing. She bitched and moaned to our dads and I got grounded for a month. Nolan wasn't so lucky. The next time I saw him he had a bruised eye and was walking kinda funny. We didn't take out the guns again for months.

I walked up the freshly paved driveway to my house and I opened the door to find my dad sitting in the living room watching TV. Great. I slipped off my shoes at the doorway. My mom was a neat freak and hated if any mud got in the house. I tried to sneak past my dad, not wanting to draw attention to myself.

"Hey son," I heard him say as my foot touched the bottom of the beige carpeted stairs. Shit.

"Hey Dad," I replied, turning my head slightly to make eye contact. His face was once quite handsome but stress and just getting old were taking their tolls. The once thin, sharp face was now fat and sagging ever so slightly around the eyes. His receding hairline made his forehead seem elongated and when he got mad it furrowed in a way that I found disgusting

"You've been out at Nolan's," he said, pulling his eyes from the TV, even turning it off to stare at me.

"Yes." I moved up the next step.

"Did you start conditioning for baseball?" My dad had been on the team in high school. He was good but I was better. That was something.

"Baseball season doesn't start until spring," I said, looking past him at my reflection in the blank TV.

"Never hurts to start early. Jimmy's son would be glad to practice with you during the week and..."

I interrupted him, "That's okay, Dad." Jimmy's son was a snob. He thought he was a hotshot and I guess he was but the fact that he knew it really made him unnerving. My dad opened his mouth to say something else when my mom came in from the kitchen.

"Everything okay in here?" she asked. She knew how I felt about Dad, and always came just in time to save me from one of his "success lectures".

"Great, mom," I said and raced up the stairs before either one of them could say anything else.

I was waiting on the front porch watching the lightning bugs start rising from the ground one by one, like the stars appearing in the clear bright sky. As a kid, there was so much entertainment in catching them, smearing their bioluminescent goo all over. Since high school, it suddenly seemed the only things that could be fun involved disappointing parents and putting lives in danger. I saw headlights dance across the yard. I stood up and headed to Nolan's beaten down Ford. I slammed the door breathing in the comforting scent of stale pipe tobacco and weed. Nolan shifted into reverse and shakily steered out of my neatly paved driveway.

It was quiet for a while until he said, "You start looking at colleges yet? Know where you might go?"

I shrugged. I hadn't really thought about it. My dad was a lawyer. So maybe follow in his footsteps. Become a living cliché. The lawyer with two kids a boy and a girl and a pretty little wife with tits like Kalie Manson's. "I don't know." I could feel Nolan's eyes on me. I hated talking about college around Nolan anyway. As nasty as Nolan's old man was to him, Nolan still cared about him a lot. He was going to work with him in the construction company after graduation and probably be stuck in Greenoak forever.

We were rounding the sharp turn that leads out of town. The headlights hit the orange and black street arrows that seemed to send a warning at the danger ahead. As soon as we came out of the sharp bend there was a white figure in the road and a deafening thud. The truck made a noise like tha-thump as the front tires hit the object and then the back ones.

"The fuck was that," Nolan said. I just looked at him. Nolan pulled to the side of the road and opened the door. "Sounded too big to be a raccoon or some-thin," he said. "You coming?" I shook my head. I was afraid Nolan would tease me about it later, but he didn't. Nolan was barely gone a minute when he appeared at the passenger window whiter than the full moon that was gaping open mouthed at the two of us.

"You need to get out and see this..." He whispered.

"Jesus Christ, Nolan what did you hit?" I asked.

He just stared at me, his breathing fast, unpleasant, reaching hysteria. I opened the car door and followed him to the road. As I neared the object the first thing that came to my mind was those creepy marionettes that used to hang in the toy shop on Main Street. The thing was distorted, and its limbs were flung carelessly this way and that as if connected by strings. Once I was close enough to see the face, I realized it was Jane from school. She lived just down the road in the pretty red farmhouse. I didn't really know her. We'd only spoken a couple times. We had Algebra together Freshman year. She sat in front of me and her hair always smelled like strawberries. Tonight, she was wearing a plain white dress that went nicely with her tanned skin. I also noticed she wasn't wearing a bra. Her arms were flung open wide and her small breast lay flat against her chest like a man's.

Her head was tilted in my direction. Her large blue eyes staring blankly at something Nolan and I couldn't see.

"We should call the police," I said.

"No way. I've been drinking and smoking, we'd get in trouble" Nolan said as if that was the issue. I stared at him.

"Then what, huh?" I asked. "Leave her for the vultures tomorrow morning? God." Nolan ran his hands through his hair over and over as if the action would bring about a resolution to this problem. "My dad could probably get us out of this," I said.

"You, yeah but I was driving. We aren't telling anyone. Okay?" I just stared at him. The only noise was the crickets chirping on the side of the road, uncaring of this new disturbance.

"I've got it," Nolan said. "Come on help me get her in the car." Unsure of what else to do, I followed Nolan's orders. I hoisted her up under the armpits, the scent of blood and strawberries filling my nose.

When we finally reached the river, my stomach turned at the thought of what we were about to do. I felt dinner come rising up burning my throat. I stumbled away from the truck and vomited. I closed my eyes, leaning my weight against the tree. Snot dripped down my nose in uncontrollable streams. I wiped it away, for some reason thinking of the time last summer when I'd vomited in the same position. It had been my first-time smoking weed and Nolan made me do it out of the bong. I'd inhaled way too much and had held the lighter up for too long, making it hot and unpleasant. I remember my throat drying out and the fire that forced its way down to my stomach. It had made me dizzy and I'd run outside to throw up like I was now. The guys had laughed at me and I hated it but right now I wanted that night back more than anything.

I heard Nolan's voice through the darkness, "Come on man, it's almost over. You can carry her legs this time. I'll get the front." I moved back towards the truck. Nothing was real, I kept telling myself. The woods, the river, Jane, not even Nolan. This was just a bad dream I'd be waking up from. We hauled the body down to the riverbed, the same riverbed that was cooling our beers not too far upstream. My hands were sticky from Jane's drying blood and I felt like puking again but managed not to. Neither one of us said much, we both knew what we needed to do without saying it. We waded into the deeper part of the river, lowering her down. I was shaking, Jane's thin legs jiggled up and down giving me away. I glanced at Nolan, but he was completely still. As we lay her into the rapids, I watched as the current took her downstream. The body bobbed in a comical way up and down and out of site. I got an unpleasant urge to laugh and hated myself for it.

We waded out of the water and back to the truck. On the drive to the clubhouse, I was finally able to steady my breathing and the weight of what hap-

pened was starting to fall on me. Things Nolan and I hadn't thought of in the moment began to creep into my head. What if we hadn't gotten close enough to the lake and the body got stuck? What if someone found it? Or it just floated right up to the top... I thought about voicing my concerns to Nolan, but it was too late now. A part of me kind of wanted to get caught anyway. "It was an accident," Nolan said more to himself than to me. Just like with Mrs. Bradburry's cat. Nolan looked at me, his dark eyes searching mine. Probably trying to decide if he could trust me. "We were on the other side of Greenoak at the minimart getting sodas, you hear me?" Nolan said. I met his eyes and nodded.

"What took you guys so long?" Jeremy asked as we stumbled into the clubhouse. I hoped he couldn't smell the death on us. I could.

I was about to speak when Nolan beat me to it, saying, "Had a little car trouble, that's all." He sat down next to Jeremy and I had no choice but to sit right down next to him. I felt in that moment like we'd violated the clubhouse. It had been our safe haven for the longest time. We were abusing it, bringing it into something it didn't need to be a part of. I think Jeremy knew something was wrong, but he didn't push us, and we carried on with the rest of the night. When Jeremy offered me a chilled beer, I wanted to scream.

The circumstances being what they were, Nolan and I stopped talking after the incident. We also hadn't thought through our plan too thoroughly. Jane had got caught by a fallen tree where the police found her two days later. When the police interviewed Jane's friends' they said they'd been in a fight and she'd walked off drunk. The police seemed to suspect Jane's friends but obviously there was no proof of that. I guess we were lucky.

~ ~ ~

I climbed into the blue Impreza and slouched against the wheel. It was my girlfriend's car and she was still at the bar. I had no intention of driving anywhere, (at twenty-one I still couldn't or wouldn't drive) but the car provided shelter from the pouring rain. I opened the visor and stared at my reflection. I'd grown to hate the face that stared back at me. The silky black hair that always brushed against my ears and the shifty brown eyes reminded me of the coward inside.

The constant edge that followed me anytime I was sober had stuck around tonight. That stranger from the bar wouldn't leave my head. She was wearing a pretty white dress that paired nicely with her tan skin. I couldn't stop seeing red blood splattered all over her and feared her eyes would be blank blue slots when I looked into them.

I took out my little outdated iPhone and start scrolling through my contacts. Nolan's name was no longer there but I could still remember his home phone number. I dialed and redialed three times, hanging up before the phone even started ringing. On the fourth try, I bit my tongue counting the rings, one, two, three... They're asleep and he won't answer. That'll make it easy.

On the fourth ring, a rough voice answered, "Hello?" I sat frozen in my seat, swallowing hard, all the spit in my mouth seemed to have evaporated.

"Hey...it's Carter," I said, keeping my voice low. I closed my eyes expecting him to hang up but I heard a distinguished rustle on the other end.

"What do you want?" There was no hostility in his voice, only fear.

"I just needed to tell you something," I said. "I'm in law school now."

A quiet laugh escaped me. "I'm in law school and I hate it and I hate my dad," I continued. "I really hate my dad and you," I was unable to control the stream now. "She's everywhere, Nolan. The road, economics class, the fucking bar," I laughed again. Nolan stayed quiet on the other end.

"Say something!" I pleaded, wanting justification for my decision three years ago, wanting Nolan to tell me it was the only way, make the guilt that had been burning my insides for so long evaporate.

"Sorry Carter, I have to go," and before I could say anything else, he hung up the phone. The long humming of an empty line played in my ears. I slammed my phone onto the floor, resting my forehead against the steering wheel. The rain had stopped. I opened my door, desperately needing fresh air. Instead, the sticky humidity of early May in Virginia washed over me. I jolted my head out of the open door and vomited the night's drinks out onto the pavement. The smell of liquor and humidity rose off the black tarmac. I wiped my mouth onto my bare arm and stared off into the dark street wishing the thick air would suffocate me, stifling me out of existence.

# Acknowledgments

The editors of this year's edition of *Warren* would like to thank our faculty advisors, Dr. Anne Stuart and Professor Sue O'Donnell, for their unwavering support and guidance throughout our publication process. This year's *Warren* is dedicated to an individual close to our hearts, so we would also like to thank Ms. Janet Locke and Dr. Claire Lawrence for their participation in the memorial pages for Dr. Terrance Riley, a man who will surely be missed at Bloomsburg University. Many thanks to Dennis Albertson from Conner Printing for his help making the physical copies of this journal possible. Lastly, we would like to thank Bloomsburg University for allowing us to move forward and publish this year's edition despite the challenges and disruptions caused by COVID-19. Thanks again to everyone who helped promote the arts by assisting in the publication of this journal.

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