palaver

/pəˈlævər/
n. A talk, a discussion, a dialogue; (spec. in early use) a conference between African tribes-people and traders or travellers.

v. To praise over-highly, flatter; to cajole.

To persuade (a person) to do something; to talk (a person) out of or into something; to win (a person) over with palaver.

To hold a colloquy or conference; to parley or converse with.

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Graduate Liberal Studies Program
University of North Carolina Wilmington
105 Bear Hall
Wilmington, NC 28403
www.uncw.edu/gls

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Thank you to the Graduate Liberal Studies Program at UNCW for letting us call you home. Palaver could not thrive without the dedication and enthusiasm of its staff: Georgia, Michael, and Ashley, thank you for your tireless attention to detail; Maria, your perseverance on numerous tasks will continue to keep Palaver chugging forward; Austin and Tieanna, your tech help was indispensable, as were your smiling faces; Christen Faubel, your visionary talent, adaptability, and efficiency astound. A huge thank you to Nick Rymer, Eli Wallace-Johansson, and dr. stef shuster for helping with the Shakina interview, and for having our back. Thank you especially to our submitters, contributors, and readership for your loyalty and for trusting us with your extraordinary work. Without you, we’d be an idea, an abstraction, a what-if, but because of you we are Palaver.
Dear Reader,

I’m thrilled to share the Spring 2017 issue of Palaver with you. The leaping togetherness of ideas that we love so much at Palaver is at work in this issue, with themes that shape-shift subtly through its pages.

We start the issue with Evan McMurry’s short story “Ionian Devils,” which explores humanity’s desire for pleasure as individuals—two scientists, in particular—are hunted by enigmatic pheromone-tempted creatures. Paintings by local Wilmington, NC, artist Zack Weaver (who was the cover artist for Palaver’s inaugural Spring 2013 issue) are featured alongside McMurry’s story. Weaver’s art squirms on the page, reminiscent of other-worldly specimens in a Petri dish.

Dani Rado exposes various hierarchies in fabulist fiction while celebrating the complexities of the genre. Benjamin (Brie) Martins’ watercolors of found black-and-white photos loom like Technicolor apparitions within Rado’s pages.

Helen Park offers insights on the connections between migratory birds, a language and its history of appropriation, and gender issues in contemporary America. Palaver’s Managing Editor Christen Faubel introduces readers to the multi-talented trans-artist Shakina Nayfack in a powerful interview (be sure to watch the video of Shakina delivering her encouraging message to those suffering from identity issues, bullying, and suicidal thoughts).

Courtney A. Harler examines a selection of art that focuses on Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and the lactation of the Virgin Mary—inspired by medieval legends—in her essay “The Lactation of Saint Bernard in Art and Literature: ‘Show Thyself a Mother.’” Audra Coleman’s personal essay “Bubo Virginianus” takes a heartfelt look at loss and motherhood while stepping into the mystery of a startling discovery alongside a rural highway. Hildy Maze’s textured collages accompany Coleman’s essay, reinforcing its complex and tender themes. I’m swooning over the lovely, vivid poems in this issue, as well.

I hope you will settle in with this issue to experience it in its totality and gain as much inspiration as we have from the connections these works lace across the pages. Thank you for perusing another issue of Palaver!
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Marcia Walden was a twenty-seven-year-old PhD candidate in economics when she drafted the theory of Potential Utility: a condition in which people do not know they want something until it is offered to them.

“Think of the PC,” she explained to her jaded professors, her amused friends, her skeptical parents. “None of us knew we needed our own personal computer until it was made available. Now we can’t live without one.” Here one cranky professor on her committee leaned forward to inquire about the materialist ramifications of this theory: Why ask questions that can only be answered with products? “It can be argued that fire once held Potential Utility,” Marcia replied. “I would add that perhaps nobody knew they needed a wheel until they saw one roll down the street.”

The first wheel! Marcia often imagined what wonder must have followed that inaugural spin. The tingle of the new: that’s what she aimed for in her theory. Though the pages of her dissertation were cloudy with proofs, she felt a breeze blew through them as well.

The dissertation established Marcia Walden in her field, earned her a tenured position at S University, and secured her a book deal. But as she worked through her manuscript, Marcia watched as new products like fancy coffee drinks and fig-infused vodka fulfilled their PU, as it came to be called. Who knew that people were not only interested in but needed yoga workshops, cell phone apps, organic wine? These things filled no essential void, but quickly life became unfathomable without them, and enterprising corporations profited. It all led Marcia to wonder whether the fulfillment of unforeseen need was actually a factor of happiness, or whether, by fulfilling these needs, PU didn’t just increase humanity’s tolerance, leading them to need more and more.

So she argued in her first book, You Can’t Always Get What You Want: Learning to Live Without the Next Big Thing. Timing, however, was against her. This was summer of 2000. After years of prosperity, many thought they could get exactly what they wanted. The book sold poorly, and Marcia’s life entered a lull. She took a sabbatical, but did little besides read periodicals in her study. And in this course she came across an article about a researcher in New Zealand who had identified a chemical secreted when a person experienced joy: “The essence,” quoth the doctor, “of happiness.”

Dr. Tobias Shaw of Yangarra, New Zealand began his search for this secretion because of the local legend of the Ionian Devils. The Devils were a mythical creature that haunted the local hills and, according to lore, attacked only at weddings, births, and celebrations. They had first been spotted by a shepherd in the previous century. As he guided his flock over the hills, this shepherd often played a series of lilts on his flute, little loping runs that rarely went anywhere. One day he noticed a small creature, slightly larger than a rabbit and of a stick-brown hue, trailing him from about fifty feet away, wrinkling its nose with what he assumed to be curiosity. The shepherd cycled through his musical repertoire and found that when he played a particular stairwell of notes, the creature crept closer. After repeating the riff several times, he made his final discovery: that the creature was carnivorous.

The attacks began occurring more frequently. One of the creatures pounced during a wedding reception, heading straight for the newlyweds. Two young lovebirds ventured into the hills for a tryst; their semi-devoured bodies turned up a week later. A man learned his wife was pregnant and was caught that night, stumbling home from a congratulatory session at the local pub. His drunken companions swore to the existence of at least three of the beasts. Before long, all celebrations were moved indoors, and the townspeople learned to conceal their joy, such that the village acquired a gloom that was commented upon in guidebooks, which attributed it to a lack of industry.

Dr. Shaw heard the legend occasionally as a youth. He left Yangarra for medical school in England, and returned after graduation while awaiting word on a residency at a London hospital. One day Dr. Shaw was walking down the street, spry about his future—in fact imagining a fictional English woman he would meet in a London pub and with whom he would quickly consummate an affair—when he spotted a brown, rabbit-like animal following him. “Hey, little fellow,” he said, and it leapt.

Dr. Shaw ran. By the time he arrived home, he remembered the legend of the Devils. Little animals that attacked at moments of mirth: surely they weren’t real? He inquired about town, but nobody believed he’d really seen one of these things. A few weeks later, Dr. Shaw turned down the hospital in Britain. Instead he stayed in Yan-
garr and, near as the bewildered villagers could tell, spent every day walking in circles. Each morning Dr. Shaw set out from his parents’ house with a small notebook in which he recorded the date and his mood. At first he just noted whether he was happy, or down, or tired, but soon he sharpened his self-measurements, noting that he was optimistic one day, but straight-up hopeful the next, parsing the difference between sour and bitter, lazy and indolent. After a few weeks, a pattern emerged. When he felt up-beat—an eight on his scale, up on exuberant, a twelve—he was trailed twenty yards back by a little rabbit creature. This result unfolded into more mystery: was it the same old, and whatever else her life had, it certainly lacked divinity. She left for Yangarra on Necessity Tolerance she had been “researching” over a year. Marcia was thirty years first time in years she reread her dissertation, felt anew the zither in her words. She was interested in this doctor, and she hadn’t been interested in anything in a long time: not in the habits of humans but the behavior of beasts: he must be emitting something when he was happy, a smell, a stimulant. Thus began Dr. Shaw’s research, which culminated four years later in an announcement in the Spring 2001 issue of Psychology and Biology that he had located a happiness emission, or, in his words, an “Ionian secretion.”

Marcia Walden read “Doc Discovers Happy Juice” in the “Off the Wall” section of her local daily. Though the article’s tone was flippant, Dr. Shaw came across as perfectly serious: “This deepens and enriches the study of happiness,” ran the quote. “Now that we have a biological indicator, we are a step closer toward grasping the full divinity of this emotion.”

Divinity! The word seemed to kick right out of the tawdry newsprint. So, a New Zealand doctor had found God in his laboratory. Marcia knew the feeling. For the first time in years she reread her dissertation, felt anew the zither in her words. She was interested in this doctor, and she hadn’t been interested in anything in a long time: not in her dusty New England duplex, nor her Tuesday morning office hours, nor the article on Necessity Tolerance she had been “researching” over a year. Marcia was thirty years old, and whatever else her life had, it certainly lacked divinity. She left for Yangarra three days later.

Dr. Shaw did not mention the Ionian Devils to the several reporters who interviewed him. What made you spend four years of your life searching for this chemical? “The pursuit of happiness is certainly a legitimate one, whatever form it takes,” he replied. Yes, but … in Yangarra? Why not Sydney, London, New York? He shrugged. “I like to stay close to home,” he said, and the reporters left with impressions of a dull doctor in a dumpy village.

But Dr. Shaw was quite happy; for confirmation, he just looked behind him. Every day on his walk to work, one of the creatures followed him, and every day one or two followed him home. Over the years he had learned to distinguish between them, the twig-brown gradients of their coats that allowed them to blend into the woods, the stutters of their walk, that pause every few steps to reassess their prey. He had allowed a few of them close enough that he could discern their individuating features; he marveled at how each revealed its own specific way of wrinkling its pink nose at him—left-right-left, right-left-pause-left—each its own greeting. As the townspeople already considered Dr. Shaw something of an eccentric, they took notice of this behavior without inquiring as to its cause; thus, he remained the only person who knew of the Devils.

One evening he was eating dinner at the pub by his lab when an American woman pulled up a stool next to him and asked if he was Dr. Tobias Shaw, discoverer of the happiness pheromone. At first he thought her to be another reporter, and asked what rag she was with; she instead introduced herself as Marcia Walden, a Professor of Economics with S University. He piqued: during the long slog of his research Dr. Shaw had often imagined the fortunes that would come his way once his findings were public. Surely there would be numerous wealthy institutions, public and private, that would want to get their hands on a happiness chemical, and Dr. Shaw would gladly make his expertise available to the highest bidder. Thus far, though, no one had come calling, a result Dr. Shaw blamed on both the esoteric print run of Psych and Bio and his novelty treatment in the press.

But this Marcia Walden, PhD, was not in the village of Yangarra on behalf of any corporation, nor government agency, nor even academic institution. “I guess I’m just interested in happiness,” she told him, in her flat American accent that sounded as though every vowel had been sat upon.

“A funny thing to say,” he said. “Isn’t everybody interested in happiness?”

She explained to him her theory of PU. “It’s hard for people to understand,” she said. “I really thought I found a … spirituality in my studies. Like there was something essential about us that had been revealed, but in numbers. But it all ended up in fancy coffee drinks and fig-infused vodka.”

“Yes, the coffee,” he said. “We even have one of those shops in Yangarra, now.”

Marcia perused the dusty bottles behind the bartender. “No fig-vodka, though,” she said, and offered to buy Dr. Shaw a round if he would tell her about his discovery.
They got three-sheets that night, the doctor and the professor, and their talk soon digressed from happiness into all variety of subjects: the London Tube, the difference between American and New Zealand cartoons, the academic life and all of its appurtenances. The doctor learned this Marcia Walden had landed in New Zealand with no plan, no goal, nothing beyond a simple interest in himself. They stumbled back to her hotel, where he kissed her goodnight on the cheek and promised to take her out for a hillside tour the next day. He walked home in an ecstasy: Had this been what he had been searching for this whole time? Not the recognition of his colleagues nor the patronage of corporations, not the respect of his parents nor the esteem of his countrymen, but this sudden woman, this Professor of Economics Marcia Walden?

Marcia stayed. At first she took an apartment for herself, but a few months later she sublet it and moved in with Tobias. She accompanied him to his office in the town's small hospital, read over his research, assisted him in the more mundane matters of his work. They picnicked in the hills on Sundays, took trips to Melbourne and Sydney, watched movies and winced when the characters psychoanalyzed each other. Marcia at last emerged from what she now thought to be only an intellectual funk. She began work on a new book. On their one-year anniversary, Tobias proposed in the pub where they had first met. All was well, until one night over drinks when Marcia asked, rather absentmindedly, what had given him the idea of a happiness secretion in the first place, and Tobias recalled the Devils and realized with a start that he hadn't seen one in as long as he could remember.

“Toby?” Marcia said. “Is something wrong?”

She followed him outside, where he was already whispering “Here, little fellows” into the night air, then tsks-ting with his tongue. He searched up and down the street, wandered down the alley to the side of the restaurant, but the little rabbit-like creatures were nowhere to be found.

That night Dr. Shaw finally told somebody of the Devils, first their legend and then their physical appearance in his life. “Of course you don’t believe me,” he said to a face newly skeptical.

“It’s just difficult to understand,” she said.

“But there’s nothing really difficult about it!” He scooted his stool closer to the table. “Many creatures secrete chemicals when they are scared or excited or in heat. Somewhere along the way, these animals learned to … equate this one secretion of ours with hunger. The happier we are, the more they smell the secretion, and the more they want us.”

“And they’ve been following you all this time?”

“But, see, that’s how I knew I was right about the pheromone. Everybody doubted me, all of them”—at this Tobias waved his hand at the rest of the patrons in the bar, and a drunk in the corner waved back—”my parents, my schoolmates who kept forwarding me job offers. Any time they doubted me, or I worried I was wasting my life, all I had to do was look behind me, and I would see one of them. It meant that I was secreting this stuff, which I wouldn’t be doing if I wasn’t happy. It’s strange, I knew these creatures were hunting me, but I came to really like seeing them there.”

“And when was the last time you saw one?”

“Right around the time—oh, when was it, it was fall before last—it was right around when I met you.”

He hadn’t meant to state it so bluntly, but at that sentence there passed a chill between them, and Tobias tried to brush it off now as superstition, but the next day Marcia said she wasn’t feeling well, that he should just head to the lab by himself. The whole trek there he whirled around, hoping to see one of the creatures, because maybe, maybe, maybe he had been so happy since Marcia’s appearance that he no longer needed to notice them. But they were not there that day, nor any day after that. Though the villagers were already accustomed to Dr. Shaw’s odd behavior, this spinning in circles down the street struck them as particularly unusual, and those who approached him with a “G’day” later remarked how troubled he seemed.

Tobias spent more and more time at his lab, and in his absence Marcia took meandering walks through the hillside. She told herself that she did this to write, to find inspiration in the pastoral she’d adopted, but she really was looking for these small creatures from her fiancé’s tale. Little rabbit things, brown like tree bark—was he serious? Had a New Zealand folk-tale overtaken him in his lab, a tumor of all his lonely years? She questioned for the first time this happiness secretion: Why, in fact, had no corporation come calling, nor government agency or think tank? Why was nobody treating this discovery with any gravity? “Doc Discovers Happy Juice,” she remembered, and sat down among the weeds. She had moved halfway around the world and become engaged to a man who was out of his mind.

“Though the villagers were already accustomed to Dr. Shaw’s odd behavior, this spinning in circles down the street struck them as particularly unusual...”
“What did you do today?” he asked her when he got home.

“Went for a walk. You?”

“Went to the lab.”

Marcia’s book stalled, four chapters in. She continued to stroll the countryside, one eye cocked for inspiration, the other for the quick motions of these fictional critters, but neither appeared.

“How’s your book coming?” he asked her.

“Never mind that,” she said. “I’ve been pacing around this village for weeks, and I haven’t seen any sign of these creatures.”

“What of it?”

“I just think if they existed, I would have seen one by now.”

“Well,” Tobias said, and snapped a page in the medical journal in front of him, “you must not be a very happy person.”

After that he asked her every morning what page of her book she was on, and asked her every night what page of her book she was on, and said, “Humph, same one as this morning, isn’t it?”

“Right,” she said. “Get any visits from your little friends today?”

“No. Something must be making me unhappy.”

A few weeks later, Marcia went home.

* * *

The converse of Potential Utility would be something you always thought you wanted, but, in fact, did not. This would be Negative Potential Utility, or NPU. It was the subject of Marcia’s second book, published the next year: *Be Careful What You Wish For: A Guide for Risk Assessment in Desire.*

Once again timing was against her. America was at war, Mission Accomplished had been declared: the country spoiled for a fight. Marcia’s guide to level-headed groundedness sold poorly.

She got a job at Southern University, where she taught classes on her theories of PU and NPU. “Television,” she’d say to each new class. “Nobody knew they needed these images pumped into their home before the technology became available. In fact, it could be argued that television actually fulfills no need, but rather creates a need, and becomes”—and here she would draw a black loop on the whiteboard—“a self-perpetuating cycle of necessity. Having invented a need, it has upped our Necessity Tolerance—that’s NT—which means we need even more of the product to feel satiated. So, does television have Potential Utility, Negative Potential Utility, or neither?”

Twelve or so sets of glossed-over eyes would look back. “PU,” one student would finally venture.

She’d point with a piece of chalk. “Argue it for me.”

“Well, I guess, even though we didn’t need television, it supplied more effective ways of delivering information—you know, news and stuff. Images of the coffins from Vietnam. That’s an example of PU.”

“Good. Anybody want to counter?”

Another student, in the corner: “But this escalated the NT for news, leading to twenty-four-hour news networks, which have devalued news itself.”

“You’re talking too much of a good thing,” the first student would respond. “It’s not NFW (Negative Fulfillment of a Wish) but OFW (Over-Fulfillment of a Wish).” He’d turn to Marcia. “Right?”

“Maybe.” Her glance would dart around the room. “So are we happier or not?”

It went on like that, semester after semester. Friends asked her about her time in New Zealand. She called it an adventure, and they praised her spirit; she left out her fiancé and his tales of animals thirsting after our fluids. She thought of Tobias often—usually while sipping a figtini at the local hotel bar—thought of him in the same way she had her Marxist ideals after her first year of economics classes, or her parents after they got divorced. Disappointment without blame: she felt let down, but felt as bad for
these agents of deflation as she did for herself. Was there a word for that—or maybe a
theory behind it? She scribbled on bar napkins: **PE: Progressive Empathy? CP: Cross Pity?**

She started making notes to herself about the feeling, wondering if maybe there was a
paper in it, if the paper could be developed into a book, if the book would finally be
timed so as to sell, the thoughts tumbling into each other, until one day when she sat
down before her computer and found two emails awaiting her, both from Dr. Tobias
Shaw.

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“Witnesses said the creatures ... swarmed the birthday boy as he peered through a tele-
scope he’d just unwrapped.”
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north of town, a groomsman reading Keats before an audience of seventy-five, the
creatures crawled out from the wooded backdrop as if enticed by the poem. “They were
small and furry, like rabbits,” cried a surviving bridesmaid. “But all brown, like tree
bark. They were horrible.”

Marcia closed the tab and opened Tobias’ second message: “They followed you.”

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In the years since Marcia had left his gloomy hamlet behind, Dr. Tobias Shaw
had dissipated. Patches of unshaven hair pocked his formerly smooth face; from behind
crooked spectacles, his eyes blinked a bothered red. He spent as much time at the pub
as he did at his lab. He growled at the villagers who greeted him on the street.

Beneath his every thought was Marcia Wälden. Dr. Shaw sunk his evenings at
the pub picturing her enchanted walk to campus, the creatures escorting her over a
carpet of southern leaves. He’d stumble back to the apartment they’d shared, curl on
the couch, dream of the day he got them back. Finally, in the late moonshot hours,
acrimony would dissolve into longing, and he’d envision flying to America, driving to
her school, finding her as she emerged from one of the ivied buildings. He’d tell her she
didn’t care about the Devils or the happiness secretion of any or the clutter that had
come between them, that he just wanted her back.
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The first: “Checked your local news today?”

A link led to an article from her local newspa-
paper: “Wedding Attacked, Two Dead, Small An-
imals Sighted.” The wedding had been between
a young woman from the Registrar’s office and
a townie. Twenty minutes into the ceremony,
under a canopy of elms at a wildflower preserve

town. Twenty minutes into the ceremony,
under a canopy of elms at a wildflower preserve

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But if they were real, then there were
all sorts of questions hollered at him from a
press conference outside the campus biolo-
gy building: From what were they descend-
ed? How did they get to America? And why
were there suddenly so many of them?
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“Well,” Dr. Shaw said, taking the last
question first, “there is not much around
Yangarra. Lack of available resources might
attenuate a species’ growth. However, here
in the United States, by an urban area, re-
sources are much more concentrated. This
might lead to an irruption in the popula-
tion….” He looked up at the banquet of
pleading faces.
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Several hundred of these creatures
now lurked around Southern Uni-
versity, haunting celebrations. A couple
wedding receptions were predictably in-
terrupted; graduation had been cancelled.
Most curious, though, were the individual
attacks. An unmarried middle-aged wom-
an, avid critic of children in front of her yard, was seized by three creatures on her walk
home from the corner store. A Comparative Religions professor, recently sidelined over
a post-divorce spate of boozing, went down on his own porch. A high-schooler who
sat alone in the cafeteria, quietly eating his lunch with his back unconsciously turned
against the groups around him.

Didn’t these incidents refute Dr. Shaw’s thesis? He shook his head: “The Devils
follow the secretion.” He had cleaned up since his arrival in the States, appeared before
the bio building fresh-cheeked, glasses polished and straightened, a spritely accent making his vowels pop. “We secrete the chemical when we are truly happy,” he said, “and that does not necessarily correlate with outward determinants of happiness.”

So, was he saying the shut-in who inveighed against the neighborhood children was happier than her social and accomplished neighbors?

“I’m saying,” he answered, “that the Devils follow the secretion.”

Marcia tracked the story through the newspaper, on television, via gossip. All attempts to capture one of the Devils proved futile. Authorities conducted personality tests on all of their agents to locate the most content. Alas, these generally pleased humans were none-too-excited to be dangled as bait, and though they walked up and down the streets for weeks, they were never followed. The next idea, to stage a large concert with no admission and free alcohol, failed to elicit the secretion as well; something about the presence of so many federal agents hovering with cages killed the mood.

The attacks became increasingly surprising: a diver who had been injured just before the previous year’s Olympic trials; a man who lived with his mother and excelled at a multi-player computer game; an out-of-work translator who had prepared a new, more playful version of Metamorphoses, apparently solely for his own benefit. In death, these elect became the envy of their peers, who, for all their successes, were suddenly revealed as unhappy.

Soon, the flyers. Outside one of Marcia’s classes hung a bright orange advertisement: TRUE HAPPINESS WORKSHOP. On coffee-shop bulletin boards: BETTER YOUR LIFE BY ATTRACTING DEVILS. Marcia could not resist; telling herself it technically fell within her field, she joined a dozen other workshop attendees in making various “Ionian poses.” They formed a circle and shared moments from their life in which they outwardly acted embarrassed but inwardly felt proud, or successful, or joyful. With the lights off, they laid down and meditated upon a moment in which they had felt complete happiness when no one else was around. At the end of the workshop, the instructor told them how they could become certified to teach Ionian Strategies themselves. The whole thing cost $140.

On the street, Marcia saw people glance over their shoulders, then frown when they did not see the creatures.

Other professors whispered to her: “Have they followed you yet?”

A student of hers, Matt, bragged that he had outrun two of the Devils the previous Friday night. “What’s weird is my dad died, like, two weeks ago,” he said. “I mean, I never liked the man, but I didn’t know that his existence was keeping me from happiness.”

“You dad had NPU,” another student said.

“Behave,” Marcia said. “Matt, remember to establish causality. Just because these creatures appeared two weeks after your father’s death does not mean that the latter caused the former.”

“You’re just saying that because they haven’t followed you.” The newly emboldened student faced her. “Have you seen one yet?”

But it wasn’t the Devils she kept swearing she saw in her peripheral vision. In the three months since Toby had arrived in her town, she’d invoked him only once, asking a colleague where that New Zealand specialist was staying; she’d been told the handsome doctor had been put up at an Extended Stay on the interstate leading out of town. “They say nobody believed him for years,” the colleague added as Marcia skirted away. She took roundabouts to avoid the building, grimly imagining him glorying in the fame he’d once confessed to craving, courting a different biology undergrad every night with brave tales of facing down the Devils. She saw Toby tsk to them with his tongue, drawing them out from their hiding as he’d been unable to do for her.

But bitterness exhausted her. At home, a bottle of non-fig-infused vodka uncapped, Marcia privately delighted in having banished the Devils from her ex-fiancé’s life with her secret unhappiness. It hadn’t been happiness that had lured her to Yangarra; it had been the breeze she’d felt reading about Toby, a lift he had named divinity. If that scared away his precious little creatures, all the better. They’d taken the creatures’ absence as a verdict, when they should have celebrated it as a ratification of a love that, if Toby’s theory was correct, transcended happiness.

“Portrat” by Zack Weaver
Extended Stay, she practically danced in the freedom of not being followed by the creatures, she alone, such that she seemed particularly joyful to passersby, who worried for the next few steps about the happy woman’s safety.

* 

Tobias searched every crowd for Marcia. At the welcome reception in SIU’s faculty lounge he lingered until all of the buffet food was scrounged before finally allowing the student driver to return him to his temporary housing. At every news conference, he squinted beyond the camera lights in hopes to catch her face. He found a pub similar to the one in Yangarra (“Not too happy an hour,” swore the sandwich board outside), drank slow beers there, wondering if she knew of the bar, if she went there to be reminded of him.

But she was nowhere to be found. Instead, America had finally offered him the success he had dreamt of back in his lab. Universities contacted him about visiting positions; agents dangled book contracts; any institution with a hall and a PA invited him to speak. Reporters trailed him, this time without condescension, hoping for just one quotable line. He ignored them all. Soon he found himself spending entire days inside his temporary housing.

That’s where he was sitting, wondering whether he should just take one of the professorships and get the hell out of town, when an idea perked his curiosity.

Potential Utility: the idea that we don’t know we need something until it is offered to us. Tobias Shaw had read both of his ex-fiancé’s books—out of quiet duty when they were courting, out of spite after they had split.

(What nonsense were her arguments!) But now he picked up her first book off his shelf and delved into it with the seriousness he knew she thought it deserved. And within the introduction lay the sentence he needed: “It is the wonder of the new,” she wrote, “that truly animates mankind; it is like seeing the first wheel roll down the street.”

* 

He sprinted the few blocks towards the university. Surely some kiosk would boast a map of campus that could point him in the direction of the social sciences building, where he would find Marcia Walden, Professor of Economics. “I was wrong,” he imagined saying as he skid before her, “we don’t secrete the pheromone when we’re happy. It’s wonder.”

He was so lost in his thoughts that he didn’t notice them at first. By the time he spun around, seven or eight of the creatures were coyly approaching, in that stalking pace, a few steps forward then a pause. One wrinkled its nose at him, left-right-left. He saw them as he imagined that shepherd had once seen them, reflecting his own wonder back at him—a look, he now realized, he had seen on the face of Marcia Walden that first night in the pub when they discovered each other, a pure reveling in having found a love neither had known they were looking for, but had wanted all along.

“Hey, little fellows!” he cried, and they ate him.

* 

The fancy coffee chain went under. The President of the company blamed DU, or Diminishing Utility. It was the subject of her third and final book, It Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time: Essays on the Impermanence of Success. It sold poorly.

Marcia finished out her career at Tech. She taught seminar classes on DU, the theory that nothing lasts, and after a few semesters acquired a reputation as an aloof professor whose classes left students in a post-semester funk blamed for fouling summers. She was often sighted alone, nursing a pint in the English-style draught pub downtown. Every December and May she took that semester’s students out; they watched as she perused the new vodka flavors, finally ordered a cucumber Cosmo or some nonsense, and sipped it with visible distaste.

A few years later, an enterprising young writer bought Marcia’s first title on a whim from a used bookshop, and shortly thereafter wrote a breathless volume explaining how readers could use PU and NPU to advance in their careers and personal lives. It sold over a million copies and made the young writer irresistible on the lecture circuit, where he became an evangelist for her reupholstered ideas. His efforts to track her down, to thank her, to pick her capacious brain and maybe swipe an idea for his next book, dead-ended in a bizarre article from her town’s local paper detailing her death in a Love Neither Had Known They Were Looking For, but Had Wanted All Along.
Only the enterprising writer savored the irony that the priestess of new products didn’t even have a car. He worked this into his lectures, a quirky but ultimately sad close to his first act before he invariably lifted the crowds with his remedies. But soon the specter of the lonely and unexplained woman began to haunt him; he thought he saw her in the crowds, standing in line for an autograph, mocking him with a mask of vengeful knowledge.

From then on, when asked how he’d come up with his ideas, he lied rather than provoke her ghost. It seemed a spirit of rage.
While my thesis director is reading,
people whip out digital cameras like fans at a rock concert.
While my thesis director is reading,
he writes fire trucks screaming down the street into his poem on the fly.
While my thesis director is reading,
I am texting updates to my Twitter account because I am dating the Internet.
While my thesis director is reading,
other poets in the room are drinking and trying to get laid.
While my thesis director is reading,
the audience giggles when he mentions masturbation.
While my thesis director is reading,
I am suddenly seventeen, across the street at the Art Institute of Chicago,
walking through an Andy Warhol retrospective.
While my thesis director is reading,
I sit on the floor in the Silver Clouds room, punching silver Mylar balloons into the air
over my head, while my boyfriend takes pictures with his 35mm camera.
While my thesis director is reading,
I wonder whatever happened to those photos.
While my thesis director is reading,
I wonder if one of those photos would make a good Facebook profile picture.
While my thesis director is reading,
I punch silver Mylar balloons of memory.
While my thesis director is reading,
I am suddenly nineteen, and war protestors clog Michigan Avenue, waving
signs and stopping traffic.
While my thesis director is reading,
the faultiness of recollection scrambles the words on the protestors’ signs into
gibberish.
While my thesis director is reading,
I know that if I met myself at nineteen on the street outside, we would not recognize
each other.
While my thesis director is reading,
I puzzle out ways to turn PowerPoint into a poetic form.
While my thesis director is reading,
I hunger for snack food.
I wake hugging the pillow to myself in defense, in denial, in an attempt at replication. The hum of office lights never reaches my ears. I try to imagine how that world operates—what paths are cut, which bridges are long crumbled, who will be history weeks from now. Which Starbucks is visited on the way to the office? What stoplights are like body memory? Where does he wish he could veer instead of staying on course?

Our lives were never intersecting, but an outlier disrupted an entire timeline. I should be writing poems about alcohol and loneliness, but here lust burrows in my empty bed, stroking my hair, tugging at my hips, spreading long fingers across my back. The secret jumped from our hands into the world fully formed. It threatens like plague and tastes like sweet poison. My body arches into death. I know that control of my destiny is a gift easily retracted.

Still, I reach for you.
Contemporary Fabulists: The Dialogical and the Inversion of Fictional Hierarchies | Dani Rado

Contemporary fabulist fiction is a fiction that is sure of itself, by which I mean that its confidence is not necessarily derived from the certainty that a story’s projected vision of the world is accurate, but from the certainty that the world’s vision of itself is fundamentally flawed. For instance, a story may offer no explanations for fantastic episodes; as in Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* we see only the effect—Gregor wakes up as a bug without any cause offered to him or the readers. Or a story may grant no mitigation for its anachronisms and other incongruities; as in Barthelme’s work: King Arthur and Winston Churchill can both debate the use of “The Bomb” (*The King*), or elementary school children carry on a philosophical inquiry into the nature of death (“The School”). Finally, a fabulist story offers no apologies for its formal interruptions or associative leaps; as in William Gass’s story “In the Heart of the Heart of the Country,” a man can narrate from any and all points simultaneously on the emotional map.

Fabulism, like many terms employed in literature to designate categories, has no readily available or agreed upon definition. Some use it as a synonym for magical realism; others insist on its indebtedness to fables and the fairy tale genre; still, others lump it in with postmodernism—or more specifically metafiction—while “new wave fabulists” seem more closely aligned with science fiction and fantasy genres. The problem with these approaches is that their main goal is to group or categorize—a project useful for compiling anthologies, but one that relies far too much on the ostensible characteristics of a story and neglects the underlying structure and techniques that give rise to what we recognize as fabulist fiction. Prioritizing the surface details not only leads the reader to ignore the underlying complexities, but could also lead him or her to minimize the fiction entirely, believing all one must do to be considered a fabulist is to “make it weird,” (Winter) as one Boston Globe review put it. A more useful approach would be to mold a definition of fabulism not only from the characteristics shared by stories, but also from the type of work fabulist fiction seeks to accomplish.

In the introduction to their anthology *Extreme Fiction*, Robin Hemley and Michael Martone bluntly describe the characteristics of fabulism: “Fabulism deals with the fantastic, the unobservable, what may exist outside the normal human ken” (4). Again, this definition focuses more on content rather than thematic or formal aspects of the structure. In his book *Fabulation and Metafiction*, Robert Scholes shifts the question of what fabulism is from the ontological to the epistemological realm. He begins his definition of fabulism (which he terms “fabulation”) by borrowing Charles Sanders Peirce’s concept of fallibilism—the idea that all knowledge could be mistaken and absolute knowledge is impossible. Scholes states, “Fabulation … means not a turning away from reality, but an attempt to find more subtle correspondences between the reality which is fiction and the fiction which is reality. Modern fabulation accepts … its fallibilism, its inability to reach all the way to the real, but it continues to look towards reality” (8).

I agree with Scholes that fabulism does not eschew reality but makes a continual gesture towards it. However, I wish to push Scholes’s definition further and claim that the techniques fabulist fiction uses to blur the line between fiction and reality serve both a literary and a covertly political purpose. It is not necessarily searching for a “subtle correspondence,” but subtly exposes the extent of that correspondence. The elements of fabulism serve to defamiliarize the audience with embedded power structures that we have come to take for granted and see as natural or inevitable (or not see at all). The very existence and prominence of these organizational structures conceals the arbitrariness of their creation and the inequality they propagate. The fantastic, then, is not a façade, but a tool by which reality’s façade is stripped away. The most important “unreal” element in these stories is not the fabled creatures nor the alternative time and spaces, but the unreal legitimacy of these real power structures that are incorporated into the fictions.

By using Mikhail Bakhtin’s model of the *dialogical* in congruence with his concept of the grotesque and carnivalesque, I will examine the way in which fabulist fiction occupies this in-between space, as Scholes suggests it does, in order to expose, debunk, and ultimately demystify implicit fictional hierarchies. By fictional hierarchies I mean both literary and social, or the hierarchy of our social and political world as reflected in literary *topoi*.

“A more useful approach would be to mold a definition of fabulism not only from the characteristics shared by stories, but also from the type of work fabulist fiction seeks to accomplish.”

*Neon Demon* by Benjamin (Brie) Martins

In the first section I will explore the ways in which fabulist fiction locates and combats questionable power structures. In the second section I will attempt to define the specific political and historical position of fabulist fiction as it relates to this task.
of demystification. And in the final section I will reaffirm that fabulist fiction’s main weapon lies in its ability to gesture towards reality by use of parataxis (akin to “reaching” as Scholes calls it), where association rather than direct connection becomes the main catalyst for plot and action. Throughout, I will also seek to carve fabulist fiction from the larger categories of metafiction, postmodernism, and the fantastic.

**Locating and Combating Fictional Hierarchies**

The pedantic narrator of Jorge Luis Borges’s story “Pierre Menard: Author of *Don Quixote*” claims, “There is no intellectual exercise which is not ultimately useless. A philosophical doctrine is in the beginning a seemingly true description of the universe; as the years pass it becomes a mere chapter—if not a paragraph or a noun—in the history of philosophy” (53). Not only is truth relative to the time in which it is articulated, but it also shrinks in importance as it is lost in the subsequent truths time has piled upon it. Thus, the narrator claims Menard’s *Quixote* is “infinitely richer” since Menard must contend with the anachronisms of writing a novel set in the 1600s, along with the four hundred extra years of historical context. If the truth of each idea is dependent on the context in which it is read, then it is impossible to recreate, and thus locate and combat.

A solution is found through Bakhtin’s concept of the dialogic, which carries on the continual dialogue with previous works as it answers and corrects them in each renewed context—which is exactly the work that Borges both criticizes and lauds in “Pierre Menard,” and therefore requires the past to construct the present and future. Bakhtin explains:

> The hero is located in a zone of potential conversation with the author, in a zone of *dialogical contact* … The image of another’s language and outlook on the world, simultaneously represented *and* representing, is extremely typical of the novel … These descriptive and expressive means that are direct and poetic (in the narrow sense) retain their direct significance when they are incorporated into such a figure, but at the same time they are “qualified” and “externalized,” shown as something historically relative, delimited and incomplete—in the novel they … criticize themselves. (“Dialogic” 332)

Here, of course, Bakhtin is specifically referring to the form of the novel, but many of the qualities he attributes to the novel as a form are equally applicable to fabulist fiction as a genre. For instance, it can be said of both the novel and fabulism that they are “structured not in the distanced image of the absolute past but in the zone of direct contact with inconclusive present-day reality” (Bakhtin, “Dialogic” 330). Most importantly, the aspect of the novel that he describes as epistemological insists on a distance between the object of knowledge and the means (linguistic or other) by which the subject comes to know it, and is crucial to the work of contemporary fabulist fictions.

Thus, as the language of the novel is a system of languages that interanimate each other, the language of fabulist fictions also undergoes “novelization” in that it is renewed by incorporating *heteroglossia*, dialogized and permeated with laughter and irony, and granted an indeterminacy. Through these actions that amount to a constant act of construction, fabulist fictions—like the novel and Borges’s Menard—are “externalized” and “incomplete,” or in the constant act of creation.

Another Borges story, “The Babylon Lottery,” centers on the creation of a slightly different type of mystery. Time does not bury the truth or origin of authority, but blurs and expands it until it becomes a pervasive force. The lottery begins as a typical one, where tickets are purchased and prizes are won, and then morphs into one of compulsory participation where the only rewards are punishments or illogically symbolic, (a bird released from a tower or grain of sand removed from a beach). Finally, its workings become so secret and omniscient that many wonder if it is still run by a real corporation or any tangible entity at all. “There is one conjecture … to the effect that the Company has never existed and never will. A conjecture no less vile argues that it is inconsequential to affirm or deny the reality of the shadowy corporation, because Babylon is nothing but an infinite game of chance” (Borges 71-72). Although this serves as an apt metaphor for the role of chance in life, the vaguely ominous tone suggests it extends further—the fact remains that something has taken monarchical control over all aspects of life for the people in this town. If the lottery is still operated by a company, then the company has grown so large it has become diffuse and thus uncontrollable. If the lottery is now just a metaphor for chance, then it is automatically diffuse. Either way, an entity maintains its power without revealing an organizational logic. Within the story, the injustice of its arbitrariness is felt but impossible to locate.

*You Little Monster* by Benjamin (Brie) Martins

*“Queen Bitch*” by Benjamin (Brie) Martins

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and thus impossible to combat. The tasks of locating and combating, then, cannot be performed by the characters within the story, but must be approached through the construction of the story itself.

One way in which fabulist fiction is often combative is through a strategy Brian McHale finds in postmodernist fiction in general—the use of antilanguage as Bakhtin defines it, which is “the specialized discourse of a deviant social group;” it is inherently dialogical, “conducting an implicit polemic against the standard language and its world view.” McHale defines deviance broadly to include the criminally deviant and the “prestigiously deviant” (168). Many fabulist fictions fall into the latter category not so much because they develop particular slang or jargon, but through their mimicry of elevated language. Whether the courtly language of Angela Carter and other fairy tale revisionists—“He throws our human aspirations to the godlike sadly away, poor fellow; only from a distance would you think The Beast not much different from any other man, although he wears a mask with a man’s face painted most beautifully on it” (53)—or the critical academic tone of Barthelme—“A call tonight from Gregory, my son by my first wife…. Recently he’s been asking questions. Suddenly he’s conscious of himself as being with a history” (99)—the formality of the language brings us into the uncanny realm of these institutions, as well as the institution of narrative. In this sense these authors do what Bakhtin would describe as “carnivalized literature,” which is a “dialectical response to the consolidation of ‘official,’ monological literary genre [and] are in this sense official literature’s dialectical antithesis and parodic double” (McHale 172).

Though McHale uses Bakhtin’s concepts to discuss all postmodern fiction, fabulism is distinguished from other postmodern fiction in that one of its main goals is to challenge the generic and ontological unilateralism of official genres, primarily through the fantastic. Rather than the oversimplified “make it weird” idea of the fantastic, I prefer to use McHale’s understanding of the concept, which defines the fantastic as a genre that involves the “confrontation between two worlds whose basic physical norms are mutually incompatible” (16). Again, I’d like to emphasize that surface elements, though the most easily recognized, are not the true markers of the fabulism. Instead, these elements naturally arise in an almost symptomatic way from the structural elements of subversion that shape the fictions.

Bakhtin’s focus is on the formal heterogeneity of carnivalized literature, which interrupts the text with various genres, such as letters, essays, etc. Fabulism’s primary focus is not on formal heterogeneity but on a paratactic organization of materials (sentences, sections, stories in collections), as well as literary topos. The latter relies on the reader’s familiarity with the staples of traditional genres and the mores of the external world. Further, it relies on our complicity with the implicit hierarchical structure of their ontological organizations. Fabulism does not send us into a world that is not our own, but shows us what ours looks like when the veil is removed from the shadow company. The fabulists’ certainty of uncertainty allows them not only to expose but to re-vision the world, a gesture that inherently contains an element of hope. In this way, fabulism is less mimetic of “the pluralistic and anarchistic ontological landscape of advanced industrial cultures…” as McHale says of postmodernism (38), and more prophetic.

Demystification

Scholes claims that fabulative fictions often work with the raw material of history. They approach collections of historical occurrences and deeds as if they are myth and seek the truth beyond the dimension of fact and documentary (206-07). History, in this case, should be understood broadly to include not only social and political history, but literary history as well. Some writers, like Barthelme, often employ direct reference to both, as in his stories “Eugenie Grandet” and “Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning.” Both stories condense a larger work or life into the short story form, and then revolve the story around the inevitable changes that occur during the process, such as the subtext rising to the text as a result of the compacted time and space. McHale notes Barthelme’s vignettes, or more properly fragments, rely on associative leaps made across a “horizontal axis … across the seams between adjacent segments” (170). But these stories also rely on the associative leaps between the work and real-world knowledge. “Eugenie Grandet” depends upon the reader being familiar—not necessarily with the novel—but with the genre of the novel and the concept of literary realism. Barthelme begins the piece with a *Thesaurus of Book Digests* summary of the book, thereby stripping the novel down to its barest story. (I use “story” here as Forster defines the term, as opposed to plot). By refusing to fill in the psychological complexities of the characters, Barthelme devalues causation within the plot and therefore the emotional struggles of the characters that make up the typical plotline, as well as undercutting the overused “show, don’t tell” dictate of writing. Instead, Barthelme includes snippets from the novel, bits of dialogue that belie the emotional tension of the novel, and literal renderings...
that must be kept at surface level. For instance, the question “Who will obtain Eugenie Grandet's hand?” is followed by a sketch of “Eugenie Grandet’s hand” (Barthelme 237). Basically, Barthelme adheres so strictly to the rules of realism as to undercut them and expose their inherent absurdity, as well as the absurdity of establishing any rules for fiction at all.

Further, if looked at from a post-structuralist point of view, Barthelme is doing the same thing with our concept of signs. Rather than giving us the signifier hand, and allowing us to attach it to its metonymic meaning, i.e. marriage, Barthelme immediately follows the first signifier with a second: the drawing of a hand. Laughter arises from our familiarity with the structure (sign equals signifier plus signified) and the unconscious expectation we have of seeing it fulfilled, only to find it—and ourselves—diverted. The shock of the drawing immediately makes us conscious of our expectations by exposing the arbitrary nature of patterns. This causes a degree of discomfort by exposing the precarious nature of social structures that we rely on in order to understand and act in the world, and therefore again induces laughter. This is a type of verbal grotesque that performs the same work as the visual grotesque of the carnival, through which Barthelme exposes the battle within language between metaphor and metonymy.

This device negates the importance of characters and their actions as driven by the forces of their psychology, by disrupting the form that couches such details. Again, then, the task of this type of fiction is not to convince the reader of the viability of its world, but to challenge the veracity of the reader's world.

It is important to note that fabulist fictions are not simply satirical, as satire usually involves an explicit target and its goal is to promote a specific social or political change. Like most fabulists, Barthelme does not fall into satire, but has a subtler goal: he contends with the disconnections of life, in his case the absurdity and fragmentary nature of it. By refusing to accept the cause-and-effect explications given in novels (especially realist ones), Barthelme exposes the inability of their form to adequately address or reflect the true nature of the world.

Therefore, what McHale claims of postmodern fiction in general is also fitting for fabulist fictions in particular: “Postmodernist fiction turns out to be mimetic after all, but this imitation of reality is accomplished not so much at the level of its content, which is often manifestly un- or anti-realistic, as at the level of form … What postmodernist fiction imitates … is the pluralistic and anarchistic ontological landscape of advanced industrial cultures …” (38). Yet, fabulism’s question is always an epistemological one that focuses on the methods by which we create this “ontological landscape.” In particular, contemporary fabulism relies on the reader's knowledge of generic forms as a prerequisite for understanding their inversion of hierarchy located within literary topoi.

Another of Barthelme's stories, “Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning,” relies not just on the reader's knowledge of generic forms, but also on the reader's knowledge of history, particularly this powerful figure. (He wrote the story before Kennedy’s assassination). Though the instances are entirely fictional, the part based in reality—Kennedy as “K.”—adds a vertical dimension to the story in which “two or more discourse worlds coexist within the same segment” (McHale 170). The effect is simultaneously dehumanizing and humanizing, just as the man is both powerful in the world and vulnerable in the fiction:

Speaking to No One but Waiters, He---
“The dandelion salad with bacon, I think.”
“The rysstafel.”
“The poached duck.”
“The black bean puree.”
“The cod fritters.” (Barthelme 82-83)

The straightforward manner of his order suggests an assertive man, but the assertive title of this section, the “I think,” and the isolation of each bit of dialogue suggest an underlying pathos. K. is not an everyman, but he embodies the space in-between the everyman and the Robert Kennedys. This is a place that exists outside hierarchy, where, as K. describes the French writer Poulet, “[a] pastless futureless man, born anew every instant …” is granted liberty otherwise denied (Barthelme 77).

The “pastless [and] futureless man” speaks directly to Bakhtin’s concept of the dialogic. At first glance it may seem its antithesis, since the dialogic is in continuous dialogue with the past and future. But, as discussed above regarding Borges’s “Pierre Menard,” the concept of novelization also applies to fabulist fictions, which are in the constant act of creating and re-creating themselves. Without a past and future, Poulet, K., Menard, Don Quixote, etc. must perform this work too, and, like the fiction, be “born anew every instant.” Additionally, Barthelme uses antilanguage to such an extent that his stories become those “in which the confrontation between worlds of discourse occurs outside of any motivating context, in a representational void; where the only worlds we are able to reconstruct are the worlds of discourses, and not any fictional
Again, fabulism lends itself to political critique but avoids the abrasiveness often found in satire. The nature of play in these fictions favors the laughter of the comedic grotesque. Therefore, even when politically overt, the works have more faith in the “humanizing value of laughter” than in the “efficacy of satire as a reforming instrument” (Scholes 145). Although, Scholes’ assertion is tenuous when he claims that “[f]abulative satire is less certain ethically but more certain esthetically than traditional satire,” or that fabulist stories “reject all ethical absolutes” (145). The humanizing impulse is an absolute and the gesture towards it is made throughout all these fictions. Their critique is simply directed at a more abstracted level of reality than traditional satire. It is not the letter of the law or the organization of the political and social systems that they reference, but the spirit behind them.

Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony” does just this. To begin with, while it seems ripe for an allegorical interpretation, giving it such an interpretation limits the story to a single meaning and ignores vital elements, such as its humor. Trying to impose a moral on the story is just as ridiculous as the script that is stitched into prisoners’ bodies by an elaborate torture and execution device. In order for the prisoner to “learn [the lesson] on his body” (Kafka 145) and also be killed by the machine, the stitched text must contain so many repetitions and flourishes that it becomes so intricate as to be illegible and so complicated as to cause the machine to break down. To embrace a single idea to the exclusion of all others is death to the prisoner and to the story, both of which Kafka refuses. Ultimately, with the final destruction of the machine and its last true believer, the Officer, the story liberates the idea of justice from the legal and penal system, and therefore returns it to the realm of individual responsibility. Although nothing is this simple and Kafka moves to an even further level of abstraction, Kafka (and the Traveler) condemn the machine and the Officer as the mechanisms that are physical manifestations of the flawed system and spirit of the law, but also laud the sentiment that underlies the Officer’s profound belief. The Traveler ends by saying to the Officer, “… your sincere conviction has touched me, even though it cannot influence my judgment” (Kafka 160).

In his story “In the Penal Colony,” Kafka directly questions the moral repercussions of someone who refuses to do this type of associative work. The story expresses the anxieties created by the removal of such institutions and the subsequent emphasis on individual responsibility. A “Country Doctor” depicts a man who refuses to act when faced with absurdity, and therefore cannot protect himself, his maid, or his patient. When he arrives at the patient’s house, the family undresses him and puts him in bed with the sick boy while a choir sings outside. There is no explanation as to why this would be a medical treatment; not just associative, but curative leaps, are simply expected to be made from doctor to patient. But association outside of a free consciousness—the doctor is only a tool to be manipulated by the horse groom, horses, and the patient’s family—cannot make the necessary connections. The boy tells the doctor, much in the manner of Barthelme’s schoolchildren, “I have very little confidence in you. …” to which the doctor replies, “Believe me, it is not too easy for me either.” He eventually flees back to his home, but already
knowing he will be too late to save his maid from the violent and aggressive groom because “A false alarm on the night bell, once answered—it can never be made good, not ever” (Kafka 224, 225).

This gesture towards—but ultimate denial of—allegory is also found in Patricia Eakins’s collection The Hungry Girls. In her story “Snakeskins,” a merchant finds a bit of skin in his teeth and becomes increasing paranoid of the “djitsis.” Eventually, he banishes his wife, fearing she is contaminated with them. She dies a homeless beggar, but her body is cleaned in a “Rapturous Gleaming” by the snakes, which is a type of blessing and purification of the soul. Though she uses the formula of the fable and there are clear undertones of feminism, Eakins refuses to attach a succinct moral to the story; instead, she uses the grotesque to carry the narrative beyond the fact of established genres. Eakins’s characters have “the grotesque body … a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body” (Bakhtin, Rabelais 317); and in this way they are similar to Barthelme’s “pastless and futureless man.”

Grace Paley also has an undercurrent of feminist critique in her work and uses the direct style of fable and fairy tales (as does Barthelme and Eakins) to bring all emotion to the surface. In “Faith in the Afternoon,” she describes Faith’s physical and emotional states simultaneously, suggesting they are not just related, but the same: “Faith has only visited her parents once since she began to understand that because of Ricardo she would have to be unhappy for a while. Faith really is an American and she was raised up to everyone else to the true assumption of happiness” (Paley 33). Further, the description is not understatement, so much as characteristic of the “banality” McHale notices in fabulist fictions, in which the characters, narrators, and tone are “impossibly blasé in the face of miraculous violations of natural law” (76). Although less miraculous than other fabulist fictions, the natural law here that Paley and Faith violate is that of cause-and-effect. How exactly is Ricardo related to her unhappiness, and why does that prevent her from visiting her parents? Explanations are difficult because Paley’s sentences avoid exact moments in time and space for as long as possible. Although her setting is a place most readers will be familiar with (New York City), the connections between her sentences rely on associative leaps and thus form a sense of isolation between each phrase so that even (or especially) the real feels strange and alienating. But this also has a liberating force. Paley herself expresses this when, in “A Conversation with My Father,” the narrator, who is also a writer, says she will not finish her story, “[n]ot for literary reasons, but because it takes all hope away. Everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life” (162).

Angela Carter, Sarah Shun-lien Bynum, and Kelly Link also play with notions of the fairy tale genre. The strange elevation, death, and necrophilic violation of the girl in Carter’s “The Snow Child”—which is, as in Eakins and Paley, propagated by an inexplicable or irrational causation—undermines the false sense of security we feel in the familiar narrative genre. The grotesque inversion and then reversion of the hierarchy in the absence of didacticism emphasizes the aesthetic concerns of “fabulat satire,” but the ethical claim is present as well, located in the humanity of the girl. Her life in the story is summed up in one sentence: “So the girl picks a rose; pricks her finger on the thorn; bleeds; screams; falls” (Carter 193). As in Barthelme, the simplicity and directness invokes pathos. Although we know the chronology of events, Carter deliberately avoids a plot that would explain their relation. We are left then to associate suffering and violation with the next available context: the fairy tale genre.

The opera singer/castrato in Bynum’s Madeleine is Sleeping offers as much analysis when he says, “My timbre is flawless, yes. But it is the cruelty of my condition that will afford them such unbearable pleasures” (29). Just as the forms of these fictions can be highly stylized, it is their grotesqueries that jar the ontological order we are familiar with. This allows the fictions to, as Scholes explains in his summary of Borges’s essays, “reach beyond reality to truth, beyond the immediate and contemporary to those aspects of the real which will endure and recur” (15). This constant gesturing towards the unattainable reality allows these fictions their aspect of hope.

Returning to the notion of “carnivalized literature,” Bakhtin notes how the typical plot line is picaresque. Fabulists often use a model of the picaro in their short stories. From Paley’s Faith, who bounces between jobs, lovers, and conversations with neighbors in her borough; to Calvino’s Baron in the trees; to Link’s narrator in “The Girl Detective,” whose quest for the girl detective is diverted into an aimless odyssey; and even to Barthelme’s wandering knights of the Round Table who outlive their use-
fulness—these *picaros* seek not just economic or social advancement, but the answer to larger questions. This philosophical pursuit brings them to the limits of their world and invites them to make the associative leap to the one beyond. They play out the cognitive journey of Borges’s character in “The Circular Ruins,” in which “in the dream of the man that dreamed, the dreamed one awoke” (61).

This gesture made at the edge of the stable world, a world solidified through repetition within systematic and hierarchical arrangements, of reaching across to what may be beyond—a gesture of both hope and exasperation—occupies that space in-between the points leapt from and to. Fabulism both creates and fills this space. This may explain the constantly recurring image of climbing found in many of these fictions. In Borges’s story, the character had to climb to the top of the ruins in order to have his dream and to be dreamed. In “The Girl Detective,” Link uses a tree as the medium through which narrator and girl detective become similarly confused:

Someone once suggested that I was the girl detective … I am doing my best to answer these very questions. I am detecting the girl detective. I sit in a tree across the street from her window … The girl detective goes to bed hungry, but she eats our dreams while we are asleep. She has eaten my dreams. She has eaten your dreams … The girl detective is getting fat on other people’s dreams. (243)

Paley’s “Faith in a Tree” also places a character in a tree in order to express the inadequacy of our ways of understanding the world, specifically the language and dialogues Faith currently has access to. Sitting in a tree in Central Park, she thinks, “My vocabulary is adequate for writing notes and keeping journals but absolutely useless for an active moral life. If I really knew this language, there would surely be in my head … that irreducible verb designed to tell a person like me what to do next” (Paley 85). She expresses her frustration with worldly absolutes, since the verb she’s looking for is not located within institutional dialogues. But quests like Faith’s only fail if they cease. In Calvino’s *The Baron in the Trees*, Biagio laments the loss of his brother in the trees by speaking of the village of his youth: “Ombrosa no longer exists. Looking at the empty sky, I ask myself if it ever did really exist” (217). The world of possibility may disappear when one stops gesturing towards it.

**Conclusion**

Kafka puts it simply in his very short piece “The Trees,” quoted here in its entirety: “For we are like the tree trunks in the snow. In appearance they lie sleekly and a little push should be enough to set them rolling. No, it can’t be done, for they are firmly wedded to the ground. But see, even that is only appearance” (382). Like the trees, our allegiance to artificial constructions is only arbitrary as long as we recognize it as such.

Fabulist fictions allow us to do just that by pulling away the veil of mystery. Like these characters in the trees and the trees themselves, they occupy the space in-between the letter and the spirit. Above, but rooted in, the mundane discourse, they represent an escape from, or rather an invitation to, the heteroglossia world of alternative discourses. They acknowledge the disjuncture but seek to bridge the gap both physically (not ground, not air) and metaphorically.

Although the fantastic is the most easily recognizable aspect of most contemporary fabulist fictions, it should be seen as nothing more than a natural manifestation of the goal of this type of fiction—to directly challenge the embedded strictures of our social, political, and literary worlds. It primarily does this by applying the grotesque to its characters and literary form, relying on the reader’s expectations in order to deny them that fulfillment and reveal the arbitrariness of the structures that shape that desire. The question posed by fabulist fictions is always an epistemological one which focuses not on the structures themselves, but on the methods used to erect and validate them. Since these methods are reified by time, fabulist fiction too must be in a constant act of creating and contextualizing in order to combat them.

“**The world of possibility may disappear when one stops gesturing towards it.**”

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Rado | 39

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Rado | 40
I had the unique opportunity to travel to New York City and spend two days with Shakina Nayfack, founding artistic director of Musical Theatre Factory, transgender musical artist, human rights activist, and actress on Hulu's Difficult People. Shakina (pronounced Sha-KEEN-ah) is, to say the least, awe-inspiring. She blew me away from the minute I arrived in New York, when I met her at a glamorous ceremony where she would receive the TRU Humanitarian Award. TRU, Theater Resources Unlimited, is a nonprofit organization that helps self-producing artists and theater professionals produce their work, and this award was given to Shakina for her efforts in ensuring transgender representation in American theater and for empowering other writers to tell their stories through performance. There were numerous performances in tribute to the work Shakina has been doing the last several years. Just look at the lengthy and growing list of Shakina’s accomplishments: she has a Bachelor’s degree of Community Studies and Theater Arts, a Master’s degree of Fine Arts in Experimental Choreography, and a PhD in Critical Dance Studies; she has written and published a book about her experience and research on Butoh dance in Mexico; she is the first transgender woman to win the Lily Award; she is a writer and actress on a popular mainstream television show; she wrote and produced several one-woman rock musicals; and she founded a nonprofit for theater professionals. As Shakina accepted her award that night, she humbly thanked all the people who helped her get to where she is today, and said, “I wish what I do wasn’t unique, I wish it wasn’t exemplary. And I wish that people didn’t call me brave, as though being your true self had to be a daring act.”

1 Shakina said this in her acceptance speech for the TRU Humanitarian award on November 6, 2016 in New York, New York.
Shakina is an artist and an activist; everything she does stems from these two ideals. As an artist, she is a writer, actor, director, and producer. As an activist, she is a political and community organizer, who chooses to live her life in a way that educates and empowers other people; she embodies a social change practice in a very intimate and personal way. One thing that embraces both art and activism is her creation of the Musical Theatre Factory, a safe space driven by and for community as a platform for sharing and creating new musical theatre work. About her work at MTF and elsewhere, Shakina says, “If you can engage in creative practice that also makes you a better person, then you are doing really good work.”2 She stars as Lola, a hilarious, bitchy, 9/11-conspiracy-theory-obsessed, transgender bartender, on Hulu’s Difficult People, where she is also a consulting writer helping to develop the character. This has been a ground-breaking role for her and for television because, up to this point, there has never been a comedic trans character written for TV, only tragic ones meant to move the plot along by soliciting empathy from audiences. Living at the intersection of art and activism can also be seen in her one-woman show Manifest Pussy, which she took on the road to tour North Carolina protesting House Bill 2.

“I just think if we can all continue to fulfill our own quest of self-actualizing, but at the same time see how we can contribute to the self-actualization of other people who have less privilege, who have less access, who have less protection, then we can make the world a better place.”

—Shakina Nayfack

Before I met with Shakina in New York, I was able to attend one of those shows in North Carolina. Her performance was like a masterpiece straight from Broadway, and she took her audiences on an emotional roller coaster of both downright hilarity and incredible sorrow. What struck me most was the vulnerability she demonstrated on stage—this willingness, and even eagerness, to share her most intimate secrets with the world—in order to bring about positive change and increased awareness of critical social issues. Shakina brought the audience through her story of growing up as a boy in a family who wanted to stifle her desires, her years trying to survive Catholic high school, being institutionalized, and her journey of transitioning to become a woman. I witnessed her powerful reverberating music echoing off the walls in the dimly lit bar and saw her anguish on stage as she sang out her suffering and, ultimately, her joy. Manifest Pussy is nothing short of a wild, intense ride. You can see the show yourself, updated and brand new for 2017, when Shakina brings it to Boston, MA, in June. Check for tour updates on her website.

2 Nayfack, Shakina. Personal Interview. 6-8 Nov. 2016. All quotes and paraphrases are from a personal interview with Shakina Nayfack unless otherwise noted.
If you are struggling with gender or sexual identity, bullying, or suicide, there is help, and there is hope. Please visit the GLBT Hotline and the Suicide Prevention Lifeline for resources and support.

Please view this video message from Shakina, who has also struggled with these same issues, by clicking the image of her below.
If you are at the right place at the right time and look up, you might catch sight of the alpine swift undergoing its outlandish journey from breeding grounds in New Zealand to wintering grounds in Western Africa. They are made for such flight: a squat streamlined head caps a tiny brown-and-white rocket-like torso that then tapers into a barb of tail feathers; wings are curved so far back they resemble self-willed boomerangs. The alpine swift spends over two hundred consecutive days a year in the air during its migration and currently holds the record for the longest time spent in continuous flight. Outside of breeding season, alpine swifts feed, drink, and sleep while “on the wing,” although the details of how (other than catching insects in the air) still need to be documented (Stromberg). Also impressive is the bar-tailed godwit that holds the record for the longest non-stop migration flight: 7,145 miles from Alaska to New Zealand in nine days, never stopping for food, water, or rest. When they do finally land, they scamper about on twig legs and their long, thin, bi-colored beaks probe for morsels of food in mudflats and marshes. During a 2007 study of these godwits, one of the birds had flown “6,340 miles … directly to a wetland on the North Korean-Chinese border” and fed and rested before continuing another 3,000 miles to Alaska. During their “long hauls,” these birds “sleep” by shutting down one side of the brain at a time, and burning up the huge store of fat piled on before the flight so as not to starve. The number of birds successfully migrating to New Zealand in the mid-1990s was around 155,000, but had dwindled down to 70,000 during the more recent study. Researchers suspect the widespread development along the Yellow Sea neighboring China and North and South Korea has led to deprivation of food sources that have all but disappeared because of the drained wetlands (Hansford).

One of the most infamous developments along the Yellow Sea that neither bird nor human can fail to miss is the Saemangeum seawall, which opened to the South Korean public in 2010. This controversial structure separates the sea from the former Saemangeum estuary and currently holds the record for the largest man-made dyke, at 21 miles out from the southwest coast of the Korean peninsula (“Saemangeum Seawall”). A seawall—made from such materials as reinforced concrete, steel, vinyl, aluminum, and fiberglass composite—is intended to, among other things, shelter areas of human habitation, conservation, and leisure activities from tides and waves (“Seawall”). On the other hand, this static barricade, alien and obstructive to the environment, inevitably hinders the natural exchange of sediment occurring between the land and sea—which then leads to such effects as scarcity of food for the migrating godwits (“Seawall”). Although impressive in appearance, the seawall made to protect the Fukushima Dai-chi nuclear power plant in Japan (at 10 meters high) was 3 meters too short against the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami that overwhelmed the wall and caused the largest nuclear disaster since Chernobyl (Lipscy et al. 6083; Barclay; “Fukushima Accident”). I wonder if any bar-tailed godwits witnessed this during their thousands-mile flight, watching as a God-sized hand of water swept through with unheralded speed and spread—observing the laughable futility of the rock-and-metal barrier in the face of such force—as the wind washed across the surface of their own bodies.

Death and havoc aside, even these most endurant of birds must touch earth at some point to feed, rest, and breed. Anything of flesh and blood must land in order to rouse fully awake, seek sustenance, and go through the motions of life. The problems appear once humans try to extend these motions, in the name of development—of progress—which inherently impedes the movement of something else. The godwits will tell ya: Enterprise is always at the cost of life.

The 1939 document titled “The Romanization of the Korean language, based upon its phonetic structure,” by G.M. McCune and E.O. Reischauer, conveys a tone of great urgency. Linguistically speaking, too much diversity was unraveling comprehension, as the first page states: “The lack of a generally accepted system of Romanization has led to great diversity and many inconsistencies in the Romanization employed by occidental scholars writing about Korea … The amazing differences in the Romanization of the same name or word by different scholars, and sometimes by the same man, can only lead to confusion and error” (McCune and Reischauer 1).

Wherever we go, there seems to be only one business at hand—that of finding workable compromises between the sublimity of our ideas and the absurdity of the fact of us.

—Annie Dillard, Teaching a Stone to Talk
During this study, a brutal noose had been wrapped around the rabbit's neck for almost three decades. Hildi Kang categorizes the Japanese colonial rule of Korea into three periods: subjugation (1910-19), cultural accommodation (1920-31) and assimilation (1931-45). Naturally, McCune and Reischauer cite Mr. Ogura, a Japanese authority, in their review of Romanization systems of the Korean language. Mr. Ogura identifies “no less than twenty-seven systems employed in Romanizing Korean,” which includes French, German, Japanese, and Chinese systems (McCune and Reischauer 2). However, there was not one effective, widely accepted, standardized English-based Romanization system—nothing that would run right through the heart and onto the tongue to please academia (McCune and Reischauer 2, 5). Although McCune and Reischauer do acknowledge that variations have caused little difficulty to scholars in Korea—that is, native Korean speakers—for outsiders’ convenience and consistency, their ambitions were to fashion a taxonomy and nomenclature for general “scholarly” and “non-scholarly” use (McCune and Reischauer 7). The holy mantle of responsibility had fallen from the shoulders of earlier pale and thin-lipped missionaries onto their flush, erudite successors (McCune and Reischauer 1, 7).

I do not envy the task they were up against. The further one reads McCune and Reischauer’s treatise, the more one realizes the laboriousness and near implausibility of bridging two languages of such disparate origins. As implausible as birds waking up one morning and greeting you with a bright Hello! One of their goals was to remove as many diacritical marks as possible—those eye-ache-inducing accents, breves, and umlauts that pebbled the French and German-based systems (McCune and Reischauer 7). McCune and Reischauer also identify twenty-one distinct vowel letters in Korean versus the five in the Latin alphabet (10). To bridge such a gap required a Herculean effort, including developing—fabricating?—categories to help discern and organize sounds. They expand upon the types of “irregularities” in vowel pronunciation and broadly classify them, finely enough, into “disintegration” and “assimilation.” Disintegration is when original vowel sounds in the Korean language lose their phonetic identity. The particular sound effectively disappears with the rise of alternative vowel sounds that offer similarity and greater euphonic ease. Assimilation is when certain vowels influence the pronunciation of other vowels that precede or follow within the word. McCune and Reischauer tried to reconcile such irregularities, but their Romanization system could not accommodate all in-between sounds—sounds not precisely vocalized and denoted in the English language, and continually refracting based upon their neighbors. Similar to vowel sounds, in order to adequately Romanize Korean consonants, McCune and Reischauer found it necessary to consider the consonant letter’s position in the word in relation to the other letters and not merely as individual letters (20-24). Korean irregularities presented lingual head-scratchers, indeed. At the very least, they do caution that their system meant “a compromise between scientific accuracy and practical simplicity” and admit to “the inadequacies of the Latin alphabet and the complexities of the phonetic structure of Korean” (McCune and Reischauer 7).

A language on paper may seem cast in concrete, but the dynamism of language—with that eternal duality of speech and script—means pronunciation, and thus the written word, begets a life of its own. McCune and Reischauer argue that the driving force behind the evolution of the Korean language, or Hangeul, was euphony. This concept, of course, is not unique to Hangeul—it is a universal human condition. Euphony is defined as “agreeableness of sound; pleasing effect to the ear, especially a pleasant sounding or harmonious combination or succession of words.” It’s a feeling of comfort so effortless that you can’t imagine the words ordered or combined in a better way; the shoe fits just so. As H.L. Mencken puts it in his study The American Language, the same can be said of the “loose and lively English spoken by the average American in his daily traffic.” Imagine this phenomenon through the myriad of polished stones, fossils and shells offered up to the shores. These once rough and raw grains are ceaselessly handled by the waves until they lay in your hand, smooth as marble, and even then your hands will rub and toss and otherwise fondle these materials until they change shape once more. When Gwendolyn Brooks writes, “Though why should I whine / Whine that the crime was other than mine?” or when Li-Young Lee writes, “While the long grain is softening / in the water, gurgling / over a low stove flame;” listen to how these sounds are handled, and how they change shape through the endless dynamic of language.

“Korean irregularities presented lingual head-scratchers, indeed.”

**“The further one reads ... the more one realizes the laboriousness and near implausibility of bridging two languages of such disparate origins.”**
Governor-General Mirami Jiro ruled Korea from 1936 to 1942, during the time of "assimilation." Instead of genocide in the conventional sense, Jiro took a clever approach so as to preserve Koreans as valuable military, farm, and factory laborers. He initiated a crusade to annihilate identity by systematically removing the native language from every ear, tongue, and eye.

One of these specimens was Jong Tae-ik, who was born in 1911 in Kangwon Province. He recounted when, in the late 1930s, a group of Japanese investigators "went around inspecting the cleanliness of each house. People had to have their houses very, very clean" (Kang 103). As head of the local neighborhood cell he was required to tag along. Not only did they inspect the home, but they also inspected the thatched roofs of the animal sheds. Of course, when crops fared poorly farmers couldn't afford to replace the straw in their roofs. At one house, the inspector saw that the thatch had rotted through. When he poked at it with his long, leather prod, it all came crashing down. All the bugs and worms living off the rotted straw rained onto the floor with the collapsed roof. Tae-ik then says, "The inspector screamed at the owner of the house and made him, forced him, to eat the worms!" (Kang 104).

Picture it: a uniformed, mustachioed man; he presses the head of a kneeling man with a rod stained with the blood of many other ethnic inferiors. The farmer is forced to eye the wriggling mass. He has never seen anything so slimy, and so very alive. Finally, amidst the flat silence and dust-filled air, the slow, resolute eating begins. The farmer becomes one of the many dull-eyed birds that flap around and peck at the soil. The group disperses, but the farmer remains there, touching his belly and gazing beyond the fields into the mountains and fog. All he hears is the chirping of birds. Such colonialist tactics may seem digestible, if not pleasant. Aren't they to be grateful it wasn't outright genocide? It was just men's braids chopped off in the town square; random beatings, kidnappings, imprisonment and torture; women coerced into sexual slavery during times of war; a life of servitude and terror because you learn—to your furry rabbit core—that you were born an error. And so you smile, go to school, eat your rations, sweat in the fields or factory or battlefield for those who are your superior by blood.

In defense of the new system, Kim Myong-Sik, the Director of the Korean Overseas Information Agency, observes that "the M-R system failed to Romanize the phonetic value of the Korean language as spoken by Koreans." He emphasizes that it is "not just a code for the native English speakers but a communication tool among Korean society-wide: documents, brands, signs, literature, websites, research, on and on and on" (Kim). Birds were all a-twitter, and the shores were all a-battered.

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per, which then requires you, the reader, to shape your lips and tongue to sound this *something* out to the best of your abilities, for both emic and etic agendas. It must make itself heard, it must touch earth, even if the imitation is barely a silhouette of the original. We march ever forward, with whatever tools we can forge.

*Progress* is both a luminous and ominous word. Two western outsiders convert an entire language while native tongues are pressed firmly down and back by soft, white-gloved hands. A whole flag and country are undone. A most steadfast bird fails to reach its final destination in order to fulfill the most fundamental of biological imperatives.

Lucky for us, progress is everlasting. Even today, over one hundred years after the onset of Japan’s colonization of Korea, progress impels rocky negotiations about self-hood. Enter one site at which definitions of self are hotly contested: the bathroom stall.

As a first-year college student, I remember entering the one bathroom facility in my dorm hall and almost running into Andy, a first-year boy living a couple of doors down from me. When I glanced at the bathroom door, it simply read: Restroom. I quickly realized that this was what the school had meant on their form when it asked whether or not I preferred a gender-neutral environment. I am cisgendered, but I had checked the box off because it sounded better than a gender *biased* environment.

So, Andy, I, and all the other boys, girls and trans students on the floor used the same facility. Talk about landing onto unknown territory.

This occurred during the early 2000s, when I was a bird from a very different land: one founded on the bleeding cross and the pious Confucian Analects; a land where gender roles were rod-straight and sexuality was not only sinful, but the evilest of Occidental attributes. If there is ever a place below the usual dermis where blisters form, ooze, bleed, film over, chafe, and re-emerge, it is on the heart of a girl striving yet failing to be a good daughter, because she cannot accept the reality as it is. She cannot abide by the laws of femininity. Something in her gut refuses to kowtow. She prays for absolution; fakes docility and chastity; and represses the thumping of her innards, that kernel of budding agency. She finally finds refuge, however inadequate, in that typical adolescent miasma of guilt and self-hatred, colored, in my case, by my second-generation immigrant upbringing.

In this guise, I entered the university and the gender-less and -free bathroom, where—elbow to elbow with other boys, girls, and trans kids—I pissed, shit, showered, brushed my teeth, and washed my face. At first, I darted in and out, quietly as falling snow, waiting until no one was around. Although in an abstract sense the practice was good and right to me, the physiological novelty of it was still an adjustment after using the ladies’ room for the past eighteen years. It first felt as though the same mustachioed, uniformed agent was standing over and forcing me to complete my daily ablutions, whether or not I became nervous seeing boys’ feet in the adjacent stall. However, like waking up slowly from a dream, I tread into a reality of comfort over and past the gender categories that had bound and shaped me all my life. The boy didn’t matter—my body didn’t matter—in an inclusive sense. As Bruce Lee advised, I became like water. You adapted till it was expected; what was once distinctive and marked, identifiable and definable, was no longer. This level of comfort is not unlike the euphonic evolution of the Hangeul language: our collective assimilation upon the same mass of cold, green tiles was agreeable and harmonious, and managed to respect—and equalize—all differences.

My maternal grandmother grew up during the altogether different type of “assimilation” under Japanese colonial rule, where Korean boys and girls were seen as evolutionary missteps. Her eyes remain orbs of mica, bright and dark as she looks beyond me, past the door and over the hills into the faces of all the police and soldiers who came from the land of the rising sun. The world taught her that she was in need of transformation, to the right identity.

Decades later and thousands of miles away, I am subjected to a different type of indoctrination (thankfully not under threat of death): to be a “good girl,” prim and shut, and chase beauty to its torturous end; my gender identity mocked for its weakness, vanity, idiocy, and general incapacity. By age thirteen, my heart was a wizened walnut, bone-hard and dry from rancor at both myself and everyone else. So I get her
hatred, in a way. One route out of this inner- or outer-facing revulsion is to cry into the 
darkness and refuse to conform, come hell or high water—come death. Another way 
out is to keep your head down, swallow the pill, and wait out the storm. Sometimes it 
doesn’t matter; someone gets punished regardless of which way was decided, like the 
farmer facing his wriggling meal, or like Shelly Tracy Tom, a Canadian transgender 
sex worker who was strangled in 2003 (the same year I matriculated). Her body was 
found wrapped in a hotel mattress cover and stuffed into a shopping cart. The killer 
pled guilty to manslaughter and was sentenced to nine years. Don't mistake this death 
as a horrific abnormality—it’s one of many, many commonplace examples among the 
immeasurable swathe of bodies glistening with blood. A field of Koreans here, a field of 
transgender sex workers there.

When I was on break from college, I would be increasingly caught off-guard by 
the male and female bathroom signs—something I never gave a second thought to be-
fore. However, now having to choose which door to open was irrefutably grating. I was 
coming to understand, in a political light, the depth and extent of how being, being 
seen, and self-perceiving bound me in an iterative sense: I did know the eyes already, as 
Eliot writes,

…known them all—
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,

will I cry out with cold, glittering eyes? Will I fly up to the limits of the atmosphere 
and never return? Will I adjust to the wall? I was female because I was X, I was X be-
cause I was female—the rabbit gnawing its own tail, coming full circle. The regime 
back then may have tried to remove my grandmother's Korean “essence,” but today’s 
regime slyly has me interrogate myself. To be female is to be everything, nothing, and 
ever enough. Language did not unfetter, no—it breathed down my back and gath-
ered dank moisture in my physical crevices. Such build-up requires years and years of 
investigation and self-discovery, and this work does not, ever, end. Even now, far past 
my college years, I scrabble through the new frontiers of marriage and possible mother-
hood. I negotiate, take time-outs, resist, and re-construct. Although I am more self-as-
sured, the field remains littered with pests, and choices of being that remain bristling 
and limiting.

Annie Dillard writes, “The mind—the culture—has two little tools, grammar and 
lexicon: a decorated sand bucket and a matching shovel. With these we bluster about 
the continents and do all the world’s work. With these we try to save our very lives.” 
Whether questioning or not, queer or straight, cisgender or transgender, in transition, 
dysphoria or alignment, sharing the same can was embracing and intimate in a way 
language wasn’t; it helped dismantle divisive categories and hierarchies that we humans 
seem so inclined to establish. Extending and limbering identities—whether physically, 
performatively, or linguistically—have come to life only at the highest of costs, which 
aren’t anything new when you look at those crazy godwits boomeranging thousands of 
miles from one tiny, remote piece of land to another for the sake of procreation.

The variations in selfhood and language that now flourish in the open are both a 
new and old testament. To demand the same recognition of self that my grandma once 
struggled through is to fight against the same seawalls, the same thousand-mile distanc-
es, the same linguistic “irregularities,” whether by degree or type. At times individuals 
need to build a bridge out of materials not yet in existence. No small task, as McCune 
and Reischauer will tell you; but it never has been, as the farmer will tell you—as Shelly 
Tracy Tom, my grandma, and untold others will tell you. As those godwits would tell 
you, if they could speak. They have always known the price, and will continue to per-
sist while “on the wing,” as they have done so long before us and will do so long after 
we are gone.
Plaster  
Adam Iannucci McClelland

You say something’s missing. When I come close you turn chin to shoulder. You call your friends and I overhear non mi piace.

On August 24th, 79 AD, Mount Vesuvius erupts. The city of Herculaneum is closer to the eruption than Pompeii and receives more devastating effects.

Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel is a fresco. An art form in which paint is applied to a thin layer of plaster while the plaster is still wet.

You use the cliché not on the same page in case I didn’t understand.

The people of Herculaneum see a pillar of gray smoke. Whitened ash faintly falls over the living, collects in the cracks of stone streets.

But you put your eyeliner on like nothing happened. I watch this routine. These mechanical movements create the only spaces in which we talk. You pull the pencil from your eye and blink in the mirror.

When it dries, the plaster holds paint for centuries. Vibrant. Easy to work with for restoration, if need be.

We go to a dimly lit restaurant where I use my menu as a reason for silence. Silverware and plates tinkling. I wait for you to be sad.

In the end, the sky darkens hours before night, the people in Herculaneum begin to flee.

While plaster begins as a liquid, the gypsum contained within dehydrates, forms a solid. Poured into a hollow or empty space, it hardens to take shape.

You look in my eyes and then at your empty wine glass. Delicately circling it on the table, you say you were bored at work today. I ask if you remember when we came here, and moved plates to hold hands.

At one in the morning, gas and rock reaching temperatures over 1500 degrees speed over 400 mph down Vesuvius’s slopes. This is only the first surge, although only one is needed.

You say nothing back.
A husband struggles to hold up his wife. A merchant, elbows to dirt, tries to rise with one final push against the earth. Two children hold hands, as if their union could interrupt death's pageant.

You raise the glass of wine to your lips. I notice a tan-line on your ring finger.

Years later, an archeologist named Giuseppe Fiorelli will pour plaster into the spaces the bodies left, proving there was something there.
she understands which way is north
which side of the road to cycle on
which light says go
(it should be red, right?
red is activity
green is restfulness)
she remembers to include her phone number
in the email
so they can ring
*
when she plants for spring
he wants to prepare new ground
get the spuds in
when she helps set up a Permablitz group
he wants to shovel the wheelbarrow full
mix mud
when she asks about friends
he wants to send out invitations
when she learns pottery
he wants to try the wheel
when she prepares for the end
he wants to be ready
The Lactation of Saint Bernard in Art and Literature: “Show Thyself a Mother” | Courtney A. Harler

Widely known for his tender devotion to the Virgin Mary as intercessor or *Mediatrix*, the French Cistercian abbot Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153 CE) became the subject of a body of medieval legends collectively called the Lactation of Saint Bernard. In most versions of the legend, Bernard is visited by Mary in a dream or vision; she places her milk or breast in his mouth to give him spiritual wisdom and sustenance. Other versions depict Bernard praying at the feet of a statue of the *Virgo lactans*, Mary nursing Jesus, and witnessing the statue come to life. Mary then expresses a triple stream of breast milk (to represent the Trinity) into Bernard's eye to cure him of a chronic eye infection or discomfort (see figs. 1 and 2). These lactation legends spread by word of mouth in medieval times and even continue to circulate on the internet today. However, the exact source of these legends is difficult to discern: some scholars argue that the legends first appeared in the iconography of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries—in exactly 119 drawings, engravings, stained glass, paintings, sculpture, embroidery, metalwork, and wall murals—as opposed to text. Yet, other scholars are intent on tracing the earliest literary origins of the lactation legends, even if considered in retrospect to other texts.

Female lactation was considered a normal and necessary part of medieval life and, as such, became a common motif in medieval art and literature. In his 2007 book *Medieval Images of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux*, James France writes that “suckling, the most basic and intimate of all physical acts, was widely represented in art” and that such images would not have shocked the average medieval person, or even the average medieval monk (205-06). Though rather suggestive to modern readers, the image of a grown man nursing would have been viewed in spiritual terms, not in sexualized terms as it might in present day. The act of breastfeeding was considered a symbol of motherhood, and the phrase “*Monstra te esse matrem*,” or “Show thyself a mother,” eventually “became the standard inscription on Lactation images” in later artistic depictions (France 218). According to Michael Martin on the online site *Thesaurus Precum Latinarum*, the phrase “*Monstra te esse matrem*” is derived from the popular Marian hymn “*Ave Maris Stella*,” or “Hail Thou Star of the Ocean.” Hugh Henry from the online *Catholic Encyclopedia* agrees with Martin in that the authorship of the hymn is often incorrectly attributed to Saint Bernard himself, but this persistent mistaken attribution only further associates Saint Bernard, the Virgin Mary, and the Miracle of Lactation—known in Latin as the *Lactatio*—in popular medieval legend.

In medieval culture, the act of breastfeeding symbolized the infinite care and compassion of motherhood, and sexual connotations of the breast were altogether dismissed in such a setting. In her 2010 unpublished dissertation “The Rooster’s Egg: Maternal Metaphors and Medieval Men,” Amanda Jane Lepp succinctly explains the medieval view of lactation:
In the Middle Ages, the breast was almost always presented as a maternal symbol rather than a sexualized one. It was because of its positive maternal associations that it derived popularity as a religious symbol. In medieval Christian literature, breasts are depicted as symbols of nurture, and compassion. In religious writing as well as moral texts, the nursing woman’s act of feeding an infant with food taken from her own flesh was portrayed as a compassionate act resulting from powerful feelings of love and mercy towards a weak and helpless infant for whom milk is essential for life. Metaphors of breastfeeding were also influenced by the medical understanding which held that the lactation period was an intermediary stage for a child between its foetal stage and when it was perfectly formed. Milk as a symbol was often associated with the ability to shape, form, and perfect while nourishing something small and imperfect. The scientific belief which held that breast milk was purified blood is also reflected in representations of milk’s whiteness as a symbol of purity.

Lepp’s explanation allows the modern-day reader and viewer to reframe the lactation legends. Instead of reacting with “embarrassed sniggering tinged with evident disgust” (France 205), we can duly consider the cultural and spiritual implications of the image. This consideration begins with the very first image (out of an impressive total of 119 similar medieval images) of the Lactation of Saint Bernard, as discussed by France.

France is one scholar who maintains that the legends were first depicted in thirteenth-century iconography. He writes, “Even though researchers may discern a retrospective source for the Lactatio in works by and about Bernard, the earliest known versions of the Lactatio are to be found, not in literary, but in pictorial form” (209). The earliest image of this miracle involving Bernard dates from 1290 CE and was found in the church of the Templars in Palma, Mallorca, painted by an artist known simply as the Palma Master to France, but more formally as the Master of the Conquest of Mallorca. In this retable, the Lactation scene is but one frame in a series of grouped frames portraying the life of Bernard (see fig. 3). France provides a thoughtful description of the Lactation frame in reference to the others:

The standing Virgin holds a cross-nimbed Child on her right arm. She presses her bared breast with her left hand and a squirt of milk falls in a curved line into the mouth of the kneeling Bernard, whose head is raised and his hands clasped in prayer. Two nimbed angels hold the same type of candles as are featured in the central picture [of the retable], and a third angel stands by. Whereas the fact that the Virgin and Bernard are depicted in the same scale gives the scene an air of reality, the presence of angels suggests the supernatural nature of the event. (210)

Although Mary does not literally place her breast in Bernard’s mouth as in other versions, the idea of spiritual sustenance is reinforced by the “presence of the angels” in this depiction. The conceptualization of breastfeeding as spiritual sustenance is likewise further developed in the earliest texts on the Lactatio.

Brian Patrick McGuire, author of the 1991 book The Difficult Saint: Bernard of Clairvaux and His Tradition, is one of France’s “retrospective” readers of the literary origins of the Lactation of Saint Bernard. Based on a 1988 article by Jacques Berlioz, McGuire argues that scholarly research has “shifted from Iberia to Gaul,” or from the early Catalan images to the early French texts: “In his excellent article, Berlioz has shown how most all the individual elements in the story contained in the Ci Nous Dit can be traced back to twelfth-century depictions of Saint Bernard” (197). The Ci Nous Dit is an early fourteenth-century Old French exemplum collection, or a collection of moral religious tales intended for instruction, considered by many to contain the “first known literary allusion” to Bernard’s miracle (France 215). However, according to McGuire, as source material for the Ci Nous Dit, Berlioz points specifically to a twelfth-century text that tells the story of the Lactatio of Henry of Clairvaux (1176 1179 CE), which was likely transferred to Bernard by the compilers of the Ci Nous Dit (198). McGuire also discusses other twelfth-century pre-Bernadine examples of the Lactatio that may have influenced the fourteenth-century Bernardine legends: the story of Fulbert de Chartres found in William of Malmesbury’s De Laudibus et Miraculis Sanctae Mariæ (191),

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"These narratives vary in specific detail but all point to Mary’s breasts and breast milk as a source of spiritual sustenance."

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Fig. 3. Master of the Conquest of Mallorca. The Lactation of Saint Bernard. 1290. Retable, courtesy Museu de Mallorca, Palma.
Richard of Saint Victor’s commentary on Mary’s breasts in his *Explicatio in Cantica Canticorum* (194), and Adam of Perseigne’s “use [of] a language of body, milk, and union between us and Mary” in his *Matride* (195). These narratives vary in specific detail but all point to Mary’s breasts and breast milk as a source of spiritual sustenance.

Yet, the exact details of these literary examples are less important than the interpretative comparison that McGuire draws between them. The original Henry legend, which ostensibly gave rise to the Bernard legend in the *Ci Nous Dit*, “has the element of sensuality that was missing in its predecessors”—that is, in the texts of William, Richard, and Adam. McGuire claims that Henry’s story “is important for us because the contact between the abbot of Clairvaux and Mary is intimate and physical” (199). Of course, McGuire does not intend for “intimate” or “physical” or “sensual” to be interpreted as “sexual,” but his characterization of the Henry story paves the way for Bernard’s more immediate experience with Mary—in other words, for the affective nature of Bernard’s piety. Here, McGuire shifts his focus to a lesser-known text that itself are indeed fascinating…

In this passage, Bernard is traveling with his fellow monks and suffers his own thirst so that his two brothers do not want for drink. When all three stop to rest, Bernard turns to prayer in his exhaustion, and Mary appears to him. McGuire interprets the story:

Here we find Bernard being remembered as a lover of fellow monks and a lover of Mary. The bonds of friendship, the duties of the abbot, the links with a world of permanence and beauty, are all summarized in the physical act by which Saint Bernard took Mary’s breast into his mouth and sucked freely from her. In a cold northern clime, the hot and dusty roads of Burgundy [where Bernard was born] were remembered in a moment when physical and spiritual worlds met in total harmony. (224)

McGuire’s assertion of “total harmony” in turn supports Lepp’s claim that breastfeeding was viewed as an act of supreme compassion—a physical act that could be simultaneously spiritual. For further explication, I return to Lepp’s study of medieval lactation: “Discussions of milk in medical texts are found in the context of a mother’s ability to nourish her child. As a food, maternal breast milk was praised as the most healthful for nourishing infants because it conveyed not just nutrition, but was also believed to shape infants’ physical and moral character” (87).

In this passage, Lepp assures us that the medieval view of lactation espoused an act that transcended mere physical nourishment, but she does not stress its spiritual nature until later: “[Breast milk] was the gift of God to the mother which she was duty-bound to pass on to her child, and a necessity because of the weakness of humankind at birth. It was also a symbol of spiritual nurture or abundance” (101). Here, Lepp duly considers both the physical and spiritual needs of the child as equally important components of proper, dutiful motherhood. Within the context of the *Mariu Saga*, we can equate Bernard’s “weakness” of thirst and fatigue with his need for spiritual sustenance. While Mary physically quenches his burning thirst, she spiritually imparts wisdom, compassion, and grace. Though both France (216) and McGuire (205) stress the physical nature of Bernard’s thirst in this passage—positing this version of the legend as different from others in that respect—we can still see a connection between Bernard’s sacrifice for his fellow monks and his reward of Mary’s assistance through spiritual means. France writes, “Stories of the Virgin offering her milk to others than her Son as a reward for their faithfulness go back to the twelfth century” (206). As Bernard steadfastly and selflessly forgoes physical comfort and instead turns to Mary for spiritual comfort, he exemplifies the epilogue of faithfulness to the belief in Mary’s infinite capacity for compassion as the Mother of Christ.

Likewise, also according to France, Mary’s sacred milk eventually becomes the legendary source for Bernard’s famed “sweet” eloquence—his own reward for faithful-
Breastfeeding as spiritual exchange even occurs between Bernard and his own biological mother Aleth.

Bernard was born in Burgundy, at the castle of Fontaines, of very noble and devout parents. His father was Tescelin, a doughty soldier unto the world, and no less devoted to God; his mother was called Aleth. She bore seven children, six sons and one daughter, and dedicated all the sons to be monks, and the daughter to be a nun. For as soon as she had given birth to a child, she offered it to God with her own hands. Nor would she allow her children to be suckled at the breasts of other women, but imparted to them, with the maternal milk, the nature of their mother's virtue. (465)

Although the Lactatio is not directly referenced in The Golden Legend, we can see how this interpretation of Bernard's mother's actions could facilitate the rise of the legends themselves. In her 1982 book Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages, Carolyn Walker Bynum underscores the reasons for Aleth's choice to breastfeed her own children:

People in the high Middle Ages argued that the ideal child-rearing pattern was for the mother to nurse her own child; in medieval medical theory breast milk is processed blood. According to medieval understanding of physiology, the loving mother … feeds her child with her own blood. (132)

As we have seen, Lepp echoes Bynum's sentiments in her 2010 dissertation—breast milk is not only blood but “purified blood” given compassionately from mother to infant child (253). It is a gift of bodily nourishment as well as spiritual sustenance, representing a moral purity potentially transferable from the “loving mother” to her precious charge.

Bernard not only experienced the purity of Mary's milk through the lactation legends, but he also wished to model this transfer of compassion in his position as abbot of Clairvaux. As Bynum notes in her 1986 essay “… And Woman His Humanity,” Bernard writes about the breastfeeding mother in these figurative terms:

There is no pretense about a true mother; the breasts she displays are full for the taking. She knows how to rejoice with those who rejoice, and to be sad with those who sorrow [Rom 12:15], pressing the milk of encouragement without intermission from the breast of joyful sympathy, the milk of consolation from the breast of compassion.6

As Bynum indicates, Bernard then extends the metaphor of the breastfeeding mother to include himself as abbot as he addresses a wayward monk: “And I have said this, my son … to help you as a loving father…. I begot you in religion by word and example. I nourished you with milk…. You too were torn from my breast, cut from my womb. My heart cannot forget you”. In this instance, Bernard's “word and example” are metaphorically transmuted into “milk,” or spiritual guidance and encouragement. In the medieval culture that so valued motherhood and breastfeeding as a sacred symbol of motherhood, Bernard's “nurturing” role as a spiritual father becomes equated with motherhood itself (Bynum, “… ‘And Woman’” 264). In essence, fatherhood pays homage to motherhood as the epitome of compassionate instruction. Motherhood, as defined by Mary, becomes integral to Bernard's “sweet” rhetoric, his own “milk” of spiritual guidance. To further link Mary's milk with Bernard's sweetness as a preacher, consider the passage below from the letters of Adam of Perseigne, as quoted by France. Adam maintains that Mary is quite capable of infinitely serving the needs of her son and those of her spiritual followers:

Those breasts are full from heaven and they refresh with unfailing sweetness. They are not emptied by the many who drink from them and, although she preserves herself totally to one alone, she does not deny her mercy to those who drink of her milk. O, unfailing fruitfulness! How great is the sweetness of this milk which the faminshed children take from the breasts of the most tender Virgin. (France 230)

As an example of one of the earliest literary allusions to the Lactatio, or the Miracle of Lactation, Adam's description of Mary's breasts, her infinite “sweetness” of mercy given through her milk, is echoed in Bernard's comments included above. Both stress the infinite nature of Mary's milk, her propensity to give “encouragement without intermission,” as Bernard puts it (qtd. in Bynum, “… ‘And Woman’” 264). Perhaps it is this enduring image of limitless compassion, this everlasting faith in motherhood, which lends the Lactation of Saint Bernard its own quality of endurance both in art and literature.

Though modern viewers may cringe at the image of Bernard ingesting Mary's breast milk, we thankfully have the skills to historically contextualize the image in both literature and art, thereby developing our own contemporary appreciation of this medieval body of legends. In evidence of modern appreciation, we see the American painter...
Hernan Bas, born in 1978 and currently based in Miami, as the most recent artist to try to capture the unique spiritual essence of Bernard’s legends in his 2007 oil on linen painting *The Immaculate Lactation of Saint Bernard*, an intriguing tribute to the medieval mystic (see fig. 4). As such, Bas’s work serves as yet another artistic interpretation of the Lactation of Saint Bernard, a medieval legend that serves to both challenge and enrich our modern-day conception of breastfeeding and motherhood.

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**Fig. 4.** Hernan Bas, *The Immaculate Lactation of Saint Bernard*. 2007. Acrylic and gouche on linen 127 x 101.6 cm, Rubell Family Collection. Courtesy the Artist and Victoria Miro, London, © Hernan Bas.

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**Notes**

1. I have yet to find textual evidence of this particular version of the legend, but fig. 1 provides an iconographical representation. Cistercian scholar James France describes the image:

One of fourteen full-page miniatures in a Prayer Book (fragment) made in Brussels (?) c. 1520-30. In a church Bernard kneels facing left with hands folded, crozier resting against the left shoulder and looking up at the painted statue of the crowned Virgin and Child on a console against the wall. Rays of milk from the right breast held by the Virgin descend towards the eyes of Bernard. The naked Child gestures towards Bernard. A red book with gilt bosses lies on the tiled floor. The gilt choir screen at the back is topped by three lit candles. The border has naturalistic flowers, fruit, and birds on a gold ground (emphasis added, description from France’s CD image-index).

Although my study will not focus directly on this version of the legend due to lack of literature, it is also discussed in the following text, which includes fig. 2:


2. Lepp’s footnote cites:


3. McGuire cites:


4. Unfortunately, the *Ci Nous Dit* images have been overwritten with blank figures in France’s image-index. It is unclear at this point if this is merely a digital error or a copyright issue.

5. According to France, “There are no known iconographical representations of this literary version” (216), which is also very unfortunate, because along with images of the *Ci Nous Dit*, here we may have found the only depictions (in art) of Bernard directly suckling Mary’s breast.

6. McGuire thanks Christopher Sanders at the Arnamagnæan Dictionary in Copenhagen.

7. Bynum’s footnote cites:


8. As Bynum states, this passage is linked to Bernard’s commentary on the Songs of Songs (264). I have deliberately refrained from mentioning Bernard’s fascination with the Songs of Songs, and how Bernard comes to associate breastfeeding with Christ through Solomon’s love story, as this topic is too expansive for inclusion in this study at this time.

9. In these two quotations, Bynum cites:


Acer saccharum | Meghan Barrett

Sugar maple leaf buds to swell and explode in early spring, each year redsaw point straining against barkback, quiet scalesong as sweet water runs deep in xylem heat, dusted with wind-pressed pollenspore, powdered ovules pearl, leafbloom: scales shower out of earth conical inflorescence flower develop into dye-caught greenfruit. Double samara fat and full, unfurl helicopter flutter downground, ripen in September or October almost fourteen weeks after pollination.

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Deepnight | Meghan Barrett

: thin days shutterhalt suns,
slanting off the horizonverge.

deepnight makes you a liar;
sugared promises, whispered on hot sapriver
nights, made conifers
of us. You distill glucose in cells, pour
absci-sick distance
acid in layers my veins stutter

sweetwaters slow as I turn scarlet
a blush of carotenoids stuck in,
call anthocyanin as frost white worms
across my roseburst breast

together we hid under cirrocumulus covers
and I sheltered you from beatenrain;
now I loosen,
scatter and you, still and naked,
heat stored low in your roots, you
shiver into dormancies
lumbering through deepnight
Phycodurus eques
Meghan Barrett

: toothpicked glass dragon

my lace wrap is a camouflage
warping men's eyes away
from my delicate bones flowing
smooth, pectoral fin as an invisible belly
dancer in the rib, i grew
just to escape notice, i am seaweed
in a twisted dark swallow, i promise you
i am only debris

we wait for the swells you
a trap at the ocean's yawn
i an uncurled whisper, slithered
through rivers of dirty palms and gold this
body becomes a man's medicine, powdered
and brought to tea, waiting for a dress
halfway down throats, my eyes
are not too dead yet to see
Abstract: the living tribe composed, a vision

Introduction:
a memory learning rich in repertoire
anatomy endowed with plastic modalities,
by design: the common stalk, inconspicuous

Materials and Methods: this is a ruby boulder
and for wingless Drosophila, fresh leaves
Lucifer is kept in plaster-of-Paris, serial and stained
this dye reveals a lucid water

Results: shortened fuse, workers striking
denote their torus architecture, honey pink
invaginations reminiscent in the ring
of blind resolve, give rise to walls, interior
filled with the rinds of finest bows &
ponerine arrowheads; the life of tiny significance
of subtle topographs without clear transition

Discussion: they are the velvet
collars, dominate true by nature
their account confirms: they are the powerful authors
with means and retention; we are a direct path
to descending: diving beetles invoking
cautious bouquets, who confuse performance
for favored interest, now we are situated
far from understanding and alone

on a smaller scale, such problems arise
even among ants.

Found Poetry Source: Gronenberg, W. “Modality-specific segregation of input to ant mushroom bodies.” Brain Behav Evol 54 (1999); 85-95.
existence. That fear leaves a residual fingerprint somewhere in the psyche, somewhere deep within the ego. There it is, a dull anxiety, a tightness in the chest, each time you find those white fields pushing toward a sunless sky.

It is also on this stretch of highway where the only radio stations you can get are AM conservative talk shows or Christian ministry. If lucky, you might be able to piece up a country song: Kenny Chesney fading in and out, interrupted by patchy static. If not, you will learn a lot about the Gospel of Mark and the moral decay of America. You will also pass the Burma style highway signs of the Champaign County Rifle Association. They are in panel sets of four or five cut from plywood, spread out by maybe two hundred feet permitting approximately a two second read time per sign. Each panel is painted white, framed in heavy black trim, and nailed to two oak timbers sunk into some willing, like-minded farmer’s land. Each individual set proclaims one fundamental truth: GUN CONTROL … DISARMS VICTIMS … NOT CRIMINALS. These are always followed by the last one with the tag line: GUNS SAVE LIVES. Once while driving with my grandfather, he told me that the signs could be found all over Illinois interstates. “Verse by the Roadside” is what he called them. “People ought to pay attention. Dangerous business—people taking your guns away. In my mind, it’s better to be tried by twelve than carried by six.” His voice was serious and full of warning when he said it.

And on New Year’s Eve, 2015, that is where I found my two Bubo Virginianus, my two “winged tigers,” right there between “DISARMS VICTIMS” and “NOT CRIMINALS.” Right there in the wind of cellular damage. Right there in the land of disappearing horizons.

There is plenty of death on the highway. Road kill is no stranger to I-74. The freeway is strewn with the evidence of man and nature colliding. Over the years, I have seen deer. Deer eviscerated, the length of their bloody intestines strung across all lanes. Deer in the median. Deer on the shoulder. Often, there are two together, their bodies lying within five or ten feet of each other. Small fawns with broken necks, their hides still speckled with white. Occasionally, a big buck is missing its head, sawed off by some beer drinking man-boy who threw it in the bed of his jacked-up truck in the dark of night when no one was looking. (No doubt, he has it mounted above his fireplace, bragging to every new giggly girlfriend about how he tagged it on the very first day of deer season.) I have seen coyote, raccoon, and opossum. Snakes, long, wending black snakes in their final spasmodic death-roll after just being struck. I have even seen a red-tailed fox. She was impossible to miss, the red fur of her tail blowing up magnificently from her delicate, still body.

But in all the years I have travelled this stretch, I have only seen a few birds that I might have actually been able to identify. They are normally so pulverized that it is almost impossible to tell. I imagine most of these were hawks. I see them often in winter, perched in trees stripped bare of their leaves along the fence line, surveying the fallow fields for any movement of prey, natural predators at hunt. But this, of course, is ante mortem. It was once explained to me by a physics teacher that when a truck is traveling at a high rate of speed, a vacuum is formed surrounding the trailer. If a bird is too close, if it misjudges, it can be pulled into the vacuum, its fragile body and wings repeatedly striking the side of the truck, again and again, until it is thrown clear. Basic physics he had said. Frequently, all that is left is a broken wing awkwardly flapping against the wind, the rest mangled carriion.

Maybe, if Maya, my three-year-old daughter, had been awake instead of sound asleep in her car seat, if we had been happily chatting away about the manes of unicorns, or had I been distracted by another one of her travelling meltdowns, maybe I would have never noticed that in a forty-five-minute span, I had passed five—five—little barreled bodies who seemingly had been gently dropped from the sky onto the shoulder of the highway. Maybe, if just one of those previous five had looked grossly macerated like all the other dead birds I had ever seen, I wouldn’t have given them another thought, I wouldn’t have pulled over when I saw numbers six and seven at “Verse by the Roadside.” Maybe, I just would have kept on driving, kept on listening to how Jesus really, truly, in his heart of hearts, wants me to be a financial success. Maybe, I would not have felt the whispering of my sleeping girl with my sudden braking in the night, the rest mangled carriion, against the wind, the rest mangled carriion.

“appearing duality” by Hildy Maze
18 x 24 oil and paper collage, 2017
Maybe it was more than that, more than winds and vanishing horizons, much more than just the riddle of seven dead great horned owls on the side of the road that day. Maybe, if I had not visited my grandmother hours earlier for the first time since my grandfather died, since his body was placed in a black bag and taken to the morgue, maybe, if my grandmother hadn’t been moved across the hall into a smaller room with a woman named Mary Alice who reeked of urine, maybe, I would have left those owls right there on the side of the road. Mary Alice, who repeatedly barked, “Who are you? Do I know you? Do you know Margaret, my daughter? Do you know her? I said, do—you—know—her?” Each time I said no, that I didn’t think I did. “Well, that’s good because she’s worthless. Totally useless. Just a big, fat liar. That’s what she is.” She said this tensing her lower lip, narrowing her eyes. “Just a sneaky, horrible person. Hides my glasses every time she comes. Can’t hide from God. He sees what she does. Do you believe in God? Well, do you?” There was usually a long pause after this part, even if I answered. She sometimes fidgeted with a button on her sweater or brushed away some invisible crumbs on her lap. “My son, he’s a good boy. A fine boy.” From behind my legs, Maya listened. Finally, she whispered, “Mama, why that woman keep asking you that? What worthless mean, Mama? Why she saying her daughter a liar?” She never took her eyes off of Mary Alice, but she kept shaking her head back and forth and saying, “That bad, Mama. That really, really bad.”

Maybe if this exchange with Mary Alice hadn’t happened verbatim every five minutes, I wouldn’t have picked up those owls and carried them back to the car. Maybe, if Mary Alice’s daughter hadn’t come, if I hadn’t noticed the surprised look on her face when she saw my grandmother actually had visitors. She only stayed twenty minutes spending most of that time showing her mother that, in fact, her glasses were right there in the top drawer of her bedside table. She didn’t say a word both times Mary Alice brought up her brother, how he was going to come get her and take her home to the Catholic Church to 1308 Lincolnshire Drive, the home of my grandparents, the home they had lived in for forty years until my dad and his two siblings sold it three years ago. Maybe, if I had just driven by and not actually stopped the car across the street, maybe if there hadn’t been festive Christmas lights on both of the neighbors’ houses or if the front blinds of my grandparent’s house had been closed instead of wide open, if I had not felt so completely shocked by the absence of their furniture, how different it looked even from the street. Maybe, if in spite of that, I hadn’t been able to remember my own room there so well, if I hadn’t been able to feel the white cotton sheets or the stitching of my grandmother’s rose-covered quilt, if I hadn’t been able to hear the tick of the grandfather clock in the other room, its chimes on the half hour, its strikes and counts on the hour, if I hadn’t been able to image the feel of its thick wooden scrolls beneath my tracing fingers. Mostly, if I hadn’t heard the voices of my grandparents telling me to sleep tight, don’t let the bed bugs bite.

But it was all right there in an instant. Spencer Tracey’s voice and Katherine Hepburn’s laugh coming from the television. I saw my grandmother in her starched white blouse and her grey merino wool cardigan sitting in her pink Louis XV chair smiling. “Oh, my! She’s really gotten herself into a mess now!” I could see my grandfather’s wooden scrolls beneath my tracing fingers. Mostly, if I hadn’t heard the voices of my grandparents telling me to sleep tight, don’t let the bed bugs bite.

Maybe it was more than that, more than winds and vanishing horizons, much more than just the riddle of seven dead great horned owls on the side of the road that day.

“evolving out of the decay” by Hildy Maze
24 x 28 oil and paper collage, 2017
lady, I think after we have some more coffee, I’m going to need to feed my birds. They’re probably wondering where I’m at!” I saw the juice glasses, the jar of sugar with tiny oranges painted on its lid. The antique green salt shaker. I saw it all. Inside every closet and drawer and cabinet. Every dish. Every picture. It was all there. I knew every single inch of that house. Everything. So, maybe, if I hadn’t felt all of that in a five-minute span as I sat parked across the street, if I hadn’t felt the broken-heartedness of it all, maybe, I wouldn’t have driven two great horned owls in Styrofoam coolers 440 miles, across four state lines, and up into my driveway exactly fifty-one days ago.

I did not find out until later that it is in violation of state and federal law to be in possession of any migratory bird, even a single feather. For misdemeanor violations of the act, individuals may be fined up to $5,000, and those convicted may face up to six month’s imprisonment. Felony violations may result in fines up to $25,000 and up to two years’ imprisonment. It wasn’t always like this. In 1918 birds of prey were excluded from the Migratory Bird Treaty Act signed with Great Britain on behalf of Canada. According to the Endangered Species Handbook, “The treaty covered almost all other species of native birds, banning hunting and killing, as well as destruction of nests.” This left birds of prey open to massive persecution. Farmers and ranchers shot them on sight convinced of their guilt when a chicken came up missing. They were hunted for sport, shot, poisoned and captured in pole-traps leaving them to hang upside down from their feet in “tiny nooses.” It wasn’t until years later, after generations of slaughter, that ecologists and ornithologists achieved victory when birds of prey were finally protected in 1972 by an amendment to the original treaty.2

In precise language the MBTA states, “Unless and except as permitted by regulations made as hereinafter provided, it shall be unlawful at any time, by any means or in any manner, to pursue, hunt, take, capture, kill, attempt to take, capture, or kill, possess, offer for sell, sell, offer to barter, barter, offer to purchase, purchase, deliver for shipment, ship, export, import, cause to be shipped, exported, or imported, deliver for transportation, transport or cause to be transported, carry or cause to be carried, or receive for shipment, transportation, carriage, or export, any migratory bird, any part, nest or egg of any such bird, or any product, whether or not manufactured, which consists, or is composed in whole or in part, of any such bird or any part, nest or egg.” In other words, “It was roadkill!” will not be defense enough in a court of law. Had I known I could face two years in prison, maybe I would have left them there. Maybe. Maybe not. Grief and fear can make you do strange and dangerous things.

However, there are some exceptions. If you are granted a permit by both your state Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, you can possess what they call a “salvage permit.” Some are granted to educators, museums, and scientific organizations, but most of these permits are restricted to enrolled Native Americans with religious standing within their tribes. These are medicine men, men who know the ways of the sacred owl. Men who will tell you the owl is the extractor of secrets, that its winged medicine brings insight into the shadow self and that it teaches those who carry owl medicine lessons in timing, when to let go, when to move on. They will tell you that these tigers of the air are harbingers of change, bringing new cycles, new beginnings as part of a process of growth and wisdom, the process of death and rebirth. They will talk of her eyes, amongst the keenest in the animal kingdom, how they penetrate the darkness, how warriors with her long feathers tied to their strong black braids called on her to locate their enemies in the dark of a moonless night, how she offered her power to selected hunters allowing them to see the tracks of their prey in the opaque blackness. These medicine men will tell you that it is owl who allows the chosen few to see beyond the veil of deception and illusion, to see what is hidden, what is beyond, what others do not or will not see—that which exists beyond the hunted. But it is the medicine man himself who is most closely allied with owl. These men have made sacred, holy pledges never to harm her, for it is she that allows them clear sight when dreaming their visions, their prophecies. They will tell you that she offers them clairaudience, that the tufts of feathers resembling ears

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allow them to hear what is not spoken, the shush that stays in the shadows, the messages that elude others. These are the ones who can hear the voices of departed loved ones who travel back from the spirit world, from beyond the horizon, across the ephemeral planes of existence.⁶

But if you dig deeper, you will find darker beliefs, fearful superstitions. According to Jonathan Holmes's *Concerning Owls*, “Among many tribes the owl is to be both feared and embraced.” He discloses that some tribes believe great horned owls “may not be real birds at all” but instead witches, evil medicine men or women practicing “bad medicine” who have transformed, shape-shifting themselves into the form of owl so they might “fly silently through the night” spying on others in the tribe, learning their weaknesses or even casting spells upon their vulnerable enemies as they sleep, or—worse yet—steal their very souls. In these tribes, Holmes reports owls are avoided for “safety’s sake,” since members cannot discern a real owl from a flying witch without the help of holy people. The two species of owls with tufts on their heads—the great horned owl and the screech owl “are often seen as the most uncanny and dangerous of owls” since many believe these tufts to be feathered horns connecting them to underworld powers. Other tribes believe these species to be the “unquiet spirits of the dead,” ghosts who cry out in the dark screeching and wailing from their treetops.⁷

I suppose now that I know this, what unfolded in the last fifty-one days could possibly make more sense. Possibly. Like, maybe, if those two owls wedged between our DiGiorno frozen pizza and Marie Callender’s chicken pot pies could have stayed still inside my freezer, they would have remained right there, frozen solid until next November when I would discover there was no available space for a twenty-pound Thanksgiving turkey or until I started dating an accountant type who might possibly one evening innocently ask me what those two curious bundles wrapped in black Glad bags contained. Maybe if they had just remained quiet, if they hadn’t begun all that relentless screeching and wailing, I would have forgotten about them….

I have spent every month since my grandfather’s death in July waiting for him to return to me, to see him stand at the foot of my bed one night, to feel his presence walking behind me, to hear him say my name while standing at the kitchen sink scrubbing a burnt pan. I have waited for a mourning dove to look into my window for a full ten minutes without a twitch of a feather. But none of that has happened. In fact, abso-

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“Maybe if they had just remained quiet, if they hadn’t begun all that relentless screeching and wailing, I would have forgotten about them....”
lutely nothing has happened. No signs. No messages. Nothing. I have even gone so far as to court him.

I don’t tell people this, and I most certainly did not invite anyone over to the house on Day of the Dead this last November 2nd, a day before my grandfather’s birthday. That morning before dawn, I made a small altar on the dining room table, his picture surrounded by burning votive candles. The speckled gold mercury of their holders illuminated by the flame’s flicker. I attempted to adorn it with some orange and yellow marigolds barely hanging on from the garden, their edges curling brown. Half Russian Orthodox saint with golden halo, half Día de Muertos ofrenda. I added other things, things I knew he liked. To the left, I placed a John Lee Hooker vintage vinyl LP with the song “Boom Boom” that I had taken from his record collection the day we packed up their house for good. “What do you say we put on a little music, young lady?” he would say, opening the wide lid to the large wooden stereo console. It was the one piece of furniture my grandfather had any say about in the entire house. It was his, completely independent of my grandmother’s reign of all things domestic. I would sit in his spacious tweed armchair waiting for the sound of the needle drop. Then, Boom Boom Boom Boom! I’m gonna shoot you right down / Right offa your feet / Take you home with me…. He could dance. I mean really, really dance, even into his early eighties. He would spin me around while telling me how he used to sneak off to the juke joints in “Black Town” in Kansas City until my grandmother as a new bride had shut it down. Smiling, with a little bit of devil in those blue eyes, he would say, “Your grandmother, I don’t think she approved of that all too much.” My gram would always yell from the next room to turn that racket down. She complained she couldn’t hear herself think, that she would have a splitting headache in the next twenty minutes. She questioned out loud what was wrong with my grandfather, had he no sense at all? He only shook
his head back and forth, like he didn’t get her at all, like he was simply dumbfounded by her response. “Oh hell, Hon,” was all he ever replied. He just kept spinning me around and around on that braided rug record after record.

In front of that record, I placed a bar of Irish Spring soap. I unwrapped it first to breath in its scent. To the right of his picture, I set his heavy metal tool box, the kind you find in the images of old Life magazines, the same type that belonged to the men who ate their lunch sandwiches precipitously perched upon one of those wide steel beams of the Empire State Building, their legs dangling hundreds and hundreds of feet above the concrete below. Inside were his hammer and measuring tape. In front of that, two pictures—one of his mom and one of his dad. Beside those, a third picture also in black and white. He is standing proudly in his Airforce uniform with his arm wrapped around my grandmother’s perfect wartime silhouette. When he died, they had been married seventy-two years. I filled a small bowl of thistle seed for his birds. That morning I drank my coffee from his favorite mug. It is tall and heavy with the words The Alamo—San Antonio, Texas stamped above a raised relief of the Spanish mission. I drank it strong and black just the way he drank it. And hot. So hot it burned my throat.

For the entire day, I wore his hat with the words ASC Agricultural Soil Management embroidered across the crown. He only wore it while tinkering in the garage, when working in the yard, or while driving grain to the elevators for my uncle. A couple of times, I rode beside him, windows down, and with half-filled quarts of oil and old Styrofoam coffee cups at my feet. He had broken the hat in, and within its shape it held some perfect measurement of my grandfather. I wore it as I talked out loud to him when Maya was in the other room playing. I told him I was back in school. He would like that, except for the debt part. He would shake his head forebodingly about that. For lunch, I ordered a hot roast beef sandwich smothered in gravy from a cafeteria I had never been to before, and later that afternoon, I made my grandmother’s chocolate cream pie from scratch, the pie he had enjoyed for sixty-something years until my grandmother could no longer remember how to follow the recipe. After dinner, Maya and I each ate a piece right there in front of his picture illuminated by the glow of all those candles. I told him silently that it was good, but not as good as Gram’s, and I knew then that my pie wasn’t enough to convince him to come back to me, and that I needed to do better than a fucking hammer and measuring tape. The truth is, I tried. I tried everything I knew to do, but he hadn’t come back to say one last goodbye to me, to show me he was somehow still with me. I wonder now if maybe that was the day, November 2nd, Day of the Dead, when those owls decided to come, if they knew that in two short months I would once again drive the highway back to all that death and dying in search of something to hold on to. Anything. Maybe, maybe not.

But there have been lots of questions, lots of maybes since my grandfather’s death. I now wonder if there is no such thing as a soul at all. Maybe there is no imperishable spirit to take immortal flight from the broken, diseased, and withered body’s last breath. Instead, maybe that’s just it—the last breath, the finality of one’s total existence. The Chassidic masters explain the essence of the soul of man as “literally a part of God above.” Maybe there is no piece of immortal God inside of us. Sometimes it seems easier to believe that. Maybe those that remain behind only create myths, invent divine signs of after-death communication to ease the grief, to somehow survive the unbearable void created when those we love die. Maybe we have to find a way to keep the dead with us in order to make sense of our own existence. I don’t know. I don’t talk about these questions. I choose to keep them to myself—but Maya, Maya is different.

It is mostly at night, right at bedtime. She shares the most with me during this time. After turning off the light and several minutes of silence, it is not uncommon

“Maybe there is no piece of immortal God inside of us. Sometimes it seems easier to believe that.”
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She answers with this expression a lot lately. “Mama, when you die, who will be my new Mama?” It’s embarrassing to admit that this question injured me, that I felt the wound of being replaced so easily, from the casualness of her voice when she asked it—that I felt a tinge of both anger and fear. But I did. Instantly, I saw her father’s new girlfriend tucking her in at night and kissing her forehead. I felt the horrible panic of “Will she forget me?” I wanted to yell, “No one! No one will be your new mother! You only have one mother! Do you understand? You have one mother!” I hated myself for such grotesque selfishness, a selfishness that must be unknown to better mothers. But even then, I only thought more about myself, about my own mother and how when she dies I won’t get another mother. She will just be gone. I’m not sure, but I think it was then that those owls, tired of their plastic body bags, began to wake up, when they began to grow restless.

“Baby, please, don’t worry about that. Please. Remember what I told you? That most everyone gets to live until they are old?” I took her shoulders in my hands. “And, no matter what, Mommy will always, always be with you, in your heart. Forever and ever.” I took one hand and placed it on her heart and rubbed it gently, trying to somehow massage the truth of it deep within its beating life; but she pulled away and suddenly stood up on the bed, wobbling to keep her balance.

“How I wonder how I wander” by Hildy Maze
35 x 35 oil and paper collage, 2017

“Am I going to die? Who will live in our purple house when we die?” The words were tight in her throat and caused her cough to erupt. I heard it—the mucous and phlegm. The indication of a high-level infection of the respiratory tract. I also heard those words come out of her mouth—the word “I” and “die” in the same sentence. I, too, now struggled for a breath. “I want to live in our purple house forever! With you!” Her thick lashes had already begun to stick together and an even more steady flow of snot was running from her nose. She took her tongue and licked it away from her upper lip.

“Come here, Baby. Blow your nose.” I pulled her to me holding a tissue to her nose until she calmed down enough to blow. “You’re not going to die for a very, very long time. Don’t think about that. Everything’s okay. Mommy isn’t going to die for a

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"until the water is clear there is no reflection" by Hildy Maze
34 x 44, oil and paper collage, 2016

long time, either. Lie down here.” She stayed there on my chest coughing sporadically until she eventually fell asleep. Although I am certain she thought about it, she never insisted, “But, you just said, you just said no one knows when someone will die.” I was grateful. Sometimes we need the answer to be easy, the one that makes it okay, if even for a minute. Maybe she needed that answer right then.

She asks these questions about death because when my grandfather was dying, I made the conscious decision to be open with her, to be honest with her. I had thought about the children who grow up on farms, how they learn about death watching their father slaughter chickens with the deciding blade of a sharp ax or by finding one of their ewes killed, ripped apart and half-eaten by coyotes, its white fur caked with red blood. Death as nature. Simple as that. I thought about the pioneers and how so many children must have watched as a sibling was buried right there beside some wagon trail, dead of smallpox or a violent kick to the head from the hoof of a spooked mule. How they must have stood waiting for the shovel to break apart the hardened earth, how the wind must have whipped through the tall prairie grasses as their wagon moved further and further away from that small life they had only hours ago believed belonged to them. If they looked back—back toward that make-shift wooden cross—I imagine those prairies must have been swallowed up in shadow, that they suddenly must have collapsed under the weight of one massive rolling wave of grief, how for miles and miles, it must have decimated all those blowing stalks of wild rye that only yesterday glistened golden in the sun.

I thought about the children in all those post-mortem daguerreotypes and tin-types from the Victorian Era when a third of all children died before the age of nine, how siblings stood in front of a camera in their Sunday best beside the propped-up corpse of younger baby brother or sister who had died from tuberculosis or dysentery only hours earlier. I once saw a picture of a family posed all together. The mother is holding one baby in her arms. The father is holding another. Both babies are dead. A boy around the age of seven is sitting stiffly upright on the parlor sofa, his eyes left open in an unnatural stare. Beside him sits a young girl, their only surviving child. She has bows in her hair. Beautiful bows perfectly tied. The photographer added a rosy tint to all three of the deceased children’s cheeks, a practice not uncommon during the time. Dead, but alive. According to the article, the photographer’s notes revealed that influenza had swept through the house and that within one week all three children had perished. I imagined the picture hanging in the home’s parlor. A visual keepsake to indelibly link the living to the deceased.

Even in those times, with the soaring death rates of the 19th century, when death was an everyday occurrence, still there was an effort to reject its finality, to deny it. Corpses dressed up and posed awkwardly surrounded by a few chosen personal items. Children hold their porcelain faced dolls or their favorite toy. Others lie in their beds portrayed as merely asleep. But in the end, it is only a photo, a photo with people nobody remembers. This is true of most old photos. They are only faces. If you are lucky, there is a name and date written on the back. But you do not know that one in the photo loved to sing “Fair Margaret and Sweet William” at the piano each evening. You do not know that white peonies were her favorite. You do not know that the man collected butterfly specimens, preserving eggs and caterpillars in alcohol, mounting pupae and emerged butterflies on tiny insect pins late into the night. You do not know that once he caught a most glorious one, and that instead of pinching its fragile thorax between thumb and forefinger, that instead of adding its beautiful iridescent wings to his growing collection, he had let it flutter away unharmed. You cannot tell from the picture the sickening sorrow he felt for the creature. They—whomever they may be—have long disappeared, and so too the acute grief of their loved ones. All completely forgotten within two generations.

But, I had mainly thought about a segment on Radio Hour I had heard while driving to Lowes one morning. It was Alan Watts’s thoughts on the essence of dying.
His voice was strangely synthesized on the recording, and it echoed mysteriously over the playing of languid violins. When I got home, I spent an hour searching for it online so I could print it out. Eventually, I found it:

And, so therefore, one person who dies in a way is honorable, because he’s making room for others.

Why else would we have children? Because children arrange for us to survive in another way by, as it were, passing on a torch so that you don’t have to carry it all the time. There comes a point where you can give it up and say now you work.

It’s a far more amusing arrangement for nature to continue the process of life through different individuals then it is always with the same individual, because as each new individual approaches, life is renewed. And one remembers how fascinating the most ordinary everyday things are to a child, because they see them all as marvelous—because they see them all in a way that is not related to survival or profit.

When we get to thinking of everything in terms of survival and profit value, as we do, then the scratches on the floor cease to have magic. And most things, in fact, cease to have magic.

So, therefore, in the course of nature, once we have ceased to see magic in the world anymore, we’re no longer fulfilling nature’s game of being aware of it.

There’s no point in it any longer. And so we die. And, so something else comes to birth, which gets an entirely new view. And so nature’s self-awareness is a game worth the candle.

It is not, therefore, natural for us to wish to prolong life indefinitely. But we live in a culture where it has been rubbed into us in every conceivable way that to die is a terrible thing. And that is a tremendous disease from which our culture, in particular, suffers.

And we notice it personally in the way in which death is swept under the carpet. And, so a person is left to die alone, suddenly, unprepared, and doped up to the point where death hardly happens.  


I did not want this for my grandfather, this sweeping of death under the carpet, so I introduced my daughter to death. I don’t know if it was the right decision, if she should have gone to a graveside funeral at only three years old. Maybe she shouldn’t have seen my grandfather lying in an open casket or the gaping hole beside it. I did not tell her he was sleeping. I told her he was dead. I did my best to explain it in a child’s terms and to still be honest. Alan Watts translated for a child. I tried to create an atmosphere of both comfort and openness. I cried in front of her, mainly in the mornings before there is time to shake off all that vulnerability and sturdy yourself for the day ahead. Each time I reassured her while microwaving oatmeal that I was okay, that both death and sadness were natural, a part of being human, that the tears were good tears because they showed how much I loved him.

I even went to the library and checked out five books on how to help kids best cope with death. I tried to follow all the formulas in all the literature I read. In the end, I don’t know how it will affect her. Maybe our bedtime conversation three days ago, her fear, will only be a sign of what is to come, that she will start having nightmares six months from now, or maybe, in the end, she will know how to better deal with loss, how to be comfortable in her own grief, how not to “brush it under the rug.” I have no idea. I can only hope that I did it right, that I haven’t somehow permanently scarred her. It would help if I could better model it, if I knew how to do all those things myself, if I believed every word of Alan Watts.

“But, for my part, I can tell you, it has been a brutal and haunting mistake, linking her to death so young to life, so soon from the womb. To hear her use “I” and “die” in the same sentence did something to me. She has not brought it up since, but for me, the permanent mark was made the moment the question fell from her mouth. I am quite certain that is when my owls’ eyes bolted open inside those Glad trash bags. The horror of this connection—between death and my daughter—isn’t something I thought of or anticipated ahead of time. If I had, I think I would have lied to her, telling her grandfather moved far, far and away across the ocean to Ireland where everything is green—that each morning he sets forth into the heavy fog for a brisk walk with his two ever faithful Border collies. Yes, that is what I would have said. I would have lied because now death is too close to her, to her tiny hands with chipped purple nail polish, to her child laugh. It has no business anywhere near her mispronounced words, her pink tutus and cheap plastic tiaras. I would have lied because I would have known how all those theories of mine overlooked that I’m simply not brave enough to endure even a vague connection between death and my daughter.

I understand intellectually this fearful relationship I now feel between death and my daughter amounts to no more than strange superstition. I know one hundred percent that it is not possible for her to have become more vulnerable to death just because the concept has entered into her understanding, that it is absurd to think that. I also know there are mothers who actually have children who are dying right now, at this very instant, and that I am not one of those mothers. That in some ways, all this panic
and fear is grossly indulgent, that I haven’t earned the right to feel this terrified. But there it is. So, it only makes sense that when I heard those words “I” and “die” come out of her fragile mouth that the owls trapped downstairs in the Frigidaire began to break free, their sharp claws tearing away their strappings one layer at a time.

I stayed there beside her, feeling her forehead. It was day seven of temperatures above 100. I listened to each cough waiting to hear what the doctor’s stethoscope might have missed. I heard it mainly when she inhaled, the crackle. I imagined the air struggling to make its way through the respiratory passage narrowed by fluid and mucus.

“Try to cough, sweetheart,” I told her while shaking her shoulders gently. And for a second, I know the doctors are wrong, that it isn’t only an upper respiratory infection. I am certain that since our appointment two days before, it has spread down her trachea, past her primary bronchi and deep her into her lungs. With my hand on her chest, I tried to determine if pneumonia had decided to unleash itself on her tiny lungs. The first night when her fever spiked at 103.8, she had woken up shivering and crying. She complained that her arms, legs, and head hurt. She repeated over and over in lethargic cries, “They hurt. They hurt. Help me, Mama, please.” The truth is, there was very little I could do except hold her trembling body while waiting for the Tylenol to kick in, except hold a cool washcloth to her burning body.

When I was pregnant, I often pictured my childhood German Shepard, how she carried and delivered her litter. How the whole process, if stripped down, was at its core a most basic function of nature. I found a picture of her and hung it on my bathroom mirror to remind me of this. After a called-off engagement, I went through eight of the nine months of my pregnancy alone. Maybe that was why I thought of her—why I chose to view my pregnancy predominantly as only an act of biology. Maybe it was less frightening to think about it this way. It’s not to say that I didn’t place my hands on my swollen belly and feel love for the developing life inside of me. I did. But there was a distance, so nothing could have prepared me for just how much I would love her.

I did not ache from the enormity of it until I held her in my arms, until I rocked her back to sleep in the quiet darkness belonging only to mothers and their infants. How could I have known how overwhelming it would be until I held her defenseless body as she slept? How could I have believed all those other mothers when they told me that love would only grow? Nothing could prepare you to love another being with such immensity. And as you carry your baby wrapped in your arms out those hospital doors, you understand that you are responsible for keeping this small life alive, that this being your body grew and protected is now outside of you and helpless to this world. Maybe it happens on that very first night when you are seized with the terrifying reality that there will be no possible way to always keep them safe, to always protect them from all that might harm them, all that might cause them pain or suffering—and, ultimately, that you may not be able to even keep them alive. It starts with SIDS and then exponentially expands. Suffocation. Infections. Diarrhea. Dehydration. Choking. Stairs. Accidental poisoning by a single poke berry. Had I known the risk beforehand, the fear of losing all that love, I am not convinced I would have been brave enough to have a child at all. Almost daily I don’t think I would have been.

But hadn’t I just promised my daughter that she wasn’t going to die for a very, very long time? The problem with promising something you know you can’t truly guarantee is that you become acutely aware of exactly what it is that you cannot fulfill in order to keep that promise. As soon as you promise it, the impossibility of fulfilling it is all you can think about. You can’t do it, and you now know, more sharply than ever, exactly what that means. And that’s what happened three nights ago when I made that promise to my daughter. I realized more than ever that, ultimately, I could not keep her alive.

Lying beside her, I thought of every horrific story I had ever heard. I tried to stop it, but it came like floodwaters rushing from a broken levy. I thought of the boy who died from e-coli after visiting a petting zoo. I thought of brain hemorrhages resulting from a simple slip off the balance beam at a gymnastics practice. Drowning. Second-
I thought about predators. I thought the most unspeakable of things. Rape. Date rape. Things I wished I had never read or seen on the news. Things too horrible to ever write down. I thought about Todd Bennett, a classmate of mine, who died his sophomore year when he was thrown from the Jeep his parents had surprised him with on his sixteenth birthday. There is a picture of him sitting behind the wheel, a big red bow still attached to the hood. I imagined her sliding into trees—brain swelling and severed spinal cords. I imagined meningitis passed by way of a Solo cup at a party in college. Drugs. Drugs I have never even heard of. I thought of tumors and Leukemia. Radiation and chemo. I thought of a story my friend, a head pediatric nurse at Mission Hospital, had told me. She had called, voice shaky, wanting to have a drink. That day she had been in the room when a young patient had died, a girl of five or six with brown eyes—the same color as Maya’s. She told me when the little girl took her last breath, she sat straight up in bed and turned to find her mother, to look into her eyes, to reach for her hand. That’s what she said—that with her last gasp, she had jolted up and opened her eyes and looked toward her mother. “They always want their mother,” she said sipping her margarita. She quit nursing less than six months after that, but I still think about that story. I thought about it that night. I also thought about how I had yelled at her for taking too long in the morning and for squeezing half the tube of toothpaste into the sink.

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I did this until I felt sick, actually drunk—dizzy, nauseous, shaky. I am sure some kind of adrenal poisoning, the hormones of fight or flight crashing into one another. I did this until those owls flew right up the stairs and into our bedroom, until they beat their razor-sharp wings in a wild fury, slicing the air above my head into a million broken shards.

With Maya gone, I felt comfortable resurrecting them from the basement. I unwrapped them one at a time. It took more time than I thought to cut through all the layers, all the duct tape I had used with the goal of preventing the spread of salmonella. Once they were free, I placed them on an old sheet covering half of my dining room’s wooden floor. On the night that I found them, they had not been dead long. No foul odor from digestive enzymes or the acids and gases of decomposition. No insects or maggots. This was a good thing. I also carried from the basement two large plastic bins which I set next to the boxes of Borax I had bought earlier that day. Only twenty dollars will buy you four 76 oz. boxes at Walmart.

For the first hour, all I did was open their broad wings, turn them over, go back and look at the diagram I had printed out. I studied them.
It was only after all this examination that I picked up the knife, a six-inch blade with a carved bone handle. My grandfather had given it to my dad when he became an Eagle Scout and a couple of years ago, my dad had given it to me. It is a light knife, easy to hold, but still my hand shook. The first cuts were to the wings. I extended them first, pulling them away from the body by their tip before gently slicing into the skin and muscle until I felt the blade hit bone. I put down the knife and used the wire cutters like instructed on the webpage. They effortlessly made the cut. I did this to both wings of the first owl. Using straight pins, I secured them to three-foot long rectangular pieces of foam board. Each wing was spread open and full of the memory of flight. I also took the same owl's talons. I'm not sure why. All were laid in the bins before I buried them in layers of Borax. I did not touch the second owl for reasons I again cannot explain.

The next morning, I took both their wrapped bodies, one wingless and without her great talons and the other intact, to the very back of our garden. By this time of year, I have normally already taken inventory, gotten up close to each plant and examined it closely with a discerning eye. It is then that I decide what is viable or what no longer serves the life of each plant, what has to be cut away in order to make room for more growth. With shears in hand I cut it away, sometimes with a delicate snip and sometimes with a hard, severe prune. Either way, it must go. But with each cut there is always heavy regret.

Between two pink rose bushes, their leaves just flushing out, I dug a hole way deeper than it actually needed to be. The ground was soft and the soil gave way easily. Within it, I laid them side by side. Before filling it back, I looked at them both, each one's body wrapped in yellow calico fabric tied with red yarn. I had expected to feel something, some kind of closure. I had expected that somehow I would suddenly be able to follow the gossamer thread linking them to my grandfather and his death, to my grandmother's eventual passing and her sad final existence, and, finally, to the fragility of my daughter's life. That somehow it would all make sense and immediately become clear to me. That somehow death and life would be tidied up, packaged and tied with a silver bow within my mind. That, at least, there would be some small release of all that fear and grief. Maybe, I expected them to break free and suddenly take flight. Maybe that's what I hoped would really happen. I don't know. I just know that didn't happen.

According to my information, in three months I can remove the wings from the Borax bins. They should, in theory, remain in the position I pinned them.9

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9 Author's Note: Since the writing of this essay, the author is no longer in possession of any owl feathers and/or body parts, having returned them back to the earth out of respect for the law.
Meghan Barrett | is currently a biology PhD student at Drexel University, studying an expanded version of “bug brains.” Meghan hails from Rochester, NY, and is greatly inspired by the ecology of the upstate area, hazelnut coffee, and her cat, Nyx. The biology behind her poetry and more about her work can be found at: meghan-barrett.com.

Owen Bullock | has published several works, including River’s Edge (Recent Work Press, 2016), A Cornish Story (Palores, 2010) and sometimes the sky isn’t big enough (Steele Roberts, 2010). He has edited a number of journals, including Poetry New Zealand. He is a PhD Candidate in Creative Writing at the University of Canberra.

Melissa Carter | is a conceptual photographer and painter whose work explores gender and socioeconomic disparities. In 2016, the Rhizome Foundation presented her exhibit Body America at the University of Kentucky. Her work has been published by Subbaculchik! Belgium, North of Center, Fourteen Hills, and she was a resident artist of Holler Poets Series. Carter lives and works in San Francisco.

Audra Coleman | lives in Asheville, North Carolina, and is currently earning her MLAS at UNCA. She has enjoyed seeing her work published in WNC Woman, 3288 Review, Kestrel, Mothers Always Write, and The Good Mother Project. Her short story “Spines of the Saguaro” will be featured as the editor’s choice in the upcoming spring publication of The Great Smokies Review.

William Crawford | is a writer and photographer based in Winston-Salem, NC. He was a combat photojournalist in Vietnam. He has published extensively in various formats including fiction, creative nonfiction, memoirs, book reviews, and essays. He had a parallel career as a social worker and community organizer. There, he wrote editing journals on behalf of the powerless, such as abused children, the frail elderly, and victims of enforced state sterilizations. He is known as Craddawg to his Yellow Lab, Scout.

Christen Faubel | is the Managing Editor of the interdisciplinary online journal Palaver at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, where she is currently working on her Master’s degree in Liberal Studies. She loves to read and write, and uses her life’s experiences to spark new ideas in her work. Christen lives in Wilmington, NC, with her partner, two dogs, and always a round of rescue puppies.

Teresa (Peruzzi) Faubuzzi | was born in New Haven, CT, in the summer of 1988. She spent her teen years in Tampa, FL, where she acquired and retained the majority of her art education while attending performing and visual arts magnet schools. After a few brief years back in Connecticut, where she attended college and worked her first three frame shop jobs, Teresa spent seven years growing, living, and loving in Atlanta, GA, where she got married, had a baby, and flourished in her art and framing passions. Faubuzzi’s work has shown in a long list of galleries and festivals. Recently, Teresa packed up her daughter, Stella, her paintings, and her rescue mutt, Troy, and moved back to her home state of Connecticut, where she is happy to be with her much-missed family. Teresa works as a full time showroom consultant at Daltile, and does her art and framing on the side, pouring her soul into her work. Some of her work can be seen on her website: http://faubuzzi.wixsite.com/artfolio.

Courtney A. Harler | holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Sierra Nevada College and an MA in English Literature from Eastern Washington University. She attended Bread Loaf Vermont 2016. Her work has appeared in Northwest Boulevard, Neon Dreams, The Vignette Review, Blue Monday Review, Chicago Literati, From the Depths, The Normal School, The Wild Word, and Ghost Parachute. Her work is forthcoming in Sierra Nevada Review, Far Off Places, and Tittynope Zine. Courtney’s flash story “Wild Turkeys” was nominated for a 2017 Pushcart Prize. Courtney wishes to thank Palaver, for publishing her critical work, and Dr. Logan Greene, her instructor and mentor at Eastern Washington University, for encouraging this study.

Haley Holden | is a creative writing student at Bowling Green State University. She regularly enters writing contests and contributes online to The Odyssey in hopes of honing her craft.

Jason Anthony Lalor | is a sound, video, and performance artist from Miami, FL. He has a MFA in Design and Technology from Parsons, The New School of Design. Lalor has been included in several exhibitions including The Nerve Performance Art Festival (Fort Lauderdale, FL) and Poet-Linc at Lincoln Center (New York, NY). He is currently preparing a video installation-performance for the Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning (Jamaica, NY). Lalor currently lives and works in Jamaica, NY.

Benjamin (Brie) Martins | graduated from the University of Massachutts, Amherst, in 2008, and earned his MFA at the New York Academy of Art, graduating as the commencement speaker in 2011. The artist’s watercolor paintings fall away from the viewer like a half remembered dream; images of ghostly and phantom children, coming together to explode in kaleidoscopic colors. Working from found black and white photos of people long dead, the images are transformed into Technicolor nightmares, the old made new. Children dressed up as monsters, and monsters dressed up as children; these monochromatic visions glow with infernal light, watching the viewer, watch them. As a transgender artist grappling with the question of my own existence, these paintings are about what lies beneath the rolling lawns and whitewashed lives that are real America. Because behind every smiling face is a raised hand, a jealous lover, a murderous intent. We view the past through a rosy prism, greener grass viewed through a gap in the white picket fence to a time that never existed, the tension at the heart of it all. As Donald Kuspit writes in Some Dialectical Images (2011), “The female body also appears, somewhat fragmented and fiery, in Benjamin Martins’ Pretty Fierce—pretty but fierce, suggesting the difficulty of relating to her, if also her self-destructiveness.”

Hildy Maze | is an American artist of Turkish, Russian, and Austrian heritage. Born in Brooklyn, NY, she received a BFA from Pratt Institute. For many years, Hildy lived and
worked in her loft in Tribeca, NYC, before moving to East Hampton L.I., NY, where she currently works and lives. Her work is influenced by her twenty-five-year study and practice of Tibetan Buddhist meditation, involving the recognition of the basic nature of mind that is intrinsic, clear, empty, aware, and flawless from before any beginning. Hildy's work visually investigates and plays with how we obscure our recognition of these intrinsic qualities of mind. The provocative titles help to create an attentive environment. Ms. Maze has exhibited her work throughout the US, including NYC, Long Island City, Brooklyn, California, the Eastern End of Long Island, and internationally in Beijing, China, and Cologne, Germany. She has won numerous awards and is in several private collections in the US, Europe, and Asia.

Adam Iannucci McClelland | completed his MFA at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington and now calls Wilmington home. Gaining inspiration from travel, Adam appreciates international poetry, poetry in translation, and the diverse accents which poetry possesses.

Evan McMurry | graduated from Reed College and received his MFA in fiction from Texas State University-San Marcos. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in a dozen publications, including Post Road, Oddville Press, Lotus-Eater Magazine and more. His book reviews have been featured in Bookslut and elsewhere.

Joseph O'Neill | was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1965. He has no formal education in art, but did study to become a chef. In the process of becoming a chef, he was forced to develop the habit of trying, tasting, and experiencing things in a different way. He has been an active photographer throughout the last decade, but only began exhibiting in 2012. Because he is self-taught, he is never afraid to try different techniques. His photography has been influenced first by the works of Eugène Atget, and later by Man Ray. His earlier work in photography was an unplanned documenting of things that are taken for granted as he passed them. Since deliberately moving toward photography as fine art, he has been experimenting more with architectural abstracts and nude studies. His work has appeared in numerous group and solo exhibitions around the world, predominately in New York City and Europe. He has been published in art journals and art magazines, digitally and in print. His work is on display in the US Embassies in Oman and Latvia. He is also an active member of New York City’s oldest artist collective, The Phoenix Gallery.


Dani Rado | was born in New England and bounced around the country until she settled in Colorado, where she currently divides her time unevenly between work, the outdoors, and writing. Mainly a fiction writer, her stories have appeared in Mochila Review, 5th Wednesday, Floodwall, Bloom, Clackamas Review, Unstuck, and Liar’s League, among others. She has been awarded an artist’s residency at the Prairie Center for the Arts and the Sundress Academy for the Arts. She was a professional student for as long as she could manage, but is now a Professor of English at Johnson & Wales University in Denver, where she teaches writing and literature. She currently lives in that city with her fiancé and their four accidental cats.

Diana Simon | is a mother, psychologist, and watercolor artist living in southern California. She is best known for her interest in psychological subject matter and non-traditional painting techniques. “If we accept the idea that art doesn’t have to be perfect to be beautiful, that the imperfections are in fact what makes a piece of art beautiful, how could this change the way we view other people? Ourselves?” Simon asks. Her work has been influenced by her disability; she was diagnosed with multiple autoimmune diseases in 2011.

Josette Torres | received her MFA in Creative Writing from Virginia Tech. She also holds a BA in English and Creative Writing from Purdue University. Her work has previously appeared in Star 82 Review, escarp, Artemis, The New Verse News, and elsewhere. She is currently a doctoral student in cultural thought in Virginia Tech’s ASPECT Program.

Zack Weaver | is a professional artist out of Wilmington, NC. Major influences include White Zombie and Don Knotts. He calls these drawings Tarantulas because he wants you to feel like you have spiders all over your face. Learn more at zweaverart.com.