The North Meridian Review

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THE NORTH MERIDIAN REVIEW:
A JOURNAL OF CULTURE AND SCHOLARSHIP

ESTABLISHED 2019

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INTRODUCTION:
FALL 2023

Dear residents of North Meridian, both far and near, welcome to the annual fall issue of the North Meridian Review. It is a pleasure to be writing to you from the editor’s desk. This year has seen a return to a more stable and normal schedule for our small journal, especially when compared to last year’s swerves and unexpected developments.

We are happy to report that we are still an independent journal, a public humanities publication for the humane of the world.

Changes to our world from the COVID-19 pandemic are still not fully understood. Daily we see updates about the ongoing climate crisis, political instability, and reactionary movements. But, as always, we place our hope in the continued struggles for economic and social justice, and the insistence that we retain our humanity even as billionaires and white supremacists try to set fire to the world. What we find is that our maintained humanity means we must fight back.

As I write this introduction, my campus of Jacksonville State University of Alabama is amid a labor union organizing drive. Those of us wanting a better university that centers human development, ethics, and sustainability are proud to join the United Campus Workers–Communication Workers of America as a new local. We cannot claim to be centers of higher thought, yet thoughtlessly allow our institutions to continue down a path of renovative destruction for the profit of a few.

This year’s issue truly reflects both the spirit of NMR’s original mission, as well as the efforts to organize on campus. You will find a conglomerate of different pieces, perspectives, and topics. Several of the contributors are returning writers, and even more are making their debut with us in this issue.
BJ Bruther returns with a follow-up to her essay from last year. Continuing with the theme of using pop culture productions such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe to better understand the prevalence of reactionary politics in today’s political spectrum.

Michael White provides a deeply researched essay on the labor organizing efforts of bookstore workers at Half Price Books. He is a former worker for the chain, and his scholarship is both timely and important for future labor historians.

MariJean Wegert has authored a stunning and beautiful prose poem/essay titled “The Witness of Trees,” while Ricardo Quintana-Vallejo and Marc Valle provide NMR with its first fiction section. Their stories, respectively, about homophobia and manhood, and enclaves and death, are great additions to the journal. We look forward to expanding the fiction section in coming years.

Our poetry section has once again a host of poets at different stages in their careers, while our art section has grown from last issue to feature not just the official artist in residence, this year Sarah Ellis with a beautiful series of prints titled “Little Worries,” but also three other artists, Adeyemi Doss, Audrey Grison, and Vivienne Rose who discuss race, disability, and fat liberation in their work.

Finally, we have our review section of scholarly and creative titles.

This year we at North Meridian are excited to also announce the launch of a new wing of publications called “North Meridian Books,” an outgrowth of the ideas, practices, and personalities at the North Meridian Review. Taken together, these two ventures will represent a larger endeavor called North Meridian Press.
We are a writer-led and artist-led press. We do not strive to become rich. Instead, we are interested in publishing works of fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and translation that would otherwise not find homes at traditional publishers.

We are a press that is market adjacent and are proud to be so.

As we say, Donald Trump has found success in traditional publishing. Virginia Woolf began a small press to self-publish her works. We prefer to lean to Woolf over Trump.

As we grow and publish our first queue of titles, we will be discussing how to both compensate folks for their work while also maintaining an economically viable press.

Two final notes regarding misprints. Last year’s issue had two major mistakes. First, Charlie Wiles and John Lepley’s names were switched for attribution to their book reviews. It should have read that Wiles reviewed “The Peacemaker’s Path,” while Lepley reviewed “The Good Hand.” Also, for our special issue on the translation of the Auschwitz trial documents, the year of the trials was 1945, not 1940. We caught these errors after going to print, and have since updated them for the printer, and for our archived issues.

All in all, it is an exciting time at North Meridian, and we are glad you are here, dear reader.

Wesley R. Bishop
Founding and Managing Editor
The North Meridian Review: A Journal of Culture and Scholarship
Northeast Alabama
Fall 2023
"EVENTS IN PALESTINE," ART, 2023

IRINA TALL
Dear readers,

The US-funded war against the Palestinian people cannot be ignored. As an editor, educator, and American citizen I write to you sickened by the war crimes currently being committed by the Israeli government toward the Palestinian people in Gaza and the West Bank. I write with a deep sense of shame that decades removed from the horrors of the twentieth-century genocide can still be practiced by governments as a matter of public policy. I write with rage that my government, the government of the United States, is funding this ethnic cleansing. And I write with disgust that so many of my fellow citizens cannot summon the moral courage or clear thinking to call a genocide a genocide and demand that the American Democratic Party do more to stop the Israeli settler colonialism of the Palestinian peoples’ homes, country, and lives.

Arguing “both sides” have killed in this war ignores that it is Israel, and specifically the settlements, that have led to this current conflict. I think that many Americans have never interrogated our own settler colonial past, or the fact that our nation owes its existence to ethnic cleansing. As such, it should not be surprising that it has taken many Americans this long to come to terms with this aspect of our foreign policy.

The violence, and outrage to violence, and rhetoric around condemning the violence, is highly selective, and I am tired of the crocodile tears that Americans commenting on behalf of Israel shed.

There is only one peaceful solution to this conflict, and we all know it. Israel must give up its intent to colonize every inch of its envisioned nation. A cease-fire must commence. Israel must not just vacate Gaza but also give back the stolen lands surrounding Gaza and the West Bank. The United States needs to divest from Israel, and the US states need to cease to outlaw the Boycott, Divest, and Sanction movement.

In other words, we need a total reversal of policy of unequivocally supporting the Israeli government, and a new policy of supporting not just Palestine but also putting pressure on the Israeli government to change its racist internal laws.
We have a model of how this could work with how some Americans took on the apartheid government of South Africa. Then, too, the US political leadership, such as Ronald Reagan, argued that the anti-apartheid movement was a terrorist organization.

The US leadership was wrong then, and it is wrong now. The best way to end the violence is to oppose the Israeli government and demand they end the settler movement, accept democratic rights for all their citizens regardless of religion and race, and that the Israeli government be held accountable when it breaks the law.

Anything short of demanding changes to Israeli policies and settler colonialism is not a serious proposition of peace.

As an editor, a press, and writers, we at North Meridian condemn in the strongest terms possible the Israeli government’s actions.
THE NORTH MERIDIAN REVIEW

A HUMANITIES JOURNAL FOR THE HUMANE DURING INHUMANE TIMES
PROSE:
“Was Thanos Right?”: Mad Genius, Eugenics, and Popular Culture

BJ Bruther

“A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic.”

-Joseph Stalin (attributed)

Currently some fans of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) maintain that the Mad Titan—Thanos—was correct in his destruction of 50 percent of the universe’s population of higher sentient beings with a single snap of his fingers. Thanos believed that a less populated universe would allow planets to heal themselves from sentient-made ecological damage and the remnant populations to make their worlds, utopias for the survivors. Thanos is a familiar figure, the mad genius on a mission, drawn from exemplars in nineteenth-century literature, popularized in early twentieth-century film and later mass-produced comics, reaching worldwide audiences through film today. Everyone has seen them or heard of them—Frankenstein, Jekyll, and Moreau—but many are unfamiliar with their roots in the cutting-edge science and social Darwinism of the nineteenth century.

Thanos and his brother Eros, both Titans, had been the only survivors of their people, a people who had destroyed themselves through heedless population growth and apocalyptic ecological damage to their planet. He determined that the universe needed to be freed from the unwise decisions of multitudes of higher sentient beings on planets. He believed that it was his task to create the circumstances through which each planet could correct itself from ongoing ecological damage because fewer higher sentient beings would be alive to affect the planet. He
hoped that the survivors would understand the necessity for the destruction of millions of their fellow beings, to build a better world. He recruited followers, built armies, and attacked thousands of planets over the years, butchering a minimum of 50 percent of their populations. His armies carved their way through the universe, leaving terrible destruction in their wake. On some planets, he spared a child of the slaughter, making that child a well-educated and trained tool in his ordained task. The task seemed endless—a never-ending slaughter. Thanos sought a more humane way to carry out his mission. He discovered that there were six gems or stones, each possessing a particular property, that could be used in a glove or gauntlet, enabling the user to carry out his deepest desire. He believed that with a single snap, he could erase 50 percent of the universe’s higher sentient beings. His search for the stones brought him into contact with two opposing forces, the self-proclaimed Guardians of the Galaxy and the Avengers of Earth. Unfortunately, neither the Guardians nor the Avengers were able to prevent the mad Titan from completing his mission. Half of the higher sentient beings in the universe were snapped out of existence; to prevent a reversal of the snap, Thanos unilaterally destroyed the stones and the gauntlet. As he had hoped, many planets made a slow recovery from devastating ecological damage. However, he discovered that he was not a hero to the survivors, but a monster. As the snap removed individuals, vehicles fell from the sky; children were left without parents and vice versa; everything that depended on higher sentient direction, such as power plants, agricultural holdings, goods manufacturers, and medical care ceased operation leading to even more casualties of the snap. Some societies descended into violence, resulting in even more deaths. Some societies resorted to authoritarian measures to recover. As societies recovered, few of the survivors could forget their loved ones and others who had ceased to exist, and all blamed Thanos. Even Thanos was affected emotionally; he had sacrificed his favorite daughter, Gamora, the one being he loved on Vormir, so that he could possess
the Soul Stone. Unwilling to admit that he might have been wrong, Thanos considered resuming his genocidal mission, but Thor Odinsson of the Avengers killed him.¹

Thanos was a social Darwinist. The core idea of this nineteenth-century misunderstanding of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution maintained that only the strong or the fittest survive, which was applied to the individual and the nation-state. Thanos applied this idea to individuals in the films, in particular to his adopted daughters, Gamora and Nebula. Gamora and Nebula were taken from their home planets, their parents murdered, and trained to be his weapons. He pitted his daughters against each other in mind games and physical combat. He rewarded the strongest, the victor, in the competitions with attention and favor. As for the loser, she suffered pain, as he removed what he perceived as her weakness and replaced it with cybernetics, effectively making her a cyborg and more powerful weapon. Gamora was his favorite, the child who was the strongest, whereas Nebula was the loser and a cyborg.²

When Peter Quill, a Ravager, purloined an infinity stone, Thanos sent his daughters and Ronan the Accuser (a Kree warlord) to seize it. Gamora reached the Ravager first, and attempted to get the stone, but she and several others were arrested on the planet Xandar. They found themselves incarcerated where they formed what they called the Guardians of the Galaxy, to retrieve the stone, make a little money, and thwart Thanos. The Guardians were Peter Quill (a Terran), Rocket (an enhanced cybernetic animal), Groot (a living tree), Drax the Destroyer (a survivor of his planet’s genocide at the hands of Thanos), and, surprisingly, Gamora (who has decided that her father is wrong). Ronan and Nebula intervene, a conflict occurs, and the Guardians

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win (Ronan is killed; Nebula vanishes into space). The stone is placed in the hands of the ruling elite of Xandar and locked away from Thanos.3

Unsurprisingly, the Guardians embark on their next adventures in which they come into conflict with two other mad geniuses—Ego, the living planet and the High Evolutionary. They are narcissists, believing that they are right, focused on their particular missions. Nothing will stand in their way. They are narcissists, like Thanos, and authoritarian rulers in their corner of the universe. However, each faces a “monster” of their own creation—Thanos, Nebula; Ego, Peter Quill; and the High Evolutionary, Rocket—who will bring about their destruction.

The archetypal mad genius, upon whom Thanos, Ego, and the High Evolutionary, are based is Victor Frankenstein, the creation of a young author, Mary Shelley in her 1818 novel, Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus. Victor Frankenstein longed to know “the physical secrets of the world.”4 As a child and later adult, Frankenstein admitted

the world was to me a secret which I desired to divine. Curiosity, earnest research to learn the hidden laws of nature, gladness akin to rapture, as they were unfolded to me, are among the earliest sensations I can remember. . . It was the secrets of heaven and earth that I desired to learn, and whether it was the outward substance of things, or the inner spirit of nature and the mysterious soul of man that occupied me, still my enquiries were directed to the metaphysical, or its in its highest sense, the physical secrets of the world.5

He studied what he believed was science, books that his father condemned as rubbish, he read deeply, books on natural philosophy written by Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus, and Albertus Magus. He searched for the fabled “elixir of life,” the “philosopher’s stone,” only to discover new passions as he entered the university, galvanism and mathematics. He plunged into his studies of

3 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 18–19.
natural philosophy chemistry, and mathematics for two years, guided by his mentors, Krempe and Waldman. Later, he added the study of anatomy, spending hours in autopsy rooms, believing he “must also observe the natural decay and corruption of the human body.” He sets aside his childish interests, as he saw them, embracing the new science. For nearly three years, he absents himself from his family and isolates himself from his fellow students and even his mentors. Nothing else mattered, but his project, “After days and nights of incredible labour and fatigue, I succeeded in discovering the cause of generation and life; nay, more, I became myself capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter.” Frankenstein embarked on his mission, a plan that he believed would make him a famous and renowned scientist, the creator of a new race of man. He haunted the graveyards and charnel-houses, collecting the raw material for his grand experiment. He built a human-like being of “gigantic stature, that is to say, about eight feet in height, and proportionally large . . . a new species would bless me as its creator and source.” One night, he creates life from the dead. His creation breathes and reaches out to him. Frankenstein suddenly views his creation as an ugly wretch: “yellow skin scarcely covers the work of mules and arteries beneath . . . watery eyes . . . shriveled complexion . . . straight black lips . . . luxurious black hair and pearly white teeth.” Horrified, Frankenstein runs away, collapsing in the street, and suffering from brain fever for several months. The creature vanishes into the night.

When his creation, hounded and tortured, reestablishes contact, Victor Frankenstein presumes that the creature, ugly and misshapen, is a terrible monster. He rejects it over and over, even as it seeks his help. He takes no responsibility for his creation. As the creature turns its anger on him, vowing vengeance, he sees himself, and himself only, as its target. He neglects to warn

6 Ibid., 30.
7 Ibid., 31.
8 Ibid., 32.
9 Ibid., 35.
any of his family and friends, even allowing a young woman to hang for the murder of his brother, William, rather than reveal its existence. He presumes that he “should be supposed mad, and this in itself would forever have chained my tongue.” Thanos, Ego, and the High Evolutionary share his narcissism. They convince themselves of their correctness—murder, coercion, and cruelty are their methods. They breed “monsters.” Unlike Thanos, however, who remains a social Darwinist, Ego, the Living Planet, and the High Evolutionary are eugenicists.

In the nineteenth century, scientists developed the idea of eugenics, which was based on the discoveries of Gregor Mendel (the laws of heredity) and Charles Darwin (natural selection) linking those ideas to an existing theory of degeneracy. They developed an elaborate scientific foundation for their theories, based on the collection of interviews, statistics, and genealogy to document the inherited nature of negative blood-borne traits such as feeblemindedness, mental disability, and physical disability in extended families.

One of the more famous essays on degeneracy theory was Oscar C. McCulloch’s “The Tribe of Ishmael: A Study of Social Degradation,” based on his study of two poverty-stricken families in Indianapolis, Indiana. In his essay, he states clearly, as he talks of the life of minute organism, existing as a parasite on the crab, “A hereditary tendency I say, because some remote ancestor left its independent, self-helpful life, and began a parasitic, or pauper, life... This tendency to parasitism was transmitted to its descendants, until there is set up an irresistible hereditary tendency... stands in nature as a type of degradation through parasitism, or pauperism. I propose to trace the history of similar degradation in man.” McCulloch was a pastor of the

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10 Ibid., 136–37.
12 Ibid., 49.
Indianapolis Plymouth Church, and engaged in charitable activities directed at alleviating the poverty of Indianapolis residents. He coordinated these activities, and so interacted with families seeking or determined to need charity between 1879 and 1891. Although he had collected historical data for at least 250 families, he focused on thirty families descended from a man named Ben Ishmael in his essay. One of his sons, John, “married a half-breed woman, and came into Marion County, Indiana, about 1840. He was diseased, and could go no further. . . Since 1840, this family has had a pauper record. They have been in the almshouse, the House of Refuge, the Woman’s Reformatory, the penitentiaries, and have received continuous aid from the township. . . In this family history are murders, a large number of illegitimacies and of prostitutes. They are generally diseased. The children die young. They live by petty stealing, begging, ash-gathering. In summer they ‘gypsy’ or travel in wagons east or west. . . Strangely enough, they are not intemperate.”

McCulloch blames John’s wife, the half-breed, for contaminating the family—her “wandering blood” and “the poison and the passion that probably came with her.” They were diseased, physically and mentally weak, and unfit for hard work. They depended upon the ample public charity available to them in Indianapolis, “thus encouraging them in this idle, wandering life, and in the propagation of similarly disposed children.” McCulloch despairs of changing the family’s life. He holds out only one hope: “(f)irst, we must close up official out-door relief. Second, we must check private and indiscriminate benevolence, or charity, falsely so called. Third, we must get hold of the children.”

Studies of atavism and parasitism reach a critical mass in Gertrude C. Davenport’s study, “Hereditary Crime”, published in 1907, focusing on a Swiss family. Davenport details the history

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13 Ibid., 50–51.
14 Ibid., 51.
15 Ibid., 54.
of the “Zeros” of Zand, a village in Switzerland—the history of an extended family of habitual criminals.

Magnificent are the scope and effectiveness of our organizations of charity, church, and state, for the repression of crime. They can cope, however, only with crimes that are the product of unfit environment by diminishing temptations or by strengthening the individual’s inhibitions. But even if they should succeed in eradicating all such crimes there would still remain those committed by habitual criminals—criminals who are bred . . . .

The villagers of Zand were “an industrious, economical, earnest, cautious, moral and temperate people.” However, one extended family was quite different, the “Zeros drank, wandered aimlessly from home, persisted in no occupation, and almost always married foreign women.” Davenport traces the descent of the family, or at least one branch of the family, into habitual criminality to the marriage of “Andreas Zero” to Ida Olga Lauter, a “woman (who) . . . was a blood relative of her husband but her blood was tainted with insanity.” One of her sons married a Lauter relative, and it was from that son who made a marriage with an Italian, “a woman of wandering and vicious disposition” who became “the cause of the permanent downfall of this branch of the Zeros.” When his son married a German vagabond, the fate of the family was sealed. All seven of their children were wanderers and drunkards, and their descendants, often illegitimate, weak-minded, unhealthy, and criminal, engaging in begging and robbery of all kinds, and even murder. A Capuchin priest came to the village in 1861, encouraging the removal of poverty-stricken children from their families to place them in industrious and respectable homes. It was hoped that through proper exemplars and adequate education to change their lives. Davenport found “(A)ll the Zero children either ran way or were enticed away by their worthless kinsmen. It is clear, therefore, that the Zeros

17 Ibid., 68–69.
18 Ibid., 69.
19 Ibid., 69–70.
20 Ibid., 70–71.
cannot be reclaimed by favorable environment. It is a matter of selective breeding, or better still of preventative breeding. . . Physical weakness is becoming more pronounced with each generation and infant mortality is great.”21 She believed that state intervention might not be necessary, as natural selection would eradicate the Zeros over time.

Additional studies simply reinforced McCulloch’s and Davenport’s findings. Elizabeth Kite, in her study of the Kallikak brothers in 1912, made extensive genealogical studies of the descendants of two brothers—one established an industrious and honest lineage; the other, a lineage of degenerate individuals and habitual criminals. She had determined that one son, a revolutionary war soldier, had married a “wayward girl” and their son, nicknamed the “Old Horror,” founded a line that lived in darkness: “a race of degenerates which, out of total of four hundred and eighty descendants, numbers in almshouse cases, in keepers of houses of prostitution, in inmates of reformatories and institutions for the feeble-minded, in criminals of various sorts and in feebleminded not under state protection, 143 souls.”22 When children of their liaisons gravitated toward urban areas, they settled at “the bottom,” carrying on the vice-ridden lives of their progenitors.23 Many of these individuals were of Germanic or Anglo-Saxon descent, living in the isolated regions of the United States (and Europe), cut off from the benefits of civilization. They were primitives—atavistic “throw-backs” or bestial degenerates, made so by intercourse with women labeled racially inferior. What followed publication of these and other studies was a thorough-going effort on the part of the progressive reformers and eugenicists in the United States to convince states to prevent those labeled feebleminded, mentally ill, wayward individuals, and career criminals from producing children through legally mandated sterilization. The goal of these

21 Ibid., 73.
23 Ibid., 76–77.
efforts was to purify the white race; sterilization had already been applied to those labeled racially inferior. Indiana, where McCulloch, had done early work on eugenics, passed the first eugenics-based sterilization law in the world in January 1907; it targeted individuals living within the state’s asylums, poorhouses, and prisons. Other American states followed Indiana’s lead.\textsuperscript{24}

As these ideas took hold in the scientific community, fiction writers popularized them. Two of these writers influenced the sequels to the first Guardians of the Galaxy film—Robert Louis Stevenson’s \textit{The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde} and H. G. Wells’s \textit{The Island of Dr Moreau}. Both Jekyll and Moreau sought to create perfected beings and perfected societies through physical changes to human and animal.\textsuperscript{25}

Degeneracy theory plays a role in the story of Dr. Henry Jekyll and his alter-ego, Edward Hyde. The tale opens with a terrifying story, “(W)ell, sir, the two ran into one another naturally enough at the corner; and then the horrible part of the thing, for the man trampled calmly over the child’s body and left her screaming on the ground.”\textsuperscript{26} As the witnesses approached the man and apprehended him, they all felt a strong irrational loathing of the man. None of them could put their finger on the why, but they felt “there is something wrong with his appearance; something displeasing, something downright detestable. . . He must be deformed somewhere; he gives a strong feeling of deformity”\textsuperscript{27} The narrator is stunned to discover that the man had some connection to the esteemed and altruistic Dr. Henry Jekyll, for Hyde draws money from the good


\textsuperscript{26} Ibid. \textit{Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde}, 4.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 7.
doctor’s account, to pay for the child’s care, as long as they do not bring the police to his door. As the narrator makes Hyde’s acquaintance, he describes the man as “pale and dwarfish” possessed of a “murderous mixture of timidity and boldness,” “husky” with a “whispering and somewhat broken voice.” He reiterates that anyone who came into contact with him felt “disgust, loathing, and fear.” Nearly a year passes before Hyde surfaces again. This time he comes to police notice. Unlike the trampled working-class child, his next victim is a well-known member of the London elite, Sir Danvers Carew. A respectable witness testified as to Hyde’s actions.

And the next moment, with ape-like fury, he was trampling his victim under foot and hailing down a storm of blows under which the bones were audibly shattered. . . the stick with which the deed had been done, although it was of some rare and very tough and heavy wood had broken in the middle under the stress of the insensate cruelty.

Soon after this horrific event, the police are unable to trace Hyde. He disappears from public view. Jekyll’s friends believe that the good doctor smuggled him out of England to some foreign shore. They are unable to explain his presence in the good doctor’s life, assuming he was the product of some unsavory union in Jekyll’s past. Jekyll himself guarantees that Hyde will never return, saying “No, I cannot say that I care what becomes of Hyde; I am quite done with him. I was thinking of my own character which this hateful business has rather exposed.” Like Victor Frankenstein, Jekyll, for all his charitable activities, is a classic narcissist. He thought nothing of giving the working-class child’s parents money to prevent Hyde’s arrest or about silencing his friends about his link to Carew’s killer. His own reputation concerns him. He is desperate to hide the reality. Dr. Henry Jekyll is Edward Hyde. Edward Hyde is the result of an experiment. Jekyll believes that “man is not truly one, but truly two.” He dreams of separating the two characters of man, the just

28 Ibid., 15.
29 Ibid., 23.
30 Ibid., 29.
31 Ibid., 65.
and the unjust. He chooses himself as the experimental subject, what better subject could exist—an honorable man. He believes “the unjust might go his way, delivered from the aspirations and remorse of his more upright twin; and the just could walk steadfastly and securely, on his upward path, doing the good things, in which he found his pleasure, and no longer exposed to disgrace and penitence by the hands of extraneous evil.” Jekyll believes that once he has separated the two natures that each will take a corporeal form, existing as two individuals, independent of each other. Jekyll purchases rare salts, combines them, and creates a drinkable potion. He drinks the potion, discovering that it does separate the two natures. However, they share the same body. Jekyll becomes Hyde, “I knew myself, at the first breath of this new life, to be more wicked, tenfold more wicked, sold a slave to my original evil; and the thought, in that moment, braced and lifted me like wine.” He indulges the evil within him, going places and doings things that the upright Jekyll would never do, secure in the knowledge that drinking the potion will return him to the guise of Henry Jekyll. When Hyde butcheres Sir Danvers Carew, Jekyll resolves never to allow Hyde his freedom, drinking the potion one last time to restore Jekyll. Everything goes back to normal for Jekyll. Until one night, when, much to Jekyll’s horror, Hyde manifests himself without the aid of the potion. Jekyll desperately re-creates his potion, so that he can banish Hyde once more. The potion fails him, leaving him to face the loss of his position in society and the disgrace of a murder conviction as Edward Hyde, so he commits suicide.

Although Dr. Henry Jekyll does not indulge himself with a breeding program, his idea of two characters or natures influences the story of Peter Quill and his biological father, Ego, the Living Planet, in Guardians of the Galaxy, Volume 2. Ego, a Celestial, wants to remake the universe

32Ibid., 65–66.
33Ibid., 67.
34Ibid., 384–5, 67–70, 74, 83–84.
in his own image, but over eons, he has discovered that he cannot do it alone. He needs another Celestial, and so creates a breeding program. He journeys to thousands of planets, mates with sentient beings on those planets, all to create a child that has the Celestial gene. Once he creates that child, he believes that the two of them can create an Ego universe. Of course, once he uses that child, the child will be one with Ego. He sees his children as extensions of himself, not separate entities; they are Ego. He creates child after child, bringing them to himself, and as they mature, he tests them. None have the Celestial gene, so he exterminates them, and moves on to create more children. When he hears about Peter Quill and the Guardians of the Galaxy’s encounter with an infinity stone, he thinks that he has found the child of his dreams. He remembers that he had paid a Ravager, to bring his offspring to his world, in particular a youngster, the child of a woman of Earth, Meredith Quill. In fact, it seems the Living Planet had developed feelings for the woman, visiting her more than once to impregnate her. She seems to have known that Ego was from the stars, for she called her son, “my little Star Lord.” Rather than take the boy to his biological father, the Ravager adopts him. Peter Quill becomes an adult, a Ravager and an accomplished thief, calling himself “Star Lord.” Ego decides to introduce himself to his son. He helps the Guardians, reveals himself to Peter who decides to journey to his biological father’s home, hoping to build a relationship with the man. Blinded by his emotions, Peter Quill simply wants a father, whereas Ego wants a tool. Peter does not go alone, Gamora and Drax journey to Ego’s home world where they encounter Mantis. Ego has a relationship with the young woman; she is an empath, capable of soothing his mind and body, taking away Ego’s pain. Gradually, the truth is revealed; Mantis reveals the skeletons of Ego’s exterminated children to Gamora. Ego reveals his plan to Peter Quill; he cannot imagine that Peter will reject his plan. He also tells Peter that it disturbed him, for he did have feelings for Meredith Quill, when he placed the cancer in her that killed her. Angered, Peter
fights his father. The Guardians, reunited, join him in the battle to destroy Ego. They succeed. Ego, the Living Planet, ceases to exist. Peter loses the powers that his Celestial gene had given him. He becomes Peter Quill, human.\(^{35}\)

James Gunn, the director of the *Guardians of the Galaxy* films, links the third film directly to Wells’s *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, saying “The High Evolutionary is one of my favourite Marvel villains. . . I’ve always been a big fan of [1932 film] *Island of Lost Souls*. He’s like a space Doctor Moreau.”\(^ {36}\) Rocket, the cybernetic animal-genius of the Guardians, is an escaped creation of the High Evolutionary; the High Evolutionary wants his experiment back. He wants to dismantle Rocket, to examine why, of all his experiments, Rocket became Rocket. When he comes for Rocket, the Guardians unite to protect a member of their found family. The High Evolutionary and his story owe much to Wells’s short novel.

The novel is a found manuscript about the horrific adventure of one Edward Prendick, the only survivor of the ship *Lady Vain*, who was discovered drifting alone on a wrecked ship in the Pacific Ocean almost one year later. He returned to civilization, claiming to have lost all memory of what happened to him. Later his nephew found the manuscript in his uncle’s papers, and publishes it as an adventure story.

After being rescued at sea, Prendick finds himself marooned on an island with two scientists, Doctors Montgomery and Moreau, who debate about his usefulness to their enterprise, a biological station. Prendick presumes that if he is not valuable to their project, he would be banished from the island, set adrift once more in the vast Pacific Ocean. He drops a name into their

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conversation about his science background, Huxley had been his mentor at the Royal College of Science. Moreau grudgingly accepts his pleas. Montgomery warns him about the island and its inhabitants. Prendick, for his part, has been alarmed by the servants on the island. They are somehow deformed and their eyes shine, not red at night, but green. He also thinks that he has heard the name Moreau before. As he interacts with one of the servants, he notes the man has a furry pointed ear. He remembers Moreau: “He had published some very astonishing facts in connection with the transfusion of blood, and in addition, was known to be doing valuable work on morbid growths. Then suddenly his career was closed. He had to leave England.”37 His wanton cruelty to and mutilation of animals in his laboratory were exposed to the public in a sensational pamphlet, Prendick remembered reading it as a lad ten years before.38 Puzzled Prendick watches the servants, he draws a terrible conclusion, “Could it be possible, I thought, that such a thing as the vivisection of men was possible? . . . Moreau had been vivisecting a human being . . . the memory of his works in the transfusion of blood recurred to me. These creatures I had seen were the victims of some hideous experiment!”39 Prendick, once he sees the village of the Beast Men and hears the recitation of the Law, demands the truth from Moreau. Moreau states “Yes. These creatures you have seen are animals carven and wrought into new shapes. To that—to the study of plasticity of living forms—my life has been devoted. I have studied for years, gaining knowledge as I go. I see you look horrified, and yet I am telling you nothing new.”40 He continues, “To this day I have never troubled about the ethics of the matter. The study of Nature makes a man at last as remorseless as Nature.”41 Further, “I have been doing better, but somehow the things drift back

37 Wells. Island of Dr. Moreau, 43.
38 Ibid., 44.
39 Ibid., 68–69.
40 Ibid., 97.
41 Ibid., 102.
again, the stubborn beast flesh grows, day by day, back again.”\textsuperscript{42} Finally, he finishes, “It’s afterwards as I observe them that the persuasion fades. First one animal trait, then another creeps to the surface and stares out at me . . . But I will conquer yet. Each time I dip a living creature into the bath of burning pain, I say, this time I will burn out all the animal, this time I will make a rational creature of my own.”\textsuperscript{43} Prendick notes that Moreau and Montgomery are careful to maintain a vegetarian diet for the creatures, fearing the taste of blood might have a negative effect on them. And the recitation of the law reinforces their human identity and deifies Moreau: “His is the House of Pain. His is the Hand that Makes. His is the Hand that Wounds. His is the Hand that Heals.”\textsuperscript{44} It ends quickly for the three men; the only survivor is Prendick. He watches as the Beast Men revert back into animals, eventually he escapes the island. Prendick returns to civilized society, yet he “could not persuade myself that the men and women I met were not also another, still passably human, Beast People, animals half-wrought into the outward image of human souls and that they would presently begin to revert, to show first this bestial mark then that. . . And I go in fear. I see faces keen and bright, others dull or dangerous, others unsteady, insincere; none that have the calm authority of a reasonable soul. I feel as though the animal was surging up through them; that presently the degradation of the Islanders will be played over again on a larger scale. . . it seemed that the preacher gibbered Big Thinks even the Ape Man had done.”\textsuperscript{45}

Unlike Moreau who seems to have created the Beast Men, simply because he could make them, and then establish a semblance of human society based upon the law, his deification, and the House of Pain; the High Evolutionary wants to create a perfect society; a society of peace in which he is worshiped as a creator-God. If his experiment fails, he simply destroys it. If his experiment

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 105.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 107.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 79–80.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 182–84.
exceeds beyond his wildest dreams, he seeks to capture it and dismantle it to understand what he did correctly. Counter-Earth is his failed experiment which he destroys; Rocket is his perfected being. He does not see his experiments as living, independent beings. They are simply experiments. Rocket becomes the monster that he cannot control, the Guardians, Rocket’s found family, his enemies. They free his experiments—every higher sentient being and the abducted animals.46

Although the current superhero films draw on deep wells of racism, misogyny and cutting-edge science from the scientific-adventure novels of the nineteenth century, the Guardians of the Galaxy trilogy provides an alternative reality. The self-proclaimed Guardians of the Galaxy share a past; they have all been affected by the decisions of the mad geniuses that they encounter in their adventures. Gamora would not be the assassin and warrior that she is without the training of Thanos; her sister Nebula would not be the cyborg that she is without the social Darwinism of Thanos. Peter Quill would not exist without the universe wide breeding program that Ego had created in his effort to create a child with a Celestial gene. Rocket, cybernetic genius would not exist without the breeding program of the High Evolutionary. However, each suffered because of these actions. Gamora and Nebula were treated as extensions of Thanos, servants of his genocidal program and victims of that program. Peter Quill was abducted from Earth and raised among what were essentially space pirates (Ravagers). Rocket was abducted from Earth along with other animals, suffered immense pain, and the loss of his first found family at the hands of the High Evolutionary. None of their creators saw their “children” as independent thinking beings; they were simply tools to be altered and discarded at will. The Guardians place themselves squarely in opposition to the actions of these authoritarian and narcissistic geniuses, advocating for the bodily and mental autonomy of the people, broadly interpreted, of the galaxy. In the world of the

46 Guardians of the Galaxy Volume 3, dir. James Gunn (Marvel, 2023)
Guardians, individuals should have control over their own bodies and minds. They should not be sacrificed for the “greater good” or for some “perfected society.”
A BRIEF HISTORY OF UNION ORGANIZING
AT HALF PRICE BOOKS

MICHAEL WHITE
Introduction:

The national dialogue surrounding labor unions, labor disputes, and workplace issues is at a level and focus now unlike any time in recent history. Unionization campaigns at Starbucks, Amazon, and other companies; recent labor disputes such as the Rail Workers, John Deere, Kelloggs, the Writers Guild of America, and SAG-AFTRA; all the labor issues surrounding COVID-19, the ensuing pandemic, and the post-pandemic recovery; and the general social milieu becoming more labor-conscious have all worked to bring labor issues back into the national common conversation.

Of all the amazing and noteworthy campaigns, one smaller yet equally interesting and important unionization campaign is taking place at bookstores across the country: that of the Booksellers of Half Price Books. While Booksellers at various other bookstore companies have an organizing precedence going back to Powell’s Books in the late 1990s, recent union organizing among Booksellers has been growing at a higher frequency and with a higher degree of militancy due to deteriorating living conditions, lack of living wages, lack of preventative health care, and a general degeneration of the career into another bad retail job. Booksellers at Half Price Books, one of the

47 Edited by and with contributions from the Half Price Books Workers United National Organizing Committee.

See the appendix for a chronological list of known union-organized bookstores.
oldest and most expansive bookstore resale chains in the country, have been organizing unions at individual stores since the spring/summer of 2021. Growing to nine unionized stores across five states in the Midwest, these Booksellers might be laying the groundwork for fresh new strategies and concepts of how to organize individual retail stores and at the same time how to build a national unionization effort. With a record of nine union elections and nine wins, Booksellers organizing at Half Price Books might be rewriting how to approach union organizing at retail stores. By organizing at each location individually, building workplace committees, building a wider union apparatus at each store, connecting each store’s organizing committee to a national organizing committee via liaisons, and with the help of locals of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) and their amazing resources, Booksellers have staged a highly successful unionization campaign, including a much publicized two-day strike action in Minnesota. The fact that these are all happening in the Midwest should make organizers in the big cities and on the coasts take note. What follows is a brief history of the efforts of Booksellers at Half Price Books to organize their trade, improve their conditions, and gain a better living for themselves and their families.
Union Background/ COVID:

Union organizing at Half Price Books began following the initial COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Half Price Books closed all stores to the public on March 17, 2020. Then on March 25 they shut down all the stores completely when stay-at-home orders began to take effect across the country. At that time HPB laid-off or furloughed a huge portion of its employees, many of whom were Booksellers. Over 2,100 employees, 78 percent of the company’s work force, were put out of work without healthcare, without any notice, without any idea of when they would come back to work.50 Fired and furloughed workers banded together on Zoom meetings, Reddit, GoFundMe, Facebook

group pages, and even made a public Twitter page dedicated to bringing their stories to light. Many former managers, assistant managers, and Booksellers contributed their stories of working decades for the company and then being fired instead of furloughed, completely let go in a time of need and uncertainty. Whereas Booksellers with minimal experience and time with the company (making the minimum wage) were usually furloughed indefinitely. When workers came back it was clear that at many stores more senior Booksellers were not coming back, workers who had spent a lifetime building a career with a progressive and fun resale bookstore company were cast aside and not given second thought. Though it was not the case at every store, it seemed to be a general commonality that HPB was more focused on bringing back newer and therefore lower-paid workers to save money; there was no recall by seniority. The company carried on with many stores having significantly reduced staffing and many younger and newer employees. The company also froze wages for all of 2020, so throughout the time of the continuing pandemic, the return to work, masking, the winter of 2020–2021, the holiday shopping season, high prices, and inflation, Booksellers did not receive raises. Most of these new Booksellers were only making between $10 to $11 dollars an hour at this time in 2020, barely enough to survive on, much less to use to build a life.

**Background of HPB:**

Half Price Books as a company prides itself on being more progressive, supporting many social causes and charity organizations, and providing a higher standard of living than most retailers to its employees. The company was initially conceived and founded by visionary Ken Gjemre, a

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veteran of World War II, former Zales salesman, and later a progressive anti–Vietnam War corporate dropout.52 Gjemre’s partner was Pat Anderson, described as the realist of the duo who contributed the financial and business know-how to Gjemre’s ideas. She was the one who put the down payment on the initial company plan and kept the business running day-to-day. Gjemre, a more idealistic thinker, wanted to establish a used book and music store that operated on more equitable ideals than most retailers.53 The idea and model were so successful that the business spread and over time grew, expanded, established stores in other states, developed warehouses and shipping, and organized a more structured corporate enterprise. Though for most of Ken’s and Pat’s lives the model stayed true to its initial ideals. Workers were paid well for retail, workers had decent health care completely paid for by the company, were provided childcare or compensation for it, and received paid hour-long lunches among many other pro-worker benefits. Booksellers had a say in the sections they ran, in monthly meetings with managers and other workers. The company was transparent and accountable to the Booksellers, who at the time had a stake with good options to buy stock. Along with that, the company also developed a system of profit sharing, quarterly bonuses, a holiday bonus, and contributions to 401k accounts.54 Booksellers had the opportunity to move up in the company, which used to have a strict policy of only hiring from within.55 From the beginning, Gjemre and Anderson designed the company to be environmentally


friendly, to help recycle books and other media, to act as a way to save things from the dump. Interestingly enough, the more one looks at Gjemre, the more it seems Ken had become more progressive, community-minded, environmentally conscious, democracy-oriented, and even what we might call Socialist in a modern sense. He was quoted in his life as being a believer in “industrial democracy.” Gjemre’s countercultural personal ideals, the business practices he implemented, and the vision he had for HPB being a refuge for musicians, artists, and humanities majors to build a life outside of the corporate rat-race made him beloved by his employees throughout his life.

**How the Company Changed:**

Over time though, and as new leaders came up, and the company spread and expanded, the culture and ideals of the company were corrupted and altered. Eventually Ken left leadership of the company to Pat, Pat passed away a few years later, and one of Pat’s daughters, Sharon Anderson Wright, took over as CEO and president of HPB. Initially some worried she might sell the company, but she did not and for some time kept things operating the same. Though by the early 2000s, and after the death of Gjemre in 2002, the company began to change dramatically. To keep up with other book and media stores, HPB began to develop database systems and an online presence, and out of that came the need to barcode items to sell online, and further computerized database systems, modules that assisted Booksellers in doing the buy-back process, and POS cash registers. Everything was made scannable and many long-held, hard-learned Bookseller trade secrets and skills were made obsolete. The profession of Bookseller, which once took months and

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56 Ibid.

months, sometimes years, to fully grasp and learn, was now mostly done with computer programs; the trade had been deskilled and computerized.\(^{58}\) Within this idea of digitizing each store’s inventory is that it not only gives the company a robust online presence but means that each store acts as a mini-warehouse for online inventory and as a pick-up and distribution center for the company at-large. So, each Bookseller is performing the simultaneous duties of retail customer service rep, warehouse stocker, and inventory taker all in one, thereby increasing the profitability of each store, projecting the brand further, and helping HPB increase its online market.\(^{59}\) Sharon Anderson Wright’s tenure as head of HPB has been an era of intense expansion, going from 47 stores in 1993, to 61 stores by 1999, and now in 2023 there are over 120 locations throughout the country. One of her first big acts as CEO was to build a new and massive flagship store in Dallas, Texas. The massive complex has over 55,000 square feet of space, bigger sections, two special rooms for reading and art exhibits, space for local café, huge windows with natural lighting, loading, shipping, and pricing areas; in general, the store is a massive version of the other smaller stores, even bigger than the outlet locations with considerably more staffing and streamlined operating system of production and processing.\(^{60}\)

HPB developed a corporate structure that became a mystery to most on-the-ground Booksellers, and new subsidiaries and divisions of HPB emerged, inventing new corporate positions while the company began to take benefits and privileges away from Booksellers. Older


Booksellers reveal that the company seems to have done away with health care first, instituting a three-tiered option plan with the lowest still being paid for by the company if an employee was full-time, with the next two tiers increasing in coverage and in cost. While the options are good to have theoretically, most employees can only afford the lowest tier option, which does not cover many costs of preventive medicine, essentially providing reactive care when any health issues do arise. And the coverage of the lowest tier option is not good, persons with serious illnesses could not fight a condition with complicated procedures and pay medical bills. The lowest-tier insurance option is there, but it’s nothing that’ll help in a serious time of need. As well, the company once provided childcare and the ability for Booksellers to bring children to work or provided parents with the ability to afford it. Both are things of the past now. Not too long ago, Booksellers had a full hour of paid lunch, meaning that Booksellers once were able to get a full 40-hour work week. The company did away with that, making the hour lunch break unpaid, meaning a full-time worker can only get up to 35 hours a week! Eventually HPB began expanding its business practices into real-estate, buying the lot across the street from the flagship store in Dallas, developing it, and renting space to other retailers and for offices.\(^1\) This multi-million dollar endeavor was started in the early 2010s and has continued to this day. Now called the BookMark Center, the space is rented to REI, for office spaces, and includes a stand-alone Starbucks location. As well as having other office buildings, parking lots, and other possible plans for development. Community members have voiced concern over the project as displacing historically disenfranchised residents by raising

\(^1\) Jason Heid, “Trader Joe’s, Looking For Your First Dallas Store Location? Give Half Price Books a Call.” \textit{D Magazine}, May 3, 2011, \url{https://www.dmagazine.com/frontburner/2011/05/trader-joes-looking-for-your-first-dallas-store-location-give-half-price-books-a-call/}. Jason Heid discusses Sharon Anderson Wright’s excursions into the world of high-end real-estate and development! There is actually a ton more info on this, as apparently HPB has bought, sold, developed, and leased properties and storefronts throughout the 2010s in Texas. One of these projects is a shopping center (something that sounds like it’s akin to a mall).
rents and costs and driving out economically disadvantaged people, gentrifying the area.\textsuperscript{62} HPB leaders have also bought and developed their own side businesses, including the margarita mix company Ready Rita and Rooster Home and Hardware, an urban landscaping and farming company.\textsuperscript{63} Over about two decades HPB became antithetical to its original founding ideals and motives, corrupting the vision of Ken Gjemre and Pat Anderson, and actively doing away with many of the standards and policies that made it a uniquely good career. Leadership at HPB intentionally de-skilled the Bookseller position, computerized the work process, and rescinded many worker-friendly company policies to increase profitability for the benefit of HPB leadership and Sharon Anderson Wright.

**Organizing in Minnesota:**

Unionizing had been on the minds of many fired and furloughed Booksellers throughout 2020, but steps were not taken until the spring of 2021. Booksellers in Minnesota began organizing throughout the spring and summer of 2021 and, after a thorough and well-orchestrated organizing drive, Booksellers at four of the six stores around the Twin Cities area of St. Paul and Minneapolis filed for elections to have union representation. On October 14, 2021, Booksellers at locations at Roseville and St. Paul went public with their union-organizing campaign when they filed for an election to have union representation. The next day workers at the Northtown store went public as


being part of the campaign. And not too long after that Booksellers at the St. Louis Park store also went public as part of the campaign and filed for an election to have union representation.\textsuperscript{64} Finally sensing the outrage and in an attempt to stop more Booksellers from organizing, just four days after the unionization campaigns went public HPB raised all Bookseller base hourly wages from what they were in late 2021 from $12 to $13. A few weeks later base hourly wages were raised again from $13 per hour to $14 per hour. And then even later, after more stores went public, HPB raised base starting hourly wages from $14 to $15. As starting base wages went up, others’ wages were also adjusted and raised; unionizing was already having clearly successful results. The company raised wages because of unionization efforts and the campaigns going public, they didn’t raise wages out of the goodness of their hearts. Booksellers had worked throughout this time with organizers and representatives of the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW). UFCW staff in the two locals that represent Booksellers in Minnesota had helped Booksellers through the process, giving legal and organizing advice and helping coordinate efforts. Booksellers initiated and controlled the entire endeavor, but without help from the UFCW it would have been far more difficult to navigate all the legal requirements and hurdles that come up when trying to organize a union.

**Demands and Reasons Behind Organizing:**

Booksellers in Minnesota set the tone for demands when they went public with their campaign in October 2021, though each store’s Booksellers are negotiating their own contract. All the organizing stores have worked together, aiming for many of the same items to be included in

negotiated contracts. The main demands that Booksellers want contracts to address include: union recognition, a living wage, job security and transparency, improved communications, better health and safety systems, better training, and overall respect and dignity in the workplace from the company and from customers. Each of these points represents several different parts or aspects of the contracts Booksellers want to negotiate. The idea is to improve the workplace, improve the company, improve Booksellers’ lives, make the workplace safer, make it more functional, and to give Booksellers a way to feel like they have a stake and a say in the company whose success they contribute to.

Each of the organized stores has particular issues stemming from specific situations on the ground. Some stores have issues with bad customers or stalkers and need security. Some have focused on their healthcare packages. Issues with out-of-date technology and broken tools have led to clauses guaranteeing access to functioning and safe tools and technology (such as computers, scanners, price guns, library and flat carts, box tape guns, box-cutters). Overall, the stores are working together to make sure each gets many of the same protections, making a kind of blueprint for a standard contract to use as a model for more stores as they go public with their own campaign. In general, having the basic protections that a union contract gives is the most important aspect—including having a union steward on the job, grievances procedure, seniority, recall in case of shutdown, codified steps for disciplinary actions, enhanced guaranteed legal protections, guaranteed competitive wages and raises, increased transparency from the company, improved safety

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65 For further explanation of demands, see Half Price Books Workers United, [https://www.ufcw.org/actions/campaign/half-price-books-workers-united/](https://www.ufcw.org/actions/campaign/half-price-books-workers-united/).

conditions and standards, and more respect for workers from management and the company. In essence, having more rights as a worker on the job.67

**Organizing Outside of Minnesota:**

Over fall and winter of 2021–2022, as the Booksellers in Minnesota filed for election, went public, and moved forward with their election to have union representation, Booksellers in Greenwood, Indiana, began their own endeavor. Booksellers at the Greenwood location, on the southside of Indianapolis, organized throughout the winter and into the early spring of 2021–2022, finally going public with their organizing effort in early March 2022, and having their election for union representation on April 1, 2022.68 At the same time, Booksellers in Niles, Illinois, began organizing, meeting together, and moving forward with their own union campaign. The Niles location had their election for union representation on May 7, 2022.69 Throughout these campaigns and election processes, HPB actually continued to improve the workplaces, trying to appease workers. They put in better floor mats, installed new cleaning supply cabinets, improved any maintenance problems, took steps to address any safety concerns, replaced old and faulty breakroom chairs and tables, improved basic issues, and made repairs throughout the stores. But by the summer and fall of 2022, two more stores had gone through the organizing process and

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went public with their union-organizing campaigns in similarly to the previous stores. In August 2022, Booksellers at the Hurstbourne, Kentucky, store filed for election for union representation; they had their election on September 23, 2022. On October 10, 2022, Booksellers at the Wichita, Kansas, store filed for their election for union representation; they had their election on November 17, 2022. It was around this time that HPB finally raised starting base hourly wages a third time from $14 to $15 for all nonunion stores, but in a vindictive act made the union stores bargain for their raise (which they all eventually obtained).

Following Wichita’s lead and seeing all the progress union organizing had brought, Booksellers at the Overland Park, Kansas, location soon began their organizing efforts, connected with Booksellers in Wichita, then the wider organizing apparatus of previously unionized stores. Overland Park had had significant issues throughout the summer during a store move from an old location to a new location. The older location had excessive mold, bad air conditioning, and no help from district or regional managers. When the move finally happened, the air conditioning went out and Booksellers were made to box up and move books in June in the Kansas heat. Some Booksellers got sick and complained, some questioned whether they would get hazard pay. The only relief that HPB provided were popsicles, Gatorade, and cheap box fans. Following these dangerous conditions, Booksellers undertook a fantastic under-the-radar organizing campaign at their location. Booksellers at the Overland Park location voted unanimously for union


representation on July 20, 2023. Winning their election with a vote count of 14 to 0, all Booksellers voted in favor of union representation.

Though at Overland Park, HPB tried to have one of their company lawyers be the company representative during the union vote, because they couldn’t get any Bookseller to act as the company’s representative. During an in-store union vote a worker-representative for both the union and the company are chosen to check off each eligible voter as they enter to vote. Because no Bookseller wanted to act as the company’s representative, the company tried to get a company lawyer who had been previously involved in union-busting activity to act as their representative on behalf of the company. HPB was not permitted to do so by National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) representatives on the election day, the lawyer was asked to leave the voting area, and HPB had to choose a Bookseller. HPB filed an objection on the grounds that they were not allowed to choose a pro-company person (because following the vote it became apparent that the entire staff voted in-favor of the union). So HPB filed a complaint, an objection, claiming that there was some kind of impropriety. The only impropriety that existed was trying to use a union-busting lawyer as their in-store vote representative to try to influence and intimidate Booksellers. Regardless of this obviously false and fabricated objection that is still being mitigated by the NLRB (which the company is obviously using to slow the entire process of union recognition), every store, all nine, won their union elections with clear uncontested majorities, despite the company’s aggressive union-busting tactics.

**Challenges in Organizing:**

Booksellers at each of the nine stores had different organizing experiences and faced different challenges in building their unions in the workplace. Generally, though, each went through the steps of building an organizing committee on the job at each store whose members navigated the
tasks of talking to other Booksellers, meeting with them off the clock, explaining what was happening, and trying to get them involved. As the organizing efforts gained steam, the groups of Booksellers at each individual store would meet via Zoom or in public to plan steps, strategize, develop tactics, and discuss happenings at their stores. Social gatherings were also a way to build more group cohesion, helping Booksellers to get to know each other outside of work and build the networks of communication and trust necessary in organizing. Throughout this time UFCW organizers would work with the Booksellers’ organizing committees, helping to guide them through the process, offering advice, and teaching Booksellers the finer points of union organizing. Had it not been for the help of the UFCW, Booksellers’ organizing efforts might not have been so successful.

Throughout the entire process of organizing, each of the unionized stores and stores still in the process of organizing would meet a few times a month via Zoom. Booksellers held old-school style union meetings via Zoom using Rusty’s Rules of Order, a simplified version of Robert Rules of Order, with a chair, co-chair, and recording secretary, and would work through an agenda that included updates, new business, old business, good and welfare, and general labor news. At these meetings, Booksellers of the union stores met, updated each other, strategized, coordinated, planned actions, and built their union movement. Through these many meetings Booksellers grew together, shared in many happy times, and helped each other through struggles and hard times. These meetings were used to coordinate events and actions, spread information, share experiences, and generally support each other in the many tasks involved in organizing the workplace.

**Deliberate Union Busting:**

Half Price Books has staged an aggressive and blatant union-busting campaign. At each of the stores the formula was generally the same. Upon filing for union election when each campaign
went public, and until the actual vote, HPB began their union-busting campaign. HPB began by having meetings with staff notifying them of the filing and upcoming elections, acting blindsided and unaware of problems, sometimes doing these in small groups or one-on-ones. These were the beginning of the captive audience meetings. HPB used the opportunity to take note of Booksellers’ reactions, asking them how this could be or if people knew more—trying to shake people down and taking notes of anything they said or how they acted. From there HPB brought in district managers, assistant district managers, regional managers, and sometimes other upper-level corporate leaders to “help out” Booksellers in their daily duties on the sales floor. These managers would “help out” at the buy counter, pricing books, sometimes shelving, sometimes working the registers, just there to “help out and answer any questions.” These upper level managers were constantly there, breathing down people’s necks, criticizing Booksellers’ work, meanwhile mucking up everything they touched, mispricing, misshelving, moving slowly, not knowing how to operate the computer programs, and getting in the way. The intention was to have as many managers on the ground to hamper and disrupt unionizing activities, stop conversations about work, and to make people fearful and quiet.

After the initial meetings of notification, HPB would have captive audience meetings almost every day or every other day throughout most weekdays. Sometimes in big groups, sometimes in smaller groups, sometimes as one-on-ones. Each of these meetings was designed to deter people from wanting to unionize and to vote ‘no’ on the upcoming election, to gather more information about the efforts, to determine where people stood, and to single out union leaders. HPB used the captive audience meetings to spread lies about unions and the unionization process, at one point using the negative and outdated trope that unions are corrupt by citing Jimmy Hoffa as an example! HPB used the captive audience meetings to spread lies and distort truths about the
UFCW locals representing Booksellers and the UFCW in general, citing court cases the locals had been involved in, implying the president is corrupt, and implying the union doesn’t help its members. In each of these meetings not only were store managers present, but so were district and regional managers, and in many cases corporate human resources officers and lawyers sent from company headquarters in Dallas, Texas. In many cases it was the human resources officers and lawyers doing the heavy lifting of voicing the biggest lies and mistruths. One of the stores was able to count someplace around 30 meetings with staff in various configurations in the one month (31 days) between going public and having their union election. That’s at least one captive audience meeting almost every day! HPB used these meetings to keep track of who were pro-union and who were on-the-fence or against the unions, they used this to organize their own opposition to the union, gather information, and to get a pro-company person to represent the company during elections. At some stores the company actively organized a ‘vote-no committee’ of workers confused by the union process and issues at hand, using their fear of retaliation to push workers to vote ‘no’. These captive audience meetings varied in length from 5 mins to an hour or more, varied in how many people and who were in them, but were done with a strategy to lie, confuse, intimidate, separate, and scare Booksellers into submission.

Facing the ‘Boots’:

The day or two before the elections, after a progressively increasing hierarchy of managers, corporate lawyers, and human resources officers descended, most of the stores were graced with the presence of both HPB president Kathy Doyle Thomas and HPB CEO Sharon Anderson Wright, nicknamed “Boots.” Wright flew to each location from Dallas, Texas, to deter Booksellers in captive audience meetings that were unhinged, demeaning, threatening, and completely unprofessional. “Boots” presented herself as being all over the place: Booksellers in some
meetings would get a nice and understanding person, trying to act as a friend of the people; while Booksellers in other meetings would be cursed at, yelled at, interrupted, berated, demeaned, aggressively challenged, and threatened at every point. In most stores there were two meetings: one usually with more pro-union type people, the other with people perceived to be anti-union or on-the-fence. In the captive audience meetings with anti-union workers and workers on-the-fence, Wright was friendly, acted like a fellow Bookseller and friend, talked about the history of the company, how hard the pandemic years had been for everyone, and told Booksellers why she thought we did not need a union, acting nice all the while. In the captive audience meetings with the people thought to be pro-union Wright truly showed Booksellers why people called her “Boots.” Wright used those meetings to talk-down, demean, insult, curse at, yell at, and outright threaten workers.72 “Boots” would use those meetings to bust the union, lie about the union, tell people outright to “vote no,” and lie to them about how things would improve if they voted “no.” She was repeating much of what had already been said by other managers, but coming from the CEO and founder’s daughter it revealed the company’s desperation and determination to stop organizing efforts.

At the captive audience meeting in Greenwood, Indiana, Wright claimed the company was “her baby” and threatened workers to “not fuck with me” all while acting extremely aggressively, threatening, and displaying seriously disturbing unprofessional behavior. She actively goaded people into participation during the mandatory meeting, called people out, attempted to provoke people, and made people involved with that meeting feel exceedingly uncomfortable and unsafe. At one point “Boots” threatened one of the pro-union leaders, misgendering them, interrupting

them, yelling at them about why they were wrong about conditions being bad, effectively shutting them down in an extraordinarily embarrassing and demeaning manner. Wright talked about how she would refuse to talk to stores that choose to unionize, how she was disgusted in the union’s proposed contract she had seen so far, though in the same breath explained that she was pro-union and comes from a union family background (trying to garner sympathy, make herself seem progressive, like she is friend of the working people). Wright claimed Amazon needed a union, but HPB did not, because “we are a family.” She told Booksellers concerned about wages, conditions, cost of housing, and prices—people that made her rich, gave her multiple businesses, and gave her the horses and stables she owns—that “life’s hard.” At one point when voicing concerns about rising prices, one Bookseller said they can’t even afford new shoes for the job, which requires Booksellers to stand, get up and down on stools, walk and run back and forth, and lift heavy boxes for their entire shifts. “Boots” was under the impression that one could “buy some shoes for $40,” apparently not aware that decent working footwear is exceedingly more expensive. Wright reiterated several times that “nobody fucks with me” to employees faces, openly threatening them because they wanted living wages, stable employment, and union recognition. She was obviously delusional and the other managers and corporate lawyers at the meeting had a hard time reeling her in and calming her down. Several times HPB President Kathy Doyle Thomas had to step in and help smooth over the bad language, harsh threats, and open union busting Wright was engaged in. She clearly demonstrated that she didn’t comprehend the struggles her own employees were facing as far as housing and costs of living, medical and prescription costs, and general lack of competitive wages and guaranteed stable benefits. Wright was so degrading, humiliating, and aggressive that she in some cases managed to scare workers into voting against the union, thinking they would be retaliated against for voting “yes.” Wright floated the idea that she would retaliate
against workers for unionizing, she would not forget it, nor would she work with them in the future. The things Wright did at the Greenwood, Indiana, meeting alone constitute violations of labor laws concerning intimidation and threats, her behavior was appalling, her actions and words violent, and all done in a failed attempt to stop people from making a living wage. And this was just one of the nine locations. All nine unionized locations have similar atrocious stories about district managers, regional managers, corporate heads, and company leadership coming to their stores and implementing many of the same vile and appalling anti-union, union-busting tactics.

A Seat at the Bargaining Table:

Since the nine stores have unionized each has been moving forward in contract bargaining negotiations. As of August 2023, the Minnesota stores, the Greenwood location, and the store in Niles, Illinois, are all about halfway through the bargaining process, done with most of the non-economic contract items and moving into the economic items (wages, raise rates, scheduling of raises, sick time, vacation time, and personal time). The other three stores are in various early phases of bargaining. Meanwhile, HPB has secretly hired multiple new lawyers, labor relations managers, human resources representatives, and has undergone some upper-level corporate reshuffling. HPB is spending millions on these new corporate labor relations positions and on legal defense, even going as far as hiring the anti-union employment law firm Ogletree-Deakins, the same far right-wing, pro-business, anti-worker law firm Donald J. Trump used to fight off unionization efforts at his Atlantic Casinos. Ogletree-Deakins makes millions fighting

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unionization efforts, targeting labor leaders, destroying community-based movements, destroying lives and livelihoods with no moral conscience about the evil deeds they do that make this world a worse place. This is the law firm representing Half Price Books, a supposedly progressive and family-run company.

At the bargaining table, HPB has been consciously and strategically obstructing negotiations. Each unionized store is negotiating its own contract. At each location HPB and its lawyers have developed a pattern of not giving bargaining dates, not responding to emails, being late to bargaining sessions, being ill-prepared, canceling dates at the last minute, sitting in caucus for hours wasting time, and being exceptionally slow to respond with counterproposals or possible language. Multiple times the different UFCW locals have had to bring Unfair Labor Practice lawsuits to the NLRB against HPB to get them to even begin to bargain, give dates, or maintain bargaining in good faith. Lawyers for HPB are demeaning, and use crude and unprofessional language; a certain lawyer even seems to exclusively wear pajamas to bargaining sessions when everyone else is dressed more professionally for the occasion—displaying how little they care to bargain professionally in good faith. In most instances of negotiations on items, the company is extremely resistant to Booksellers’ proposals, barely budging, and barely able to understand Booksellers’ point of view. Booksellers and the UFCW show up ready, but HPB and their lawyers have to spend most of the day in caucus to go over something we said we would all read before the meeting. Or will spend the entire time considering a proposal only to give Booksellers their counterproposal a minute or two before the end of the session.

The company finds ways to waste time in bargaining, to do as little work as possible, to do anything to avoid working through another agreement. They only give Booksellers one or two four-hour sessions a month at each location, making the entire process for getting through each article or section tedious and cumbersome. Half Price Books will do anything and everything to resist and extend negotiations with the intent being that they think the effort will lose steam, people will get disillusioned, quit, or get fired. Booksellers won the first step: their elections to have union representation. Booksellers still need to win their second step: to negotiate, bargain, and vote affirmative on their contract before they become full union members with protections under a contract. Until then Booksellers have only minimal protections, and technically HPB still operates in their status quo, meaning there is no union steward, union protection coverage is legally gray and not fully available, and HPB can still discipline and reprimand Booksellers any way they see fit. Half Price Books is currently and actively trying to prevent Booksellers from successfully negotiating a contract, which would in turn kill the union drive.

**Continued Retaliation:**

Besides obstructing and delaying the bargaining process, HPB has been involved in clear and old-fashioned retaliation. Corporate leaders at HPB have put local store managers and assistant managers in tough positions of enforcing their anti-union stance. Store managers and assistant managers at many of the unionized stores have begun to target pro-union Booksellers and leaders of the movement to unionize. At a few locations, Booksellers have been targeted so thoroughly that they have elected to resign and leave the company rather than face such blatant and serious harassment and negligence from management and HPB. Some have pursued legal routes, filed NLRB complaints, and successfully sued the company. At other locations, Booksellers have been terminated on bogus charges or first infringements. HPB has encouraged workers to argue, bicker,
and have long-running disputes; encouraging workers to fight among themselves. Managers don’t help or de-escalate the situation, then highlight it as a reason why unions are bad, citing the unions as the cause of the problems. HPB’s Human Resources, the same people responsible for the most heinous lies, threats, and time-wasting captive audience meetings, have now hired more lawyers and labor management specialists and are staging a premeditated, calculated, and strategically motivated anti-union/union-busting campaign. Albeit quiet, in the shadows, and behind the scenes, HPB has tactically undertaken clear retaliation in attempts to bust the unionization at each store by getting rid of and forcing out union leaders. Knowing they have all the time on their side, knowing that they can delay proceedings, knowing that they can get away with some of the most dastardly union-busting retaliatory tactics, HPB has maintained the facade that they are good to their employees, politically progressive, and socially open-minded.

**A Strike in Response:**

In response to the anti-union union-busting tactics of HPB, their president, CEO, and growing team of company lawyers, Booksellers at the four unionized stores in Minnesota went on a two-day strategic strike. The strike was undertaken because the union alleged “that Half Price Books management has failed ‘to provide crucial information to union representatives during the contract negotiation process.’”\(^74\) For many months the company has refused to share information requests by the various organizing committees and the UFCW locals that represent organized workers.

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When workers at the Minnesota locals finally made it to the portion of contract negotiations that included economic items such as wages, sick/vacation/leave time, raises, and other items that have an actual dollar sign attached to them, HPB and their team of lawyers basically refused to budge an inch. HPB offered an insulting increase of only 1%, while at the same time throughout the negotiations violating federal labor law on multiple occasions, claiming that the company couldn’t afford a better wage increase (without giving any information as to the finances of the company, the CEO’s or president’s pay, or how much they spend on company lawyers). These awful proposals and the way HPB was treating its loyal workers incensed Booksellers, insulted their years and years of dedication to the company, and showed that HPB higher-ups didn’t care about the livelihoods of its workers; they wanted to keep as much of the company’s profits as they could for themselves.75

At the same time, HPB wanted the Booksellers to give up their already agreed-upon quarterly bonuses, which HPB had been giving since the founding of the company under Ken Gjemre’s ideals of industrial democracy and sharing the profits the company made with the actual people who make the company’s money. In response Booksellers from these four locations voted unanimously to go out on a strategic two-day strike. Booksellers set up pickets, marched out in front of the four locations, held signs, chanted, and handed out information about their organizing efforts. The striking Booksellers made it known how awful HPB was in negotiations, how they were using union-busting tactics, and how their proposals were humiliatingly low and insincere. Booksellers had an outpouring of public support both locally from customers, many who said they would avoid HPB until they began negotiating in good faith, and on social media where pictures

75 Niepow, “Half Price Books Workers Strike at Four Minnesota Stores.”
of proud striking Booksellers abounded. HPB was publicly shamed, and rightfully so, they were engaged in some of the worst negotiating tactics that money could buy (and they have spent an estimated millions on their team of right-wing, anti-union, union-busting lawyers), all to avoid giving their loyal workers a living-wage, better benefits, and a piece of the wealth that the Booksellers created. Following the strike, Booksellers went back to work with renewed vigor and purpose, the public supported them, and they were more organized and focused than at any time prior.

**Next Steps and Conclusions:**

Despite the anti-union sentiment within the company, despite union-busting before and after the elections, and despite clear retaliation against union leaders, Booksellers at all nine locations are making progress in leaps and bounds. As was said already, six of the unionized stores are a little more than halfway done with their contract bargaining, having more than half the articles tentatively agreed to; the other three are in the beginning phases of contract negotiations and union recognition. While HPB has been doing their best to resist negotiations and to slow them down, Booksellers have been persistent, proactive, and continuously involved. Booksellers come to the table having counters and proposals ready to go, having an idea of what to do next, and having the help of the UFCW. Booksellers at the Minnesota locations have staged a few other actions besides the strike, talking to customers outside, setting up informational pickets, passing out information, and coordinating wearing shirts and pins. The UFCW and all the organized stores have a coordinated social media presence on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, and are constantly sharing updates, news, photos, and memes. Booksellers at all locations have contributed to making informational bookmarks, writing articles, and putting together information packets for the public to spread the word of the organizing efforts. Booksellers have used various social media platforms
to institute more direct communications; platforms such as Slack and Discord have been tantamount to building the movement across state lines; they also help get new Booksellers situated, educated, and further involved. Booksellers at the unionized Minnesota locations have even participated in a recorded conference on the subject of unionizing at bookstores put on through the East Side Freedom Library, in St. Paul, Minnesota. All the while, the UFCW has assisted in connecting new Booksellers interested in joining the cause and helping the work along. Booksellers at all nine unionized locations meet regularly, communicate every day, and look forward to having more join their numbers—increasing the momentum and success of the union organizing effort as a whole.

This is only the first chapter, of the first volume, of the first set of organizing at HPB—more stores will follow. By organizing at each location individually, building workplace committees, building a wider union apparatus at each store, connecting each store’s organizing committee to a national organizing committee via liaisons, and with the help of locals of the UFCW and their amazing resources, Booksellers have already won nine out of nine elections for union representation. More than that, they have built a structured, goal-oriented, and highly motivated union organizing campaign across the Midwest, outside of the usual areas of union organizing, especially for the retail industry. The uniqueness, determination, and success of Booksellers in the way they built their unionization effort is an important narrative that can be used to draw lessons for other retail and service industry workers and their unionization campaigns. A handful of organized and motivated workers can make a difference and change the conditions of their life and labor for an entire company. To help support the effort, get involved, or find out more, check

76 “Bookstore Workers Organize: Not Just Something to Read About.” Recorded online conference about Booksellers organizing efforts in Minnesota, moderated by Peter Raitcliff, East Side Freedom Library, St. Paul, Minnesota, Jan. 30, 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxNJ_Bgivg0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxNJ_Bgivg0).
out the social media pages. Just search “Half Price Books Workers United,” on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram to get more information. Or reach out to your local UFCW; they can help you and put you in touch with Booksellers from the unionized stores. Keep a lookout for more unionized HPB stores whose stories and triumphs are yet to be published. And never forget that “alone we can do so little, but together we can do so much!”

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78 A quote regularly used by humanitarian and union advocate Hellen Keller in her many speeches and writings.
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<th>Appendix: List of Bookstores That Have Unionized</th>
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<td>15. <strong>Half Price Books</strong> - (1 Location) - Greenwood, IN. Voted April 1, 2022!</td>
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“Workers For Half Price Books Union @HPBUUnionMN” X (Twitter), https://mobile.twitter.com/HPBUUnionMN.

X (Twitter) Post. Oct. 19, 2021 - Northtown HPB workers also came out as publicly part of the unionization effort as well. Making the number of stores part of the campaign three: Roseville, St. Paul, and Northtown. All three are carrying forward as part of the campaign and election. See the twitter page for more details. URL to specific twitter post and picture: https://twitter.com/HPBUUnionMN/status/1450501749618397191.
“Indigenous peoples understand that there is no difference between the telling and the material. They understand how we all, in fact, live inside and through the narratives we tell and that the importance in telling stories is inseparable from the identity, community and history they compose and the spiritual, economic, and political realities on which they depend and which they subvert or preserve.”


Indigenous adjective
Indegenous /ɪnˈdɪdʒənəs/
(formal) “Belonging to a particular place rather than coming to it from somewhere else.”

If you want to find life, go to a graveyard.

I think of it as the trees’ revenge. Or maybe, they’re simply making the most of what they have – for when humans decided that the best way to honor their dead was by filling their body with embalming fluid, cementing them into a hole in the ground away from the beautiful, regenerative process of decomposition and rebirth – there must have been anger from the animate world. Tree anger. Hedge anger. Worm anger and beetle anger.

Who do you think you are? I hear them saying. Too good to feed us, as we fed you? But in this anthropomorphic insistence on absence, on amputatedness, on sterility, the trees claim their elder space.

When I visit a graveyard – to honor the dead, or to make space for my grief – I go there for the trees. In a graveyard I find the trees that aren’t often found elsewhere: in addition to the oaks and maples, I find chestnuts. I find linden, alder, sweetgum, and tulip poplar. Beech and elm and ash. They tower over the statues of women draped in stone, the temple-like marble vaults that worship the wealth of the departed. Their roots curl around the edges of the graves, vast invisible networks lacing fingers underground. Over time, the trees will crack them open. They’ll sidle their wild tongues, along with the fungus, the insects, the soil. But until then, they reclaim the space around the dead, teeming it with life. They seem to laugh, saying, You tried. You tried to pretend we are lesser beings. But we are still here, and we are thriving while you are alone.

I discovered the graveyard in 2019, a few miles south of Wabash, Indiana, the first electrically lighted city in the world. I followed a trail of signs to a newly opened coffee shop housed in a greenhouse on the White’s campus. Today called White’s Residential Center, the
institute is located a few miles south of Wabash, along a tributary of the Wabash River called Treaty Creek.

Tucked in a gentle ridge in the crease of a gully and Treaty Creek, the graveyard is full of the bodies of indigenous children, many of them Sioux, buried in soil far from their families and native lands.

The graveyard is run down and unmarked. The wooden arms of the fence around the edge of the space are leaning groundward at the corners, and about half the stones are undecipherable and many of them are leaning or flat on their faces in the dirt or cracked in two. The names on the headstones, if there are any, are wind worn and barely legible. It seems like a graveyard of the forgotten.

But the place remembers what happened even if people don’t.

In early 2020, in the middle of a pandemic-ravaged country, I followed a series of calls to live in Wabash and work at the center for a season as a groundskeeper. I’d always felt the land around Wabash was mystical and mythical; poised like a strange hill country in between the flat, dusty corn and soybean fields that disgrace much of the Indiana terrain, the city itself was anomalous to most of the Midwest, offering graceful architecture, built in the sweep of a hillside, along the Wabash River. Right over the bridge jutted the strange edges of limestone and shale bluffs, blown out of the hillside by dynamite a few hundred years before to make way for a railroad.

Wabash is the site of the official signing of documentation forcing the removal of Miami and Potawatomi tribes who were settled in the area in 1826. The United States promised a half million dollars for as many acres of their settled land. The site of the “treaty” is commemorated along the river, where small cabins built like the traders’ cabins form a semicircle a ways off from the riverbank, carrying an odd celebratory vibe, as if the event had a mutually agreeable outcome for all parties.

The overlapping histories—of the city, and the ground it is built over, were both full of intrigue. But below the veneers of brick and long windows gleaming in the sunset, the place felt haunted. I couldn’t note what, but I had a feeling it had something to do with the dissonance in the proud announcement of the land trade, with the reality that our history books don’t discuss.

Today, the center offers recovery services, residential care, and a high school for children at risk of incarceration. Most of the campus leadership are practicing Christians and boast evangelical Christian values. The newly opened coffee-shop greenhouse, which drew me to the campus, boasted that it hired from the pool of these at-risk children, giving them opportunities to learn responsibility, resilience, and, of course, experience the therapeutic benefits of hanging out with plants.

Around every corner of the grounds seemed to be something anciently tended sycamores and chestnuts, lindens and alders and oaks. But the place itself, deeper than the history of the white people who built on it, thrums with a sort of connection—the very first time I laid eyes on
the campus, cupped in a hollow of trees on the way down to the greenhouse, my very body talked back: *I want to be here*, it said. The land itself talked—not with words, but with sensations. I felt called.

I enjoyed my seasonal job there as a groundskeeper. I loved being outside, the manual labor and the investment of my coworkers in my learning new skills. Over the course of the summer, I learned how to operate and maintain a zero-turn mower; received training with chainsaws, tractors, and backhoes; and even got some basic training on how to take care of cars from the resident mechanic. I learned a few of the basics of how to take care of cattle and listened to a lot of stories about how to run a small farm from the two elder employees, who were small-town curmudgeons in every sense of the word.

Most of my coworkers had worked on the grounds for decades. They were full of stories about how the school was run “in the old days.” They waxed eloquent about the formal boxing matches that used to be held in the back forty to dispel quarrels—a practice squarely done away with in modern times—and showed me the acres where the students used to be responsible for subsistence farming—corn, squash, beans, wheat. They also told me about one of the campus buildings; an eerie, squat building, made of concrete and with bars over the windows. Until a few years ago, according to the stories, it was where the school sent “problem kids,” students who committed acts such as trying to run away into the two miles of cornfields surrounding the hollow, or smuggling drugs or other “contrabands” into the campus. Part of their remediation was often to spend time in the building, designed to feel as much like a prison as possible.

Another coworker, a young dad who works with the “sexual divergent” group for a few seasons, talks to me of the sanctioned form of physical takedowns over a bag of Doritos, laughing as he says that, “These kids need to get a taste of what could happen if they don’t learn to behave."

The solitary confinement and takedown practices were done away with for liability reasons, but the building is still there, a cold, cave-like shadow on the campus. And the coworker is still laughing remembering his glory days.

When I go to a graveyard, I can tell what people value. A body in death is treated like a body in life: individuated, preserved in shriveled objectivity instead of a vibrant, interrelational subjectivity of dirt. Words carved in stone in eternal purity. Boxes within boxes. These collective death rituals portray a civilization obsessed with sterility, with individuality, and with the trappings of the cold, hard metal of currency.

The air inside a tomb must be so old—no decay. But no life either. And no beauty. Some graves tell me smaller stories: *this person is still remembered and loved*, say the fresh flowers and the tiny pebble cairns. Some graves are so old no one tends them anymore; maybe some were never tended at all. But the trees—they tell me what the people forget.

And they also grieve.
As I spent time with the gently rolling terrain of this haunted little place, following the loop of the barn swallows in the mornings, and watching the tulip poplars flower on the hillside, I found myself drawn back to the graveyard.

I asked my coworkers about it one morning during our morning coffee break in the maintenance warehouse. The head gardener, who has been at White’s for decades, and who has the tender heart of an empath and storyteller, gives me a few hushed sentences. He tells me there was an epidemic, that the Sioux and children from several other tribes who were forced from their homes caught a plague and were all buried there.

I seek out a public record of deaths at White’s and only find a few deaths per year, but the thought doesn’t leave me. In the campus center, there are cheerful pictures of the many eras of White’s school hanging from the ceiling, a testament to their services, spanning the first era of orphan care, the years of subsistence farming, to today’s residential care. Sandwiched in between is a black-and-white photo of the years of “Indian reform school”—nightmarish pictures of indigenous children with cut hair, the uncanny combination of the cut shoulders of a white man’s suit. To the unresearched eye it could be just another picture in the legacy of White’s. There is no notation of the reality behind the picture, and there is no marker on the dilapidated cemetery sign depicting the oppression of bodies and spirits that was the Indian reform school.

The director of the place lives across the gully, in a special house not unlike the rectory of a religious institution, living on the campus. King of his hill. He invites the groundskeepers to a lunch on his swept deck one day, grilling burgers and serving watermelon in chunks from a plastic bowl. Over our plates of food, I ask him about the graveyard—maybe there is a plan, I think. Maybe this pain can be witnessed instead of glossed over.

His eyes, in fact, gloss over when I ask him—he waves his hand vaguely toward the bodies in the hillside within sight of his pristinely mown back yard. “Oh yes,” he says vaguely. “I think there is some organization interested in updating it eventually. They have plans for—sometime, in the future, I think.”

The White’s school founder and namesake, Josiah White, was a businessman, a philanthropist, and Quaker who dreamed of starting a school for underprivileged children. His dream was realized in 1860, when the school opened to students of all races—one of the few in the area that admitted Black and indigenous children. A progressive for his time, White wanted a school where any orphan could attend, and which was accessible to low-income students. White’s noble cause was quickly subverted when, twenty years later, the Indian Aid Society and Indian Bureau negotiated funding for White’s in exchange for the admission of indigenous children during their removal from their families to the infamous “assimilation schools”—a nightmare in which children would be taken from their parents, sometimes without their knowledge or consent, and stripped of their language, traditions, agency, and pride.

The history book I found about White’s did cast an apologetic tone for the atrocities, but it’s not apparent in how the institution runs currently. This graveyard is their secret: White’s, along with the many other schools, hosted indigenous children removed from their families, their native practices and language, cutting their hair (a sacred), dressing them in “civilized” clothing,
and forcing them to live and breathe as different than who they are. White’s admitted indigenous children for a decade before reformatting.

White’s was a subsistence center for many decades; children were worked hard and fed poorly. At the time the executives of the school took a harsh Victorian stance. Those children were likely buried in shrouds, or plain wooden coffins if their families could afford them. There was no concrete barrier between them and the earth and no embalming fluid to keep them from returning to dirt.

Their stories are now stored in the roots of the trees.

In 1883, the *Wabash Weekly Courier* published an announcement in its morning publication:

“THIRTY LITTLE INDIANS”

It read, “Last Tuesday morning thirty Indian children from the Indian Territory, for whom provision has been made at White’s Institute, south of the city, arrived here and were immediately taken to their new home, where they will complete their education. They were an intelligent looking set of redskins and wore the garb of civilization; in appearance they did not differ from the Indians on the reservation in this county. …All in all they are a respectable lot of kids who will some day possibly make useful citizens.”

Another article made a firm claim that “No pupil having been brought here against his will” “An Indian school—White’s Indiana Manual Labor Institute 11 May 1888.” History tells a different story.

The cited newspaper article betrays the attitude of the day: that these sites of oppression were, in fact, the saving grace for these “redskins” who, with the right structure and programming, could “possibly” become productive citizens.

But this is one storyline; there are many more.

A more accurate version of the story of the land might be told by Zitkala-Sa (also known as Gertrude Bonnin), a Dakota Sioux who moved to White’s during the late 1880s. In her books, she tells of the slow, agonizing spirit thievery of the customary assimilation practices, the oppression of body, and consequent numbing:

“In the process of my education I had lost all consciousness of the nature world about me,” she writes in *American Indian Stories*. “Thus, when a hidden rage took me to the small white-walled prison I then called my room, I unknowingly turned away from my one salvation.”

Whatever practices she lost, the young Gertrude understood something about trees. In her retellings of her childhood memories, she recounts listening to telegraph poles: “Often I had

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stopped on my way down the road, to hold my ear against the [telegraph] pole, and, hearing its low moaning, I used to wonder what the paleface had done to hurt it.\textsuperscript{80}

That “paleface” apparently leaves dead and dying trees in their wake.

I hop off my mower in the clearing later that week, where some of the names carved in stone are too time-worn to read. The head gardener hops off his mower too, and approaches me, with a posture of deference. “Are you acquainting yourself with the children?” he asks. I just nod.

The trees around this graveyard are sick. Some kind of leaf gall blisters on the stand of young maples planted directly around the graveyard. The old sycamore in the lowland downhill from the graves, where floodwater from the nearby ditch collects to run into Treaty Creek, shoulders a bulbous growth the size of a person. The tree itself is thick and towering, one of the widest-trunked sycamores I have ever seen. Its roots crawl into the side of the hill, and on the other side, I’m sure, reach almost to the creek, drinking up water. The growth is the size of – the size of several children, in fact. When I go near it, a shadow passes over my heart, like something cold and full of grief is held there.

Even going near the swelling growth makes me shudder. I do some research on tree cancers, finding that trees can close their own brittle skin over pathogens to keep it from infecting itself or other trees. Whatever this tree carries, it is massive, and dark. The roots plunge into the soggy soil beneath it, a floodplain of the creek, holding on for its life against the desperate weight its upper branches bear.

I kept thinking about how trauma stores in the body. How it goes deep into our cells to hide, how bodies form and twist to accommodate unwitnessed suffering. If trauma stores in our bodies, then why not in earth’s body? What if the trees know? What if the sickness in the trees around the graveyard is the cellular memory of the place, holding on to unwitnessed sorrow? If humans are partially responsible for the stories they tell, then why not the trees? The rivers? What can we read from their stories?

I’ve come to see that such meaning-making faculty is part of the magic and power humans were meant to have. Stories are one of the fundamental ways we were meant to interact with the world. But it’s a transhuman faculty. The trees tell the stories, too. I wonder if I was called to that crevice in time and space to witness, with the trees, what had been forgotten by humans. Part of me thinks that’s why the place wanted me there. Someone to witness. Someone to see and acknowledge what the leadership of the place must hide behind platitudes: that, despite the intentions of the original founder, the place and the people there were complicit in the oppression of indigenous bodies, in the death of body and spirit.

The trees remember. And now, I do too.

\textsuperscript{80} Zitkala-Sa, “The School Days of an Indian Girl,” \textit{Atlantic Monthly}, February 1900, 186.
Moss is the perennial tenant of 310 W. Alameda Street, between Alondra and Raymond, an industrial-park-turned-guesthouse between three tire shops, a cart with the best pupusas north of the Suchiate River—allegedly—because the lady who cooks them, makes them with love; and a vape shop that not too long ago diversified into the THC market and to this day still sells pirated adult films in the back. It is an unusually hot spring day. One can see the train tracks sizzle, they seem to expand in the heat. The former owner had the good sense to build an internal courtyard with a small pool (now full of dry leaves), in the hope that the area would gentrify before his kids turned into adults. This did not happen. The guesthouse is just a little too far, the neighbors a little too brown, the clientele a little too undesirable. So, they sold it at a loss. And the people they sold it to, sold it, and so on. It has always borne names with the hard J of Spanish, Jiménez, Juárez, Jara, but now has the name of a masculine flower, Jacinto’s, the current owner’s name, given to him by a feminine father, whose gentle disposition and proclivity for Hawaiian shirts Jacinto despised.

Out of room 17 comes the strange man who makes Jacinto uncomfortable. Don Fermín is middle-aged, dark-skinned, fat, hairy, and most of all, handsome. His ancestors had been violent colonial conquerors for, although his skin is dark, his eyes are an unexpected deep green that looks like thick honey in the evenings. His large clothes dry proudly on the railing on the second floor, overlooking the courtyard. More than one of Don Fermín’s neighbors has looked at those great, wide denim jeans, and the crisp white polo shirts, and thought that Don Fermin must be a strong
lover, a horse of a man. More than one tenant has offered to wash Don Fermín’s great trousers, just for the pleasure of feeling their immensity, with the excuse that Don Fermín lives alone, and has no one to look after him, and a man should not be seen scrubbing jeans anyway, for all to see. But Don Fermín always disappoints.

Now, Jacinto knows Don Fermín is a man of means, a fact he has shared with whomever is willing to hear. Jacinto knows that his business is to accept all kinds of tenants, with and without papers, fixed and loose incomes, and the less he asks, the better. But Don Fermín arrived years ago with an I.D. and a bank statement that did not match the humility of Jacinto’s, its peeling paint, its dried pool. Jacinto knows Don Fermín could live in a better place, but he suspects Don Fermín stays for the children.

Plenty of children live in Jacinto’s. Jacinto does not really mind, and he had learned the hard way that he would lose a significant number of long-term clients if he decided to mind. Most kids have parents who leave all day to work. Some kids have one parent who locks them in their room from the first bus run of the day until the last; these kids sometimes count the busses that go by, until the hours thin, and they get to see their parent again.

Most parents trust Don Fermín to take care of their kids. And, even when they don’t, they are not going to pay a day-care service when Don Fermín watches them for free. Who can blame them? And Don Fermín loves every last one of them. He teaches them how to play hide and seek, thieves and policemen, tag, and to stay inside the courtyard. Don Fermín teaches them to do math with the license plates and reads them folk stories from the places where their ancestors lived: Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico. Don Fermín brings pupusas and candy for the kids locked up, pushes them through a cracked window or the gap under a door.
Jacinto sits in his office and looks up from his television from time to time. Jacinto watches Don Fermín and feels a nameless discomfort that crawls up and down his arms.

The parents thank Don Fermín with a hot meal, they offer to wash his car, do his laundry, scrub his enormous shoes. But Don Fermín declines, he wants nothing to do with the parents. On the weekends, when the parents stay with their children, Don Fermín disappears. And one such day, with the man gone, Jacinto invites some of his tenants for a beer, and he first calls Don Fermín by that name that had been on everyone’s tongues, but no one had dared utter: Don Faggot. “Don Faggot,” Jacinto says, laughing, “you know he sews his own jeans, right? He, she, whatever, you know? What business does a man of means have with kids not his own?” And the tenants laugh, and drink, and some, for the first time, worry.

The name catches like fire. Suddenly Don Faggot notices the tenants point at him and chuckle. But everything seems to be as normal, so Don Faggot calms his nerves and continues to play, teach simple arithmetic, read, and eat pupusas made with love by the lady and her cart.

Not long after, the single mother from room 22 (who has never been surer of her decision to lock up her 8-year-old girl all day long) leaves for work and forgets to blow out her candle to La Virgen de Guadalupe. She prays every morning that things will get better, that things will be better in this country, and asks for forgiveness for taking the girl from her father, but did she have a choice? How could she not, Lupita? And the candle is knocked over by some force— the little girl, or the vibrations from a truck passing by, who can say— and first burns the image of La Virgen, her green cloak quickly turning red and then black. The fire catches like a name.

There are only two adults in Jacinto’s, Jacinto and Don Faggot. Jacinto is first to notice the smoke. He screams and points and runs to fill a bucket with water, but the water drips frustratingly,
as if it knew and was an accomplice of the fire. The children yell and gather in the yard. One of the older children frantically points at room 22 and screeches: “Lupita! Lupita está ahí adentro!” Without a second thought, Don Faggot runs up the stairs and smashes his colossal frame against the door. One, two, three times! He can feel the heat coming from inside and the smoke that escapes attacks his eyes. Don Faggot takes a step back and, with all his strength, he slams himself against the door, which comes apart at the hinges, as if a rocket had exploded. Don Faggot looks desperately for the girl. He finds her, fainted in the bathroom. He fights through the smoke, now thick like a wall, as he tries to find the exit he created. By the time he sees the daylight coming in, he is all flames, and with his last breath, he runs out, girl-in-arms, and faints just by the railing.

Don Faggot wakes up in the hospital, an unbearable pain takes hold of him. The pain is like a pool where he is drowning. He sleeps again.

The doctor rushes him into surgery. She is tending to the burns on his body when a nurse notices Don Faggot is bleeding from his crotch. A small steel rod is lodged in his scrotum, but if he will die, it will be from the burns, so the bleeding is stopped, the rod quickly forgotten, since the burns take priority.

Lupita lives. She is barely injured. Don Faggot is still at the hospital, but no one dares call him by that name.

He is Don Fermín.

He is the bravest man in Jacinto’s.

Perhaps the bravest man in all of L.A.
As wounds heal, the doctor notices black skin forming around the hole left by the steel rod. And to be perfectly honest, she feels a little jolt of excitement. Finally, she gets to perform the amputation she had always dreamed of. And it is not that she is perverse, but that she had been working with a team of researchers to develop artificial gonads. And, at last, here is her chance for a human trial.

Don Fermín has not been awake when the decision is made to castrate him. Since he has no next of kin, the doctor is allowed to decide, and she does not falter. As soon as it is done, she has her chance for her experimental reconstructive surgery. It is a success. The patient has not regained consciousness and yet, the artificial gonads react to stimulation, and are able to produce viable gametes, as expected from animal trials.

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When Don Fermín returns to Jacinto’s, he is given a hero’s welcome. Lupita embraces the man warmly. Don Fermín is at once the bravest man and a medical marvel. Lines of reporters from television stations gather outside room 17 to interview the Hero of Alameda Street. They do not even ask for Jacinto’s permission to park in the courtyard. Actually, they ask Jacinto no questions at all. The nerve! They even interrupt Jacinto’s shows to broadcast the face of his fruity, fat-cat, fucker of a tenant. And, Jacinto admits to himself, he is more than a little embarrassed over the peeled paint and the dried pool full of moss.

The weeks pass and the summer rages. The cameras and reporters disappear and, sooner than one would think, the name that burns like fire returns. Jacinto has his little campaign to reinstate Don Faggot’s name, which he manages to do with a few beers and an unkept promise to refill the pool to combat summer’s heat.
On one of those days when the pavement sizzles, Don Faggot is getting ready to leave for the weekend (who knows where?), when the alarms from one of the tire shops go off. A little mouse of a boy runs into Jacinto’s, looking for refuge, and Don Faggot takes him in. Police cars only come to this neighborhood for one reason. And a young man, new to the force, eager to prove himself, arrives at Jacinto’s alone on a motorcycle. They tell him on the radio to wait for backup, but the adrenaline of his first call rams into his heart. He is a peeled wire sparking.

Jacinto spares not a second to run to the officer, screaming from yards away, “You’re looking for the little mouse! He is in room 17, right there!” —he points. “Don Faggot is hiding him!”

Officer sparking wire climbs up the stairs and knocks. He knocks again. The few tenants who were not already in the courtyard, gather to see the show. Officer sparking wire caresses the gun on his waist and knocks one more time. The door bursts open, and before the officer can react, his face is met by Don Faggot’s gargantuan fist. As Officer sparking wire flies, the little mouse runs from behind Don Faggot, down the stairs, into the street, and before Jacinto can grab him, he is gone. As Officer sparking wire attempts to grab his gun, he feels his whole body lifted into the air, he thinks he must be dreaming when he gets that sense of falling, past the railing, and into the empty pool. The officer meets the moss in the bottom of the pool with a loud thud. Thankfully, he thinks, it’s soft. The crowd cheers and laughs as the officer gets back on his motorcycle and rushes away. That’s the crowd, except one. The one who immediately knows the police will come back.

The motorcycle returns with four police cars. The faint sound of a helicopter approaching follows. But Don Faggot is already waiting for them, sitting with his legs hanging into the empty
pool. Little Lupita waves at him, and he is still smiling when the embarrassed officer slams his head on the concrete and his blood spills into the pool.

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Don Fermín resolves to reinvent himself in prison. Why not? He has all the time in the world. He pumps iron in his new courtyard and sees his lean muscles pop as the months go by. He misses the children, of course. But he finds ways to fill his time. He reads more now than ever and, it is entirely possible, that he feels a sort of joy in that place, where all can happen that could not happen on the outside.

Don Fermín gets a few flashes from his old life. The little mouse he saved comes to visit. He brings news that he has a tiny mouse of a girlfriend, that he is back in high school, that he doesn’t want to steal anymore. It is perhaps something like pride that Don Fermín feels for his young friend. Little mouse brings Don Fermín cigarettes, a little cash when he can. Little Mouse never misses a visiting day and tells Don Fermín that Jacinto finally filled the pool. Don Fermín is glad to bestow life advice on his tiny friend. He feels generous when he gifts his little mouse his car, so his young friend can take the girlfriend to the movies and ride along the Santa Mónica coast, all the way to Santa Bárbara. Don Fermín fantasizes they find a virgin beach and give themselves to each other. Don Fermín feels contented with his reverie, yet he is not one bit aroused by it.

Indeed, Don Fermín notices in this new stage of life, he is rarely aroused. He finds beauty in the bulging anatomies of his fellow inmates, but he is surprised by his lack of excitement, his general softness. It could not be the iciness of the concrete floors, could it? They seem to get much colder in here than in Jacinto’s.
To Don Fermín’s surprise, a few months in, as he walks to the visiting area, he finds that it is not his mouse of a son who is there to see him, but the doctor who performed his castration and reconstruction. She has a bizarre look in her eyes, and seems bleak, as though she sees right through him. Of course, in her mind, she gaily visits her experiment, her perfect specimen, but she will be damned if she betrays her professionalism, her perfection, in this place. She is pleased with her subject’s clear signs of testosterone production (overproduction?). She looks at Don Fermín’s hairy arms with satisfaction, at his growing muscles with indulgence. She inquires if he has been involved in courtyard fights? If he has been aggressive since the incident with the policeman? And she merrily makes notes; that is, until Don Fermín confesses his slumbering libido.

A crooked scowl takes over the doctor’s face. But she figures, it must be the environment, right? How do they expect the miracle man to thrive in such a place? And she concludes, right then and there, that she must get him out.

The best thing from Don Fermín’s old life returns to him once a month, when the pupusas lady he knew is allowed to come into the prison and sell her delectable pupusas to the inmates. More than one inmate is allowed a pinch of her bottom, a stolen caress, a flirtatious glance, or a dirty fantasy whispered in her ear. But it is Don Fermín who seems to catch her eye. She gives him pupusas bursting with beans and chicharrón. She grabs his forearms, unashamed of her favoritism.

Don Fermín remembers his conviction to be a different man and reciprocates. He gets close to her and when the guard looks away, kisses her neck, her ears. And although Don Fermín is not aroused, not in the way that the doctor wishes him to be, he enjoys her warmth, her brash desire, how she breaks the monotony.
It is again Spring when the doctor returns. Yet this Spring brings chilly air from the mountains. She is happy to see her human trial continue to build exquisite muscle, thick hair, but is again disappointed by his general lack of violent drive. Yet all is forgiven as soon as she hears of Don Fermín’s secret affair with the pupusas lady. She is elated. And, more convinced now than ever, she tells Don Fermín the good news: arguing the need for him to be observed in a proper medical facility, the advances his body could lead to in medical research, his clean record, his value to the community, etc., etc., he has been granted an appeal.

Don Fermín, anxious that this unforeseen freedom will push him to his previous life, tells his little mouse of an adopted son to call the pupusas lady immediately, for he intends to marry her.

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It is an unusually cold summer in Santa Clarita when Don Fermín lays awake next to his sleeping wife. He gets up to close the window and looks at her reflection. She looks peaceful now, in this house without children, without the possibility of children; but a fire burns inside of his mind. In this quiet night, all he can think of is of that bastard, Jacinto, of the children he used to love and take care of, and of that name, Don Faggot.

Was it possible that Don Fermín misses the name? Does he long for the fires it burned, its accuracy, how powerful it made him feel, how afraid?

He looks at his wife again in the moonlight. She was never a beauty, but in this light, he feels repulsed by her. He hates her when he thinks how kindly she accepted his impotence. His anger makes him tremble, then panic.

He needs to catch his breath.
Don Faggot quietly walks down the stairs and grabs his car keys from the wicker bowl next to the front door. He pushes his car out of the driveway careful not to wake his wife. When he feels confident, he won’t wake her, he gets in and turns the car on. He heads to Alameda, between Alondra and Raymond. He knows this city better than he knows himself, or what he will do when he arrives at his destination.

For a moment, he is angry that he cannot buy a gun.

He turns the windows down and lets the cold air hit his face as he drives down the 405, past Sherman Oaks, past the mountains, past Westwood, past Culver City, past Inglewood, left on the 105. He can see the colors of the sunrise now. Right on the 710.

Don Faggot parks his car in Jacinto’s courtyard, his spot is empty, as if waiting for him.

He notices the pool where he had his head bashed in is now full of water.

He walks up to Jacinto’s office by the courtyard and waits.

It starts with Don Faggot slamming his body against the office door. The tenants hear the noise and open their blinds. Those with a developed taste for gossip even open their doors; they sense a show starting that they cannot miss.

Don Faggot shatters the office door open, as if a rocket had exploded. A half-asleep Jacinto emerges from the little apartment connected to the office, shotgun in one hand, phone in the other. Jacinto surprisingly recognizes Don Faggot. Jacinto had suspected a burglar immediately. Don Faggot is leaner now, more muscular, but sure enough, it is him. Alarm turns to panic as Jacinto shouts: “I will call the police!” —while he lifts the shotgun. But it is too late.
Don Faggot easily wrestles the shotgun from Jacinto’s hand and tosses it away. Same with the phone. And grabs Jacinto by the hair, pulling him into the courtyard. Jacinto screams and cries and suddenly thinks of his late father. Why does he think of his father now, that he fears to die?

Once in the center of the yard, where all the neighbors can see, Don Faggot pulls down Jacinto’s pants and underwear. A hairy bottom emerges trembling with fear. “It is me, Don Faggot!” —he yells. “The Hero of Alameda Street!”

Don Faggot proceeds to spank the trembling man with his mammoth hands. Each blow is followed by a harrowing scream. “Please! Please stop!” the little man screams, turned to vermin, all tears and sweat.

And, all of a sudden, with the squirming man wrapped around his lap, Don Faggot feels a hardness arising. Don Faggot feels his brawny, determined, vigorous firmness!

Don Faggot bellows, pressing his towering manhood against his victim, “Am I a man?”

Jacinto whimpers, “Yes! Yes, you are a man!”

He is cured, at last! And he is, at last, the man he always dreamed of. Isn’t he?
OUR SACRED UNDERGROUND: FICTION

MARC ALEXANDER VALLE

When I was in high school, I was obsessed with death. Me and this friend, Kindall, were into death and dressing in black. All black jeans, shirts, whatever. This was a long time ago, and lots of kids did that, dressed black from head to toe, and we listened to lots of music about death too.

I met Kindall in gym class. I was new to his school and didn’t know anyone. I wasn’t even supposed to be going there. We lied about our address, that type of thing. My mom was just scared of the influences from my real school, but for the first few weeks I didn’t know anyone until I finally talked to him.

One day some dude flushed his head down the toilet in the locker room. Some big guy just walked up to him in that little bathroom in the locker room, and Kindall wasn’t all that big, and this dude just picked him up like a mannequin or something and flushed his head down the toilet. I saw it. He even had his headphones on still.

I gave him my towel to wash the pee off his face. He had pee all over him, and he had to rinse it off in the sink, and it took five whole minutes. And I was just waiting ’cause they were taking attendance in gym, but I didn’t know what to do. All he could do was shake his Walkman off to see if it worked. And it was working too.

I asked him what he was listening to, and he just put the headphones by my ears and let it play. I still can’t remember what song it was or who it was from. I just remember it feeling heavy, but poppy at the same time. Like a light was shining somewhere in the darkness, far away, you
know. I had thought this kid from the West End was all dark and weird all the time, but here he was listening to something that I could get down with. Kindall and I would hang out since then. And that was it.

Now Kindall introduced me to the music before everything else. We spent a lot of time listening to music in his room and talking about the lyrics. Kindall knew all about the music and we went to independent record stores all the time and waited weeks for some records to be delivered. But we could spend hours listening to new music at these places. They would open up and let you listen to whatever you wanted, if you were a regular customer. But we mostly went for the hard-to-get underground records, the best stuff we heard was on those records. Everyone else was into major studio labels, the kinds of songs they made big music videos out of on TV. But me and Kindall, we just didn’t get our minds blown with that kind of stuff, I guess. We were on a different level. So Kindall was already into death, and I guess he got me into it too.

So, I don’t know how we got it all started. I think it was Kindall’s idea to start going to funerals, but I don’t know why we kept going back. It was something different, something exciting, I guess. And maybe ’cause people were emotional and nice to each other is why I liked it, but we just kept doing it. We’d go to people’s funerals that were in the newspaper and show up and watch the viewing. And no one thought anything, most of the time. We’d just show up in suits and sit down most times and no one bothered us. All over town we went to funerals and we did it for weeks. “Just don’t look at anyone,” Kindall would say. And no one said anything.

Except once.

Some Dad didn’t like us at his little girl’s funeral. I told Kindall that I didn’t want to go to this one. He showed me the little girl’s picture in the paper, I had seen her picture for weeks already
’cause she’d been missing. That same picture every day in the paper and on TV and on telephone poles at the corners. Black hair, and she was always smiling.

Her name was Cassie. And I couldn’t even describe to you what she looked like, but that smile, and those happy eyes are still in my head even now.

The cops eventually found her body in the river. Then Kindall showed me that picture of her. Overnight, that kid on the telephone poles was no more. It was like someone I knew in some crazy way. I didn’t know how to feel. I’d met a celebrity in person once before and it was like seeing an old friend. Unreal, you know. I thought maybe I’d feel the same if I saw her there in a casket. So, I said, “No.”

Anyway, I wasn’t having it regardless. I knew from television that only family and friends were supposed to be there. If we got caught, our parents might find out. But Kindall said he had a plan and that he really wanted to go. “Chill out,” he said. “Everything is cool.”

I knew when I walked into that funeral home that this scene was bad. I just got a feeling, a bad feeling. Like someone somewhere was watching us right when we got in there. I got a knot in my stomach when I saw her mom pass me. And I knew it was Cassie’s mom because I saw her on TV, and she looked right at me. I felt like a fool then. Like I kicked myself, wondering what I was doing in this place. Right away, I turned to Kindall on my right, thinking he might be feeling the same way. But nothing. It was like walking into the park for him. Nothing about him changed.

So, me and Kindall, stood by the closed casket. Supposedly, her body didn’t look right ’cause it had been so long that she was outside by the river, so they closed the casket. But me and Kindall got in line like the rest and now it was our turn to pay respects.
I stood next to an old lady to my right that smelled like this strong, cheap perfume, like dirty Lysol. That smell went right up my face man and I wanted to get sick. Kindall was to my left now with his head down. And we all just stood there paying respects and looking down.

“Just a baby,” the old lady said. And she kept saying, “A baby. Lordy, lordy.”

I couldn’t take it no more. I tapped Kindall on his foot to get his attention, but he didn’t do anything. He just kept looking down, bobbing his head like he was agreeing with the old lady. So, I said, “Forget this.” Then I walked back to the entrance. I wanted out. But Kindall, man, this dude just stood there with the old lady. He went and held her hand too. So, I just backed up some more and looked to the front entrance. The doors were wide open, and no one stood in the main lobby anymore. I could leave if I wanted. But I didn’t.

Then I heard, “Something-something, son-of-a-bitch!” Real loud. And I looked to the front and Kindall was flying down from the aisle up in the air. Some dude had thrown him right there with all those people. He landed right on his face. Kindall got up and ran. He ran so fast, he flew right past me. And I was just standing there looking back at Kindall going out those doors, and I looked back and saw this man’s eyes, starting right into me.

I’ll never forget it. Those eyes. He looked like he had already killed someone in his life. Like he choked out the life of some guy a long time ago. He cut right into me and went down to my gut. I almost shit.

I ran though. I ran, and I think he said something about ripping us apart, but I wasn’t even paying attention ’cause by the time he said it, I was mid-air jumping off the porch of the funeral home. I just kept going. Going and going right around the block and into an alley looking for
Kindall, but he was gone. I didn’t see him anywhere downtown, so I just kept going until I got to a bus stop and got on the one-nineteen.

I got home and Kindall was in my room on my bed with his headphones on, listening to my CD player. My mom had let him in.

And I said, “What the hell? What’d you do?” and he was like, “You okay?” I stood above him and cursed and made like I was going to hit him. I really wanted to hit him.

“I’m sorry, man.” That’s all he said, and he raised his hand in defense and just kept saying sorry. I never saw him like that.

So, I said, “No more, man. I’m not doing it.”

And he was like, “Ok.”

And I was like, “For real?”

“I swear,” he said. “On everything.”

That must have lasted a week. I remember it was a week ’cause it was right around Thanksgiving, and on Black Friday at the mall he showed me the newspaper again. We were in the middle of eating, and he just pulled it out. It was even already folded to the obituary section. He just held it up and pointed at it. This dude, his name was Winky. Winky O’Donnell. No joke. It said it right in the paper, like his government name.

“I want to see what this guy looks like,” Kindall said. “Don’t you want to see what a dude named Winky looks like?”

I got mad. But I couldn’t get that mad cause we were at a restaurant.
I said, “No.”

And he was like, “But this is open to the public.”

I didn’t care. I was tired. I wasn’t having any of that. So, I told him to drop it or else. And he said he was going anyway. So, I got up, threw out my tray and left. I didn’t even bother to get a ride back from his dad.

Now this guy, Winky, when we got to his funeral his mom was there. Her name was Verna. Verna O’Donnell. She came up from behind us and introduced herself. She looked like she must have been in her 90s, but she didn’t look old. Like she still had an active life. She was short with her grey hair in a bun and thin, and she had the brightest green eyes. For a funeral she was dressed nicely too. I mean, she was dressed in black, but it was what you would call elegant. She dressed elegantly. But the one thing I noticed was this flower over her heart. A purple flower. Out of all the funerals me and Kindall went to, I never saw a purple flower over the heart. But she had one, like five other women had one, and I had never seen that before.

“I’m so glad you could be here,” she said. “You both look like fine, young men. So glad you could pay respects.”

So, Verna thought I was some urban kid Winky used to help and volunteer for. We didn’t even say nothing. She just came up to us with a smile and all as we looked at the body. And Winky was big. I’d say he was about in his 60s. Anyway, he looked like a Winky too. A jolly fat guy, with peppered hair.

But his mom, she said, “Winky talked so much about you kids.”

And Kindall said, “I miss him already.”
And he just said it. Just like that. We didn’t have to lie or anything, but he just said it. I kicked his foot, so he could shut up, but then Winky’s mom started to cry.

Then she said, “Well, I know you kids, all you kids, you meant so much to him. He used to say that it was his most important work. You look like you boys turned out okay.”

“He was a gentleman and a scholar,” Kindall said.

Then she said, “I want you to come to the burial if that’s okay. To represent all those kids.”

I did not want to go. I just wanted to go home. I didn’t even want to be at the viewing. I mean, what if one of those kids showed up and exposed us. Plus, I started feeling what I felt at Cassie’s funeral. Like someone was watching, but this time it was different. It was like a bunch of people were watching and talking about us right in that room. But when I looked around all I could see were a bunch of old white people talking to each other and crying. It’s something I never felt before, and I never felt it again except maybe in a dream. I didn’t know about this place, and I sure as hell didn’t know about these people.

But Kindall over there, he said “Yes.” Something was off, and I thought he felt it too, but he said yes.

So, I’m like “No”. I didn’t even say it nicely. I just said, “No. We got to go.”

But now that Kindall opened his mouth, and Verna insisted. So Kindall goes, “We’re cool, Mrs. O’Donnell.”

“Call me Verna,” she said.

“No ma’am, I think we’ll stick with Mrs. O’Donnell, if that’s okay.”

And she was like, “Oh, you boys.”
So, we’re in this car. Me and Kindall are in the back seat and an older man is driving and Verna is in the passenger seat up front. And this older man, he looked normal, like a regular, nice dude, but he had different color eyes. One was blue and the other was brown or red or something. I never saw that before except on TV with those dogs. Huskies, they’re called. The guy looked like a husky, a husky trapped in an older man’s body. He ever had a strong, sharp face like a husky too. But he seemed like a real nice guy, just a normal guy.

I didn’t know what to do. I kept looking out the window, thinking the cemetery was right around the corner. I was hoping it was the one down the street. I told myself that I would go home from there. You know, tell her that I live around the corner. And if Kindall didn’t come then I would leave him behind. I’d leave him right there. I didn’t care.

And Kindall, he just kept looking out the window like nothing was wrong, and Verna just kept talking to us. She asked questions like, “What program were you in with him?” and “How old were you when you met him?” And every question, Kindall had an answer for and with every answer Verna just said, “Oh that’s nice,” and, “Lovely.” She said “Lovely” a lot, always with “Lovely.”

Then she goes, “Oh, he would have been so happy that one of you young men are coming to his burial.”

And Kindall was like, “I wouldn’t miss this for the world.” Just like that. Then right there, I wanted to hit him. I was going to. I mean, what the hell was this dude thinking? This was a dead guy’s mom. You don’t mess with people like that.
Look, man, I agreed to go to this, and I had agreed to go to funerals all the time, but we never said nothing to people. We just stood there or sat there and said nothing. It was like an agreement or something.

Anyway, I wanted to whip his ass. But I couldn’t.

Instead, I told myself, “When this is over me and Kindall are done. For real this time. I won’t call his house or come by or nothing.” See, Kindall never listened. Whenever he wanted to do something crazy, he would never listen. First, I was cool with it. Like skipping school and stuff. But he kept going. The dude put random groceries in a woman’s shopping cart once. I mean, we were cool, real cool, but I don’t know. I just liked to hang with him. He had other ideas sometimes.

The car stopped at the light on my block. I looked out the window and saw some neighborhood kids on their bikes. There was Manuel, George, and some other kid that I didn’t know, all on their bikes. They were standing in front of the corner store, laughing like they were telling jokes, and they were eating chips and stuff. They didn’t see me though. And I don’t know if I wanted them to. Like I wanted to get out and buy a soda with them, but I didn’t want them to see me like this, all jazzed up like this. Like I was just another dork, all suited up to be just like everyone else. But here we were pretending to know this guy. I don’t know if I was more ashamed of what I was doing to Verna or what I might be doing to myself.

Then the husky-eyed guy spoke, “You boys, you did really good for yourselves, I see. Your teacher must be proud.”

“Yeah,” Kindall said. “They are.”

I was tired of him talking and answering. Every time he opened his mouth, he almost got us in trouble. I was feeling like an idiot not saying anything, like he was just trying to keep it going,
trying to see how far it could go. I figured if there was any way we were getting out of this, it was to just say nothing, but why should I let Kindall do all the talking?

“I don’t even know my teachers,” I said. “I’m new.”

The husky-eyed guy said nothing for a few seconds. He just looked in the rear view. I looked dead at him and just kept a blank stare. But those eyes. I couldn’t tell if I should be scared or what. They just hypnotized me. Especially his left eye. I could tell if it was red or brown. And that face. I almost regretted saying something.

“Mean everyone,” he said. “Teach, parrents. Everyone. You know?”

I didn’t know if he was mad or just trying to correct himself. I didn’t care. I wasn’t trying to push it. He looked like the kind of dude that whipped his kids back in the day for being smart, a man of the house kind-of-guy. I wasn’t going to test him.

“Yeah,” I said. “They’re happy. Real happy.”

Manuel, George, and everyone kept on joking and eating. The light turned and we kept driving.

The guy with the husky eyes drove through the city streets, and eventually we got into the woods. And I mean out, out in the woods. It must have taken us 45 minutes to get there. That whole time I was scared and had to pee, but I didn’t say nothing. So, we just kept driving down the woods. I’d never seen the woods like that before. Trees were all around. I’d been to the woods in the park with my bike, but these were real woods, the kind that I only saw in movies. The kind with killers and crazy people that couldn’t take it in the world anymore.
By the time we got where we were going, I couldn’t even see the sun through all the trees and hills, even though most of the leaves were fallen by then.

He turned onto this dirt road and just kept driving, bumps and all. The car jump kept swaying and going up and down. And here my stomach had gotten calm, but all these bumps we’re throwing me around and making me want to pee some more. This whole time I’d look at Kindall and he was just looking out the window like it was nothing. No expression. Nothing.

We got to some type of field. Just an open field big enough to fit all the cars, like 15 of the cars we got there with. And then we stopped. And there was nothing around, but woods. Verna and the old guy got out and then Kindall got out too, so I opened the door. It was getting brisk, and I didn’t bring my coat. Just a blazer. I liked to bring hats too sometimes, but I didn’t have one this time. The wind was hitting my head and my ears.

So, they all got out of their cars, and then they took the casket out of the hearse. Like eight dudes grabbed the casket, the pallbearers. I looked at Kindall and he just kept looking at the casket.

I crept up to him and whispered, “I got to pee.”

Kindall turned to me, real slow “Yeah?”

“How long you think this is?” I said.

And Kindall goes, “An hour. Probably an hour. It’s all good though.”

And he just kept watching. Like it was nothing. Like he was into it now. Like he forgot that we weren’t even supposed to be there.

Then all those men, they carried the casket towards the woods, and I could see just a little opening in the trees. They walked right into it. And all the other men followed.
“Gentlemen,” Verna said to me and Kindall. And then she gestured her head to the path. I looked to my left and all the women, most all old women were bunched together just looking at us, like they were waiting. They were all in white too. They dressed white and all had the purple flower over their heart. They wore different looking outfits, but all white except for the flower. And I mean it wasn’t like they were pissed either. They just politely waited, some looking at us, others looking away or with their heads down.

“Let’s go,” Kindall said, and he walked away towards the wooded area. So I followed him.

We kept going down this trail for what was like a mile, man. It wasn’t even a flat path. We were going all up and down rocks with funeral shoes and funeral clothes on. All thick vines and trees in the way too, for like, a mile. We just kept following the guys that were following the dudes holding the casket. I didn’t know when it would end. But I looked behind and I could see the first woman in line still, a middle-aged woman. She had a mean face too. She was way behind us. Every time we turned a corner, I kept losing her. Then she would show up again with that face, like a mean schoolteacher or something.

So, finally when we turned another corner, I figured this was my shot, my only shot if I ever had one. So, I ran off into the brush. I didn’t even care if Kindall saw, I just had to piss.

But see, as I finished, and I felt better, I started to think. And it was just a thought. I thought I could just run and go home. Like I was just at the park by my house or something. I didn’t know what I was going to do, but anything was better than this. I felt my pocket and noticed that I still had some change for a phone. I could call my mom or my Uncle Rod. There was a store way back on the road and I felt like I knew what way to go. Like I knew that the Sun was west, and we drove up north to get here, and it would be just like in the movies.
I looked up. Kindall stood on the trail looking at me. Like he was waiting for me.

He said to me, “What are you doing?”

I said, “What?!” Then I turned and looked down the trail. I could see the ugly-faced woman looking right at me. I zipped up and walked to the trail.

“Monkeys!”

I swear heard someone say the word “Monkeys” Just like that. I mean, I wasn’t sure, but what else could it have been? And it was coming from behind too. I looked back, and I saw the that same woman looking right at me hard. I had never heard her voice either, but I swear with that energy coming from her, she was the one that said something. But at the same time, I don’t know, it was like it wasn’t possible from where she was standing. It had to have come from someone further back. Someone that fell behind. But she just kept walking right up the trail, giving me that look. And here I was looking for any proof that she was the one that said it. I couldn’t tell.

“You heard that?” I said to Kindall up ahead, but he kept walking.

I looked back down and the ugly-faced woman kept walking toward me. They all kept coming toward me down the trail. And what was I going to do? I couldn’t ask her what she said, if she was the one that said it. So I turned and kept going. I kept going until I caught up to Kindall again. So, we finally got to this field out in the middle of nowhere. It was just a plain field out in the open, real big, but there’s already a white canopy set up with people standing there, five people.

We got closer and I saw those people under the canopy dressed up. They looked dressed like lawyers from England. They call them barristers. All old men. They looked like the kind I’ve seen in TV with robes. They had on black robes, but they had dome-shaped hats, like a derby hat
with no rim. They even had the white ribbons around their necks. They were all old men though. No women. I looked down the field and the group of women were coming toward us now. Everyone was white though. Both men and women. Not a black man or Latino or nothing in sight. Just white people, from the funeral to the burial.

But at that moment, watching those women make their way to us, it felt like they didn’t care who we were. It could have been any non-white kids. It was like for some reason, they needed us to make this thing real or official. Like they wanted us to bear witness, and that was it.

Now I grew up around lots of people. People that spoke Chinese, Spanish, Arabic, lots of languages. I’d been in their houses and heard it, but I’ve never heard anything like what those guys in robes were saying to each other. I mean, their tongues were twisted, like it wasn’t even possible to be making those words. Then this one guy, he had one of those chins, like multiple chins. He looked right at me and stared. And I froze. Then he looked at Kindall. Then he turned to the husky-eye guy. And the husky-eye guy said something in that crazy language.

Then the chin guy turned to me and nodded like he was approving and saying hello.

So, they placed the casket in the hole and the women started crying. And one by one, the women would throw a flower on the casket and walk away, back to the woods. Not even a word. They just walked back to the wooded area but didn’t go inside. They just stood there with their heads down.

And all these dudes, all of them this time, they put on those funny hats. And me and Kindall were just standing there, and I looked over to Kindall, and he just kept looking at the casket, so I looked down too.
Two bags of something landed on the casket. Burlap bags and they were moving. The bags were actually moving. Two moving bags, small ones, and you know, something living was in them. I could tell.

One bag had a cat ’cause I know how cats move and sound, but the other bag was something else.

I don’t know what. It looked like a big ass worm was in the bag. It moved like a big, thick worm. It was moving and making all these crazy noises. Noises I never heard before except maybe in jungle movies. It was like a monkey, but like no monkey I had ever heard. It just kept moving all around until it fell off the side of the casket. That’s when it really freaked me out ’cause it made this noise, a growling noise, but like a human. Like a grown-ass man making an animal noise.

And then that’s when they did it. The guys in the robes started throwing gas on the casket, a big container of gasoline they had hidden under a blue tarp.

And the guy with the chins, he goes--and I’ll never forget this— ’” May you find some way to heaven for what you did to the brothers. Cause we banish you to the infernal underground!””

And then they lit him up. They just threw a piece of paper that was on fire right on top of the casket and that was it. The whole thing went up in flames. And the growling noise stopped as soon as the fire started too. Then the guy with the chins said, “We have spoken. May all within our sacred brotherhood take heed, if you ever wander astray,” And these dudes just stood there watching and backing off slowly. And most everyone walked away, and me and Kindall walked away with them.
We walked towards the woods again, all smoke and flame coming from behind us. But I saw the guys in cloaks stay behind. We walked to the woods, and I could see flames and those guys just standing there, getting smaller every time I looked back.

When we got in the woods, I couldn’t see the burial site anymore. Just smell the smoke. I can still smell that smoke to this day. It was strong. I’ve been to a couple bonfires since then too. I never smelled smoke like that.

And Kindall, right when we get in the car, this dude puts on his headphones and plays his music. We sat in the back again, but this time Verna sat between us, but I’m here trying to figure out what happened and he’s not even in this world. I got pissed. I was trying to get a feel of what was going through his mind, but he didn’t even look at me.

Verna turned to me and smiled. “We’ll be taking you boys back.” I looked in the rear view and the guy with husky eyes just looked at me. Then he looked at Verna. Verna just gestured for him to drive, and he drove.

Then she said to me, “You know, young man, I can’t tell you enough how important this is to us, what you just did for Winky. Do you know that?”

I said, “Sure.”

“You do?” she said. She put her hand on my hand and smiled her big smile. It wasn’t like an old woman’s hand though. It was smooth like a young lady. I felt a sense of relief in some way. Like she really meant to calm me. And those eyes. They cut through me again. Like she knew a lot and she’d seen a lot and people respected her and she knew it.
“And I shouldn’t have to say this,” she said. “But, you know, there’s some things better kept to ourselves. Some people just won’t believe it. Especially coming from someone so young and so troubled at one point.” She went and patted my hand. “It’s just the way of the world,” she said. “I’m afraid it’s just the world.”


They dropped us both off at my house and I got right out of the car. Still, I said thank you for everything I made sure I offered my condolences before they left. I kicked Kindall on his foot to make sure that he did it too, and he did.

We got inside the house, and I didn’t waste no time. I knew my mom was still at work, so I didn’t have to change my clothes before I got there. I went straight to my room, closed the door and turned to Kindall. I wanted to keep it open too, to listen out for my mom, but I needed to send a message to him too—“You’re gonna have to answer or else.”

I looked dead in his eyes and went, “You got something to say about all this?”

Kindall scrunched his eyebrows and said, “What?” like he didn’t know what I was talking about. I had a feeling he’d be like that. I knew on the whole ride back that he would deny everything. I stepped closer to him though. “You could have had us killed, man!”

“Killed?” he said, and he chuckled, “How?”

I squared up to him. I knew that even though Kindall wasn’t tough, he would still fight if he could take his opponent. And I really believed Kindall believed he could take me, like he misread me that whole time, so anything was possible. It didn’t matter at this point. No one would
see or know, if I got beat. Plus, I had the home court advantage. He knew it too. That’s why he backed up and raised his hands a little in defense.

“You just want someone to tag along with your bullshit” I said. “You don’t give a rats ass about me.”

“Man, it’s not even like that,” he said. “We’re boys.”

I pointed my finger in his face. He backed up some more. I knew Kindall was a kind of a bitch, but this was easy.

“I turned my back on my friends from my block,” I said. “All for this nonsense. Man, no one at school does this stuff. All my old friends think I’m crazy.”

He didn’t break eye contact at all. He just kept looking at me like I owned him. It made me feel like even more of an ass that I followed this dude, like he knew what he was doing. But this time, I don’t know, he just looked sad. Like I could say anything and have him follow me instead. This guy was a wet noodle.

“Alright,” he said. “Okay. I got it. I just thought you were different. I thought we were different. That’s all. You want to go back to those dudes, go ahead. Go ahead. That’s all I’m saying. That’s all.”

I don’t know where this came from. It was something about the way he said “those dudes.” And maybe it wasn’t condescending, but I guess I was just caught up in the moment. So it just came out.

“You know,” I said. “You’re nothing but a spoiled brat still mad at his parent’s divorce.”
His mouth parted, and it looked like his face turned all sorts of colors. He didn’t know what to think except maybe I was right. But I could see the pain in his eyes. I really got into his solar plexus or whatever part of our bodies feels hurt, deep hurt. I could feel his pain too. It was sharp, and it went all though him. His eyes kept showing it. Then he just stood there for a few more seconds, not knowing what to do, like he was waiting on me. And I knew I could say nothing for too long, but that whole time, that whole five seconds, I enjoyed it.

Kindall nodded his head. “Yeah,” he said. “Alright.” I just kept giving him the dead stare. I knew that I didn’t have to anymore, but for some reason I did. Then he walked past me, and I could hear the front door close.

By Monday, we were just two people who passed each other in the halls. It got to a point where we would look and each other, but we never said a word all year. Then finally I left that school and went back to my old school and that was it. I saw him two more times, and we said hello and asked each other about our future plans after school, but that was it. The funeral boys or whatever you want to call them were done. Disbanded as we would say. And that was it.

Kindall passed last week out on the west coast at the age of 42. They said he knew in advance that he was going to die. His mom found me online. She asked if I could say a few words at his funeral. I don’t understand why, but she said that he spoke well of me, that I was an important influence in his life. I don’t know how, but all hard feelings had been long gone ages ago.

She said that she would pay for my flight out west, and I could stay at Kindall’s house and meet his boys, Bowser and Ganon. I really didn’t want to. I didn’t feel that I could speak like some of those people when she told me what type of people would be speaking.
She said that Kindall was some sort of music critic out west. A lot of people read him all over the world. And all types of music people and writers would be at his funeral. I got nervous on the phone when she told me. I said, “Yes,” though.

So, I looked him up on his blog. His last post talked about how he was into the death scene as a teen and listened to all that type of music. I mean, it wasn’t a scene. It was just me and him, but whatever.

I looked through all his writing all night. It was good stuff. All types of music and he had a lot to say. So, I went back like one year and I saw this article.

This is what his article said:

“Music is all around. I didn’t realize how important music was until a few years ago. I had stopped listening to records and stopped going to concerts to devote myself to full-time substance abuse. And it wasn’t a lack of music in my life that made me realize how important it was. It was because when I stopped feeling sorry myself and finally started getting help for my problems, I could see the music in everything. First in books. Then in conversations. Then in the world. Then finally in my memories. And the music in memory is always the best songs. You never run out of them. So many combinations and variations, a never-ending long play.”

I asked to speak at the funeral first. I’m going to read this piece, and I don’t want anyone to read it before I do. Then I wouldn’t have much else to say.

But I decided to play our favorite song. It’s a rare song. It sounds like a song about love and happiness, but really, it’s about death. You would only know that if you knew about the songwriter like me, and Kindall did from ordering those magazines and videos.
I think they’ll like that song. They probably never even heard it. But it’s like Kindall said once, “Sometimes you get more fun out of watching people listen to a song for the first time than you get from hearing the song over and over. Like you hear it for the first time again. Then you suddenly realize, ‘Hey, I was wrong. This person is cool.’

Something like that is what I think he said.
ART:
NMR is a shared space among academics, artists, and activists to highlight and discuss their work. The artist in residence is chosen each year to share their work with the journal’s readership. Their work will be featured both in the print journal and website.

The 2023 artist in residence is Sarah Ellis. Sarah is the Assistant Professor of Printmaking in the Department of Art and Design at Jacksonville State University. Her personal studio work consists of predominantly printmaking, paper arts, illustration, and sculpture. Sarah is a member of the LGBTQ+ community and participates in JSU’s Safe Zone program as a Facilitator. When she isn’t working, she enjoys self-care practices that include cooking, rock climbing, and spending time with her partner & her cat.
I had never felt fear like this.

If this fear had a taste, it would be a blend of burnt coffee and bitter unripened citrus fruit with metallic notes. It would bite at the back of my tongue in a lingering, astringent sensation. If it had a smell, it would be the phantom scent of an electrical fire that cannot be located. If I could see the fear itself, it would be the shadow of an unknown man in my peripheral vision during that vulnerable moment preceding sleep.

Instead, I could only feel it nestling itself in the pit of my stomach and establishing roots.

I didn’t know it was an obsession at first. I found myself becoming more and more preoccupied with what could be wrong with my body after I noticed a strange feeling in my abdomen that lingered. Numerous doctor’s visits and blood tests confirmed only one thing: I was healthy. However, I began to research my “symptoms” more and more frequently as an attempt to soothe my anxiety. This swiftly developed into a compulsive behavior that consumed my evenings. I would lie awake and cry at night, afraid to sleep because I could feel in my bones that I wasn’t going to wake up in the morning. My relationships began to struggle as I became more and more fearful of being sick. I would fall to pieces if I discovered something new on my body or if I experienced what I perceived to be a new symptom. I needed constant reassurance that my fears were unfounded, but this was unobtainable. I became a stranger to my own mind as I lost control of my ability to rationalize.

I couldn’t trust what was real anymore. Every bodily sensation, every minor ache, and every flutter of discomfort sent shockwaves of panic through me. I spiraled into a world where
even the most mundane symptoms became omens of catastrophic illness. Each Google search became a rabbit hole of dread, a confirmation that I was going to die soon. I was living with Hypochondriasis, or Health Anxiety Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

As someone who has experienced varying degrees of mental health crises in my life, I knew it was time to seek professional help and medication during a specific panic attack. My (vaccinated, healthy) cat bit me and I became convinced that I had rabies instantly. As I was sobbing into my partner’s shoulder to the point of almost fainting, we both knew something had to change. Prozac soon acted as a powerful ally in working through my fears, removing some of the paralyzing anxiety and making room for me to start reestablishing reality. The hypochondria haze had been cleared, and I could see how severe it was in hindsight.

I would not describe my flavor of OCD as tidy, neat, or orderly. It was a messy, chaotic nightmare that eluded me for so long due to my own misconceptions of the disorder. I wanted to represent this in the suite of prints I created as Artist in Residence. The use of type in this work highlights the “little worries” that build pressure under the surface when processing rumination and compulsions. Seemingly inconsequential thoughts quickly turn into symptom-checking, a new bump on the body sparks excoriation, and a sore throat becomes a trip to urgent care.

The print pieces that I created as a part of this self-reflection use food products as a symbol of self-control being challenged. Canning food involves gathering ingredients at the peak of freshness and sealing them away to be ready for another time. Shelf stable, they are reassuring that nutrition (life) is still there. Things can happen to make these normally safe foods toxic and deadly, though. Botulism lingers as a threat in broken seals, cracked glass, and miscalculated temperatures.
Humans can only control so much when there is an entire world of flora and fauna that we can’t see with the naked eye.

Relief printmaking, similar to canning, preserves something for the future. The carved blocks can be used repeatedly and in varying combinations, allowing them to be blended into new compositions. These blocks have an indefinite shelf life, and my collection now spans almost a decade of artistic exploration. Each piece was made specifically for this publication from newly carved blocks and will continue as an ongoing series.

Jacksonville, Alabama
2023.
I hate anything with a needle.
filled
with a dreadful fear
fear of the doctor

I'm being fooled

I'm of fear
fuck being particular with laundry

i have to google "ebola itch" for the next hour
fix it
Part of *NMR*’s mission is to create a space where both academic and non-academic writers, activists, and artists can read, share, and engage one another’s work. The journal’s managing editor, Wesley R. Bishop, met with French artist and disability rights activist Aubrey Grison to discuss her work over the summer. The following conversation has been edited for clarity and length.
Bishop: Can you please start by telling us a little bit about yourself? Give us your background information, the whole thing. Who are you?

Grison: Okay. Basically, I am 31. I am an artist. I’ve been studying for fine arts, art history, and I have a degree in graphic design. What can I say? I think I like to be a [inaudible 00:01:07], because this is how I express myself. But not only as painting or modeling or whatever, it just is something very important in the way that I tend to see people as colors and emotions. And when I was 20, I used to think I was not sensitive. Then I realized that I was, which was for me a big thing. It sounds kind of silly, but I am such a strong person, and I am a rebel. And I say what I think, I’m very honest. So, to actually dig into my feelings and to accept the fact that I was feeling things.

But at the same time, I was like, okay, it makes sense. It’s why I am creative. I am in a wheelchair. I was born with my disability. It’s still unknown to this day what it is exactly. My parents tried to find a different diagnosis, but each of them were wrong. And I never had [inaudible 00:02:22] me the fact that I want to know what I have, even as a kid. So, when they stopped digging, I was just very happy to not go to hospital and stuff like that anymore. And eventually, because my ears are quite fragile and stuff like that, I have to be careful. But I live my life, I would say, as anyone. Except for the fact that I am physically dependent. Yeah, I think it’s about who I am in the big picture.

Bishop: Can you tell us where you’re based out of?

Grison: I am in Toulouse, which is the southwest of France. It’s quite a big city. And I was born in Toulouse, and so I am still in Toulouse.

Bishop: You were speaking a little bit about disability and art, and how that related to your earlier life. Can you talk a little bit about how that transition from you being younger and not wanting to know anymore, and just wanting to get on with your life, how that impacted your art, particularly modeling and photography?

Grison: I would say that I am 30-something, and so I realize now because I don’t shy away from it, I’ve been doing therapy for two years. And so I just realized that what I was when I was six, I became the same in the way I [inaudible 00:04:18] over a book or over a TV show, or a movie. I don’t know. In the fact that I was very confident in what I was, who I am, and what I deserve. I’m pretty lucky to be in this way, and to still be like that. I think some way modeling was a new thing, a new step in seeing my body differently. Because even if I always been low-key sensitive and feminine, and I like to take [care] of myself. Still, to make [a] picture, and then you see yourself through the eyes a photographer, and you see the results. Well, it’s great. And then you say, “Oh, my God, it’s not that bad actually.”

And so, when you make a statement, you can make it with your own words, which I’ve been trying to do ever since I was a kid. But to realize that my body was that powerful in, oh, I can express my image. Oh, can I shape it, what I want to say and what is meaning of my [inaudible 00:05:39]? I was going to say beauty, but body. Yeah, it was very strong, very powerful. And I would say I’m even more confident in my ability to look good, but only for me. And at the same time I was like, when I’m making a painting for clients, then it’s all of me inside of it. But then my client buy[s]
it, and okay, that’s it. It is. When you look at a piece of art, it doesn’t belong to me anymore… But what is funny is that it’s my face on it. But when someone look[s] at the picture, he just thinks something of how I look or what I say and whatever. But what this person is thinking doesn’t belong to me anymore.

**Bishop:** What was the first photograph of you and your body that you saw that made you think that? That, wow, this is something that I could pursue, that I’m beautiful, that I can show my body in this way? When was this? What year specifically? Was there a photographer that you worked with or was it a selfie that you took?

**Grison:** I would say it’s in two times. Because in 2016 I went to Paris and there’s a group of photographers on Instagram… And they were doing a worldwide tour, and they were in Paris. I was like, “Greta, I want to do it.” And it was not so expensive, so I was like, I’ll try it. But it was my first time, and I was like, oh, my God, am I going to look ridiculous, or whatever? And I had the best time. It was just so much fun, so crazy. I had to change and to be in a tail in front of the Eiffel Tower. It was very insane. And, I don’t know, it was fun. But then I didn’t do much after that. And in 2021, in the middle of the pandemic, I had a lot of anxiety and I need to find something to do. Which was like, okay, I need to get out of my home. I need to have fun.

And so, I went and called a friend of a friend, she’s a Colombian… and she’s in Toulouse. And so, we went in the field, and we made the picture. And when I saw the result I like, oh my God, it’s great. And it was the first time I thought, okay, maybe I can make something out of it. Maybe, I don’t know. As I say, it’s pretty message or make money, or meet people. And each time I was doing a photo shoot, what I liked the most is a process of creativity right before the shooting. Which is like, okay, I have this idea, I want to do this. What do you think? Okay, make it. Just the communication, exchange.

Which is like, I just love to make something in my head to make it real. It just so exciting. And so all of this is quite selfish because what I think is that I did [it] for me, but at the same time it’s quite selfless because it just made an impact on [how] all people picture disability. I don’t know. When it gets extreme, it can be both. And something I made for fun just went bigger than what I had in my head. And then I’m like, okay, if I can make something so different, so strange for some, make it look good or look normal, or look creative and sexy, or whatever. Then I’m like, okay, I’ve done my job. But it wasn’t my first intent. My first thought was, I’m going to offend.

**Bishop:** You’re going to what?

**Grison:** I’m going to offend.

**Bishop:** You’re going to offend? … That’s interesting. Can you talk a little bit about that if you’re comfortable with that? Why that thought initially of worrying about offending or worrying about it not being received well?
**Grison:** I would say I wasn’t really worried about it, but it’s a fact that when you create something, people are going to like it or not. And the fact that I never fit into something. Maybe the first time was like maybe I’m going to get ridiculous. But because I am confident in who I am anyway, I go for it… But if I was truly worried about my image or what I was doing, I would say I wouldn’t have done it. But just fact is to be realistic, to know that some way you can have hate comments and very nasty messages, or whatever. It’s a fact. I’ve had some in the past, so I know it is. But I chose to never answer.

**Bishop:** Can you speak a little bit about that in terms of the comments? How would you break them down? Have they been supportive, negative? Have they been even/even? Did they start off as overly negative and then become positive over time? I guess, what is the history of the comments on the photographs and the modeling work that you’ve done?

**Grison:** Honestly, they’ve been mostly supportive. Then I can believe sometimes people can mock me, or whatever, but I don’t remember one bad comment concerning my modeling stuff. It’s been really great. But as I am in public, you never know what might happen. But it’s a choice. When you choose to, I would say that to expose yourself, I’m just being realistic. But I had issues in the past for a few stuff, but it wasn’t…the modeling. And I’m a bit tough, so I don’t take any shit. But I just probably in real life, when people speak that to me, I can be like… I don’t know. My favorite movie is *Scarface*, so don’t fuck with me. But again, I comment like that. I know it can happen, and I think the best thing is to not answer, because it’s not my energy.

**Bishop:** Would you say then that the comments online have been overwhelmingly positive? You said with a few negative, but mostly the negative comments you’ve been concerned about are actually as you’re doing the modeling. Not from online people, but people who are in the physical world with you.

**Grison:** Yeah, sometimes. Sometimes. God, what can I say? Wait, just because I need to translate into English. I just translating. I would say that I just sound like a diva, cold, or bossy or whatever. I’ve been told that a few times. But I know that people who say that to me are not confident in themselves. And I’m definitely not cold. You won’t meet anyone burning more than I am. I am a flame. But if you think that I just look, I don’t know, demanding or bossy, or whatever, it just means you have an issue with yourself. So, take a look in… I need to share that because once people speak back to me, like, don’t start, you’re going to die… I try to be wiser. I just try to shut it and to not say something always. But it can be like that. But if people are judg[mental], perhaps it’s not my issue. It’s your issue. I just want to focus into spreading positivity and optimism, and to show kids that they can do whatever they want, disability or not. I just want to focus and do that instead of focusing on bullshit. Then people will just want to be like, ‘I am so much better than you are.’ It just is fake. But I [am not] here to be the therapist.
**Bishop:** How would you say France is overall culturally in terms of disability rights and disability acceptance?

**Grison:** You picked the wrong French person. Honestly, I was with friends this week coming home from Stockholm. And all my friends are having very different background culture than I am, from the USA, Great Britain, Stockholm, place[s] like that. France, I would say… France… I think there is this word which is very trendy to speak about being “inclusive.” But in France, in my opinion, it is quite bullshit. Because I just want to sound like they [do]. For example, in Toulouse. Toulouse is very accessible in term of subways, bus, stuff like that. If you went to Paris and [had a] wheelchair, forget it… I know they make an effort. But in terms of shopping, going to, I don’t know, the bank, restaurant, theaters, anything. When you get out it’s very, very difficult. There are so many places I can only go in summer because [they have outside seating, other times]… I can’t enter because I don’t have a ramp. They don’t have accessible toilets. It’s like, facts. And to me it’s bullshit because most of them will be like, “Yeah, I forgot about the ramp, but I don’t have any clients in wheelchair.” You don’t have clients in wheelchair because you don’t have a ramp.

**Bishop:** Hmm mmm.

**Grison:** So… Don’t start [with the excuses]. Yeah. No, it’s not good. I think in terms to school as well... [out of] 2,000 kids in high school, I was the only one with a disability. Still to this day, it’s been more than a decade. Still to this day, when I’m going to party [at], I don’t know, clubs in Toulouse, or whatever, I still have people coming to me. “Oh, you were in that high school. I’ve seen you.” It’s crazy how lonely it was. But for me as feelings, I was okay. I was always the only one in high schools, in middle school, anything. I was the only one with disability.

In the early… [1990s] it was still very difficult to be inclusive in term[s] of normal school. Yeah, I would say it’s very, very late. I am much more comfortable in England. It’s much more like the way people are behaving. They try to find solutions. They’re not offended when you say the fact that it’s not accessible. I’m not going to apologize because I [cannot] enter. You have to think through it. No, to me it’s very bad, honestly. To me it’s bad because I’ve seen other stuff. I’ve been in other countries, and so I can compare. Even in Spain it’s easier.

**Bishop:** In Spain how is it?

**Grison:** Easier.

**Bishop:** Have you been to the [United] States before? How does it compare?

**Grison:** No, because taking a plane and maybe getting my chair broken, [gives] me too much anxiety. But I wish I could come, but so far it just is giving me too much anxiety.

**Bishop:** I understand that, that’s something that a lot of folks talk about in terms of the airlines. The airlines are not accessible by design, and for people who use wheelchairs. Like you said, wheelchairs can become damaged. You were saying that in France there’s obviously the inaccessibility of architecture with, excuse me, restrooms, seating, doors, entrances. And then you’re also saying that attitudes as well, where there’s this false inclusivity. But if you point out that things aren’t accessible, instead of them trying to fix it, they make excuses. Correct? Do you
think… that making these excuses comes from a place of discomfort? That they know that they
should be doing better and that they’re not? Or what do you think?

**Grison:** I know it’s coming from ignorance. And ignorance is not always with some intent… it’s
just being dumb. Honestly, we have a famous place in Toulouse, which is called the Capitole. And
when I’m in the middle of the Capitole, I know that 80% of the people coming out from the subway
never saw anyone [with a] disability. So, when they look at me, they’re like, though she’s smiling,
is she looking pretty? I don’t know, does she look friendly? Does she smell nice? I don’t know.
And we just look at myself. And from a judgment of what is to have disability. But the spectrum
of disability is very large. So, because someone has disability and the same disability, it’s the same
person. So, it’s bullshit again. But daily, I am obviously educating people at my expense, so have
to do that to some extent. Because sometimes it just goes, sometimes it gets wild.

Like at a lunch last summer, it was one year ago, but still in my head. And so, we just chatting,
friend to friend. And it was for work issues. And then he asked me, “Oh, did you ever have sex?”
And I was like, “Sorry?” Just out of the blue. And so, people feel like they can ask this question,
and it’s so rude. And so, okay, what do I do? Do I get offended? But at the same times I’m quite
open at answering people[’s] daily stupid question because they don’t know. So where do I fit in
that spectrum? And honestly, it’s very complicated. Because if I answer, it’s not good. And if I
don’t answer, it’s not good either. So very often you can get stuck in that kind of dilemma.

**Bishop:** If you don’t mind me asking, how did you respond? Did you answer the question, or did
you ignore it, or did you explain to them why it was inappropriate to ask?

**Grison:** After that lunch, four hours later or something, I was like, what the fuck, it happened.
When it happened, I was a bit shocked, but then I quickly moved [on in] the conversation because
I wanted to get to another subject. But then I realized, I was like, it’s not normal. And then I’m
like, okay, now Audrey, you’re not a kid anymore. You’re still kind of are, but you have to be an
adult. And if I was a woman without disability, maybe I would’ve just get offended and not answer.
So, get entitled to answer. It’s super difficult to just know what’s right or wrong. And I know it
wasn’t mean, but it was just, again, out of ignorance. And it’s very difficult to just know. And so,
this is why one example that I think that France is very late in making [areas] accessible and
changing minds. But at the same time, if they don’t meet anyone with disability in the classroom,
in the office, in any place, how can we change the way they look at us?
Why should an artist reveal himself, and why does it matter to us?

WE are not things.
**Bishop:** Do you know of any other artists in France who are pushing the concepts of disability inclusion and disability rights?

**Grison:** On Twitter, I follow a few people. What I find complicated, and maybe because I’ve been saying this a lot, I don’t want to get involved in politics. Because I feel like nobody represents what I stand for. Even out of disability, I don’t relate… And so I tend to stand back from that kind of speech because I feel like, okay, they’re going to use me, they’re going to use my image, they’re going to use the way I behave. I don’t want to associate with political stuff. I don’t know, maybe I will evolve around that, but so far, I find it too tricky.

And I know that even... I don’t know. I was doing an exhibition in the gallery two years ago, and a few politicians came, and they all asked for a picture with me. And yeah, I know they use the fact that, oh, the young woman’s disability, she is making up a show in the gallery, blah, blah, blah. I know how it is, so I play the game. But if I have my say in that, I try to be very careful with that kind of stuff.

**Bishop:** Sure. Makes sense.

**Grison:** Yeah, there are a few people who are activists, but the way I do it in a very creative way is quite singular to what I love.

**Bishop:** So, you said you’re also a painter, correct?

**Grison:** Yeah.

**Bishop:** And was this an art exhibit that you were just mentioning, was that a painting exhibit?

**Grison:** Yeah.

**Bishop:** What do you paint with? Do you use oil, watercolors? And what subjects do you like to explore in your painting?

**Grison:** I make mostly portraits, and they’re faceless. And I use watercolors and pens, so I use pens to make the hair and the silhouettes. And then I paint with colors which are quite vivid, vibrant. I’ll say that I associate people with colors, such as a mood or who they are. I try to use the color to describe the people I’m seeing. Because again, they’re faceless. So, you don’t have the nose and lips, or whatever.
Stupid men!
it's just till these tears have dried.
**Bishop:** Switching gears a bit, do you think that body positivity is linked to disability rights, or do you see them as very separate movements, in your opinion?

**Grison:** No, I think it links, definitely. But again, it depends on how you use it. How to say that? Okay. The first thing is visibility, the choice to expose yourself. Which I’m doing. For me, it’s quite obvious just by the fact that I am exposing myself, I am making a statement. And so, I try to say it’s normal and it’s okay to everybody, which is different. But again, I know my state of mind can be very driven, very strong. And that I [am] ahead of my years in the fact that I am kind of young, but I feel much more older in my head, because I just develop an attitude. Which was like, okay, I understood a lot of stuff. But don’t worry, I’m very naive and I still mess up hours like I did today. And I am still silly. But in term of emotional intelligence, I am very much like, it’s a lot for me to be around... You just have to make the choice to own yourself.

Because I say that I own my body, but I do not really own its image. And this is why making art is interesting. Because I can create something, then I give it to the viewer, and then people can interpret. But maybe I’d say that because, again, I see everything from a creative point of view, but it’s the way I develop each project. And I would speak about one more thing in turn of body positivity or stuff, to make tattoos.

**Bishop:** Tattoos?

**Grison:** Yeah, to add tattoos on my body. Eighteen or so was a big step into owning my body… I can choose to have pictures on my body. And driving statements, like words, sentences. It was quite important in terms of taking back the power.

**Bishop:** That makes sense. How were the reactions of your friends and family when you started doing modeling? Were they supportive? Were they critical? Did they have much to say?

**Grison:** Yeah, most of my friends, I think they were surprised. I’ve been known for being, as I say, feminine and stuff. But it was another step into... I don’t know, I just saw some of them thought I was brave for, again exposing myself. But because I’m okay with my body and its limitation but also its power. And it’s not totally complicated.

**Bishop:** This is something that has come up with a few of the people that I’ve interviewed [for fat liberation], that you’ll have feelings when people say, “Oh, you’re brave.” And they will push back on that about the idea of being brave. How do you feel about that when people say, “Oh, that’s so brave.”? Do you welcome that, do you reject that?

**Grison:** Honestly, again, it doesn’t belong to me. It’s a classic statement told to people with disability. It’s not only about the body, it’s about the fact that you go to school, or you do this or you do that just to be out. It’s so brave. It’s a typical stuff. And I don’t care, honestly. I’ve learned so much, some amazing things also, which were crazy and bad, so I don’t care. But I know that a lot of people struggle to get out of this bitch, but I don’t think we’re still there. I think it’s going to be here for [awhile], because people are not still ready to completely accept that we are human beings which sometimes struggle… I don’t try to fight it. I just like… *shrugs*… and we move on.
**Bishop:** For your art, what projects do you have coming up that you’re excited about? Are you going to be continuing with some of the same themes in your painting and modeling, or is there something new on the horizon that you want to do?

**Grison:** By the end of June, I’m doing a new photo shoot in the forest. It was my friend who’s a Colombian photographer. It’s the one I told you before. And so, it’s going to be very exciting. We have a lot of stuff. I would say that we really went deeply into the creative process, what I want to say and stuff like that. It’s going to be amazing; I think. I feel like it’s going to be Barbie meeting Twilight. I’m excited about it. Apart from that, I’ve done a photo shoot with one of my best friends, she’s a photographer as well. But it’s not a main job, so we’re going to publish very soon, the pictures. I’m going back to teaching in high school in September or October, so it’s nice as well. I only do that four months a year, so it’s very nice because I don’t get bored [with] it.

And yet I just love to speak with kids and to be like, even if I teach my arts, it just is a moment some way in the classroom where when I come to the table and see them, and one of them confident in myself. And I just listen and try to not say too much shit. And it’s when I feel very useful, because you see the results at the moment, and it’s nice to have kids. I remember what it was like to be 16, even if I was unhappy, but I remember the confusion. So, I just try. Here’s the thing, is that I tend to be very shiny. I am very solo, and I speak way too much. But at the same time, I’m very skilled at listening to people.

I understood recently that I was meant to listen to them and to really... Yeah, I think in my future it’s going to be very important. So far I don’t do that on the side. I’m like, maybe, I don’t know. I’m going to become some kind of astrologer or whatever. I don’t know. But I know there is something which makes people feel good, and there [are] enough bad things in the world. Why not help people, if I can do it?

**Bishop:** You were saying that you teach, you said you teach fine arts?

**Grison:** Yeah. Since 2018.

**Bishop:** Did you go to school anywhere for art? Did you study art at any of the university, or are you self-taught?

**Grison:** No, I was studying fine arts and then art history, and then I did a graduate design degree. But it had nothing to do with teaching. Teaching just happened, it wasn’t meant to be.... Someone I knew from another school, and they just liked my [work and profile online, and said]... I could educate teenagers about disability. Sometimes I speak from making small conferences, and so mostly I go to teach schools fine art.
Bishop: Would you like to close with any statement about disability, accessibility, and art?

Grison: I would say that if you don’t fight for yourself, who’s going to do it? It’s always go back to yourself. What may sound selfish is not at all if it’s done with great intentions. I just think that people should not give up on what’s right for them, and to go [have] fun, get out. I don’t know, just live your life. Don’t get stuck in, I don’t know, something depressive. I know that mental health is important, some people have issue with it. And it’s important to take care of yourself. But to go out and to sometimes get out of your comfort zone will make you meet people amazing. I would say that in my life, normal never happen. It’s always on the scale of what is extraordinary. When I was a kid, a little kid, when I was eight or something, I was a big fan of an artist in Spain.

He used to make his design on your school bags in band, and whatever. And each summer, because I go to Barcelona in summer, they always were taking all the pens and all the notebooks and stuff. And when I was seventeen, I could make a wish, like Make a Wish in America. But not wish as a charity. And so, I asked to meet him. And then we met and he’s like my soulmate. When your find someone and then you meet the person, and the actual human being is even greater, it’s kind of nuts. And it’s important to love and to try to make some greatness happen. But I know that I am very weird. I’m ambitious. And at the same time, as I say, I shy away from politics and stuff like that because I don’t want to belong to something that is not me. But at the same time, I struggle very hard to find people like me. So, it makes no sense. But I think just to be in love with life and to respect yourself is very important.

Bishop: Thank you so much for your time!

Grison: Thank you.
“WHEN WE WEAR A MASK”: PUBLIC BLACKNESS AS ART, DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY, 2022, EXHIBIT OVERVIEW.

DR. ADEYEMI DOSS
The opening of *Public Blackness* achieved record attendance. The exhibition that expanded three galleries (Turman Gallery, Yang Family University Gallery, and Bare-Montgomery Gallery) located on the campus of Indiana State University, included a large number of paintings, photographs, and media installations from invited artist such as Abe Abraham, Dread Scott, Idris Habib, and Ayanna Ross. The art exhibition was also my first one, and it was inspired by a piece I wrote for *The North Meridian Review*, which was published in 2021. “Public Blackness and the Burden of Black Privacy” explored themes of identity and belonging through a time of protest around the killings of Ahmaude Arbrey, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, interwoven with my personal experiences and observations as a Black male. It was the idea of being Black in public that I wanted to explore through the lens of a visual artist. In my examination of how blackness and the bodies of Black people are perceived in public, I started to wonder how I could bring other people from all walks of life into my web of thoughts on what and how it feels to be Black in public. I wanted to challenge the notion that the Black experience is singular and static, and instead showcase its diversity and complexity in a time of heightened anti-black racism. By incorporating various artistic mediums such as painting and photography, my aim was to create a more inclusive and immersive experience for viewers. Through this exhibition, my intent was to foster dialogue and understanding among individuals from different backgrounds, encouraging them to reflect on their own perceptions of race and identity in public spaces.

Upon arrival into the first gallery, which sits north of the campus, attendees were greeted with a display of racial artifacts from the Jim Crow era dating back to the late nineteenth century. These artifacts came from my private collection. On the side of the artifacts displayed a mature content sign advising the attendees that the exhibition contained mature and potentially provocative content that may cause a range of responses based on personal ideologies. Along with a “mature content” sign, there was also a description explaining the history behind the artifacts on display.
The reason behind the artifacts was to educate the public on how Black people’s bodies are imagined and scripted through many forms of media as objects that are often seen as everything but how it ought to be seen—as human. Thus, the artifacts served as an entry point that demonstrated how the Black body becomes entangled in web of anti-black thoughts and how detrimental those thoughts can be to the existence of Black people. As the attendees walked through the entrance, they were faced with a description of the exhibition:

This exhibition demonstrates how the Black body in a racially divided society gradually disappears from our understanding of what it means to be a human. What transpires when the Black body is captured in our gaze—a gaze that has been trained to only view it as a problem everywhere it exists? What happens when the myths from our past—which were frequently used to justify its destruction—become ingrained in our imagination of its existence today? When these myths become the foundation for how we perceive and interact with bodies of Black people, we often overlook their value and humanity. In other words, by only seeing the Black body through a racialized lens and not allowing for its true humanity to be seen, we are upholding the structures of white supremacy, which have been so pervasive throughout history. We must actively challenge the idea that the bodies of Black people are inferior and shift our gaze to a lens of equality, appreciation, and value. By examining the past and how it has been reconstructed in our present, we can begin to actively seek out ways to undo the power of racism and dismantle its embeddedness in our culture.

One should leave the exhibition knowing a bit more about what makes the Black body vulnerable to the violence it still endures today. With that knowledge, one should be empowered to view and treat the Black body not as an object of fear or mistrust, but with respect and appreciation. This exhibition forces us to ask hard questions and confront painful realities about the ways in which we have historically, and continue to, marginalize Black people and their bodies within our society. By examining the unique history of the bodies of Black people and their collective experiences, this exhibition reveals a complex interplay between past and present understandings of how the myths from our past have become intertwined with the realities of what it means to be Black today. As an observer, this exhibition pushes us to think deeply about the themes of power and oppression that have long been tied to representations of the Black body and encourages us to consider our own roles in the continued marginalization of the Black people within our society. This exhibition not only reveals the painful realities of our past, but also challenges us to make a conscious effort to learn from our history in order to create a more just and equitable future for everyone.

Going forward, it is essential to take these difficult conversations and use them to help foster a more equitable society that works towards dismantling structural racism, prejudice, and discrimination in order to ensure a brighter future for everyone. As such, the exhibition presented in this way serves as a call to action for all viewers, inspiring us to use the difficult conversations that these powerful works of art bring up as a tool to educate and advocate for change. Moving forward, it is our duty to use these powerful works of art as
a platform for learning and a call to action in order to make a lasting impact for generations to come.

As those present made their journey into the core of the gallery, they were greeted with an 18x16-foot mural painted in acrylic, which took me two weeks to complete with the assistance of a graduate student. Right in the center of the mural is my face, encompassed by the faces of Emmett Till, Michael Brown, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and Sandra Bland. The mural functioned as a powerful representation of the ongoing fight against racial injustice and police brutality. Each face depicted on the mural symbolized the lives lost and the need for systemic change, urging viewers to reflect on the urgent need for justice and equality in our society. The mural was also an interactive mural that offered attendees the opportunity to write and reflect on not only the work itself, but also the atrocities that they have seen or witnessed regarding racial violence, which has taken the lives of many people of color. The interactive aspect of the mural provided a space for healing and collective grieving, allowing individuals to share their personal experiences and emotions. It served as a powerful reminder that the fight against racial injustice requires active participation and solidarity from all members of society.

Next to the mural were three 48x32-inch black-and-white digital photos mounted on foam core. These photos aimed to capture the complexity of the black experience, highlighting the internal battles and challenges faced by individuals in their everyday lives. By presenting these images in an abstract manner, I wanted to encourage viewers to reflect on and empathize with these struggles, fostering a deeper understanding of the systemic issues at play.

By using photo manipulation to illustrate how some black people and their bodies respond to public blackness, my goal was to capture the everyday struggle and resistance against the embodiment of societies collective views of blackness which is often seen as the consequence of humanism in which those who appear to exist in blackness can be alienated and exiled at any time.

In conclusion, my ambition for this exhibition was to generate greater knowledge of the persisting and-often neglected local and national racial issues. Through the effectiveness of visual storytelling, both my work and the works of the other artist attempted to stimulate conversations and inspire a sense of
urgency for change. The exhibition aimed to dismantle stereotypes and challenge societal norms, urging spectators and attendees to examine their own prejudices and diligently work toward a more inclusive and equitable society.
He wanted something I wasn’t willing to give.

It’s MY body. My ‘no’ should be enough.

It wasn’t.

First, it was a pleading email, followed by an email full of insults and death wishes when I declined. That fast. Minutes after rejection, it became “I hope you die” and a string of expletives. Then he sent an email with apologies an hour later. He just didn’t understand why I treated him this way when he was nice!

All I said was no. I even explained my answer, and I wished him luck in finding what he desired.

He acted as though I were gatekeeping something he had every right to take at will.

Many more emails came, under different names, always using the same pattern and verbiage. Then the social media stalking began. He sent multiple direct messages daily and commented on dozens of photos on every social platform I used for weeks, under his name at first. Each comment was some sort of guilt attempt, insult, or request.

He created new email addresses, new Instagram accounts, and new Twitter accounts. Always the same pattern. Each time I blocked him, he popped up as a different account name, but still related to his original name. When I blocked a media account, an email would show up in my inbox asking why I was being this way, followed by more insults. Each time I shoved him away, he crawled in another opening!

Throughout all this, I worried that other followers would see his comments and believe the things he accused me of or called me. I developed this fear that everything I built as a social media presence would be destroyed. Years of energy, effort, sharing, and love, all soiled & toppled by one entitled penis who didn’t take no for an answer. He forced his way in, ignoring my anger, ignoring my denial, ignoring my right to choose.

One night, I had this dream. Chatting away with my sister in my beautiful home, I heard a noise. Someone was at my front door. I walked through the decorated hall with framed pictures and art thoughtfully placed in the living room. The door had been forced open, and 2 dark figures slithered in there as if they had every right to be! I yelled and pushed and shoved and threatened! I finally forced them out of my home, but not before they swore I would regret it. I turned and leaned against the triple locked door, my back feeling the vibrations of their pounding protest, only to notice my home was ruined. The walls were cardboard. The pictures were flimsy paper blowing away through the torn roof.

The years-long harassment was entitled and downright invasive. I hadn’t realized just how much it shook me until I had that dream. The worst part of it is I have no recourse. It’s a game to him, and as of today it continues, though intermittently.

It no longer has power over me.\(^\text{81}\)

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\(^{81}\) This piece first appeared at the Empty Hourglass Project, dedicated to documenting, and discussing issues related to abuse, trauma, and healing through art. For more information, see Empty Hourglass Project, [https://www.emptyhourglassproject.com/](https://www.emptyhourglassproject.com/)
POETRY:
Benjamin Balthaser’s poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in journals such as *Massachusetts Review, Boston Review, Minnesota Review, Laurel Review*, the anthology *What Saves Us*, and elsewhere. His 2012 collection of poems from Partisan Press, *Dedication*, details the lives of blacklisted Jewish activists during the McCarthy era, and his 2016 book from University of Michigan Press, *Anti-Imperialist Modernism*, explores connections between cross-border, anti-imperialist movements and the making of modernist culture at mid-century. He is currently associate professor of multi-ethnic literature at Indiana University South Bend and lives in Chicago.

**Ghazal for the Nightmare of History**  
*for P.L.*

You come downstairs to share  
your burden: our bodies

wedged uncomfortably in chairs: these  
pages in Russian: ghosts embodied

without addresses or eyes. The  
hours are against you, your body

and its weight of flesh & voice: we  
read: women herded into vans, body

parts broken open, a rib-cage  
shattered by metal bars: bodies

upon bodies charred into fibula, spine,  
and voice-box: into a mash of bodies

no longer human: into shapes  
neither dark nor light: there are no anti-bodies

for the name that streaks like blue flame in these  
KGB files: your grandfather, on whose body

fitted the black and red Nazi uniform: can guilt  
descend through generations? The bodies

of Eucalyptus press at the cement  
and do not enter. They lift, bodiless,

without arms or ears, just blue seeds  
that drift on wind, without the body

of memory that haunts you: you want
to evoke our friendship: my body

to provide an alibi: the crimes are listed:
they do not belong to you: just somebody

who bears your name, your pale, sandy hair, your
blue eyes that reflect, so perfectly: my body.
For Admiral Peary: Arctic Explorer

It’s hard not to believe in you. The dry snow of confetti covers New York as you parade Madison Avenue, Times Square, having reinvented the country with a pair of faulty coordinates: our shores of melting snow can now be forgotten - polite girls or maps made of paper. In return, we made you a kind of saint: living alone on your island, facing the hard coast of Maine in an office crested with battlements and cut stone, a compass in the tile tracking due north, your thick Siberian mustache along with leather bound books never opened or read.

I’d like to say we love your imagination:
on an island bristled with summer blueberries, you dreamed of a shifting point in the snow.
That to make yourself someone you stopped building canals and went to the heart of the wasteland. Your one friend Henderson died of bad crabmeat on the way back from Alaska and when you returned, black ghosts and doubles followed you everywhere, collecting confetti in their pockets, as you learned taxidermy on pigeons sick with the city’s poison. But we spared ourselves the last act. As the Dutchman stood at the world’s center two years before you, you planted a flag on the ice-cap and marched home, you will to walk on sheer pain, feet frozen to numb stumps
mattered more in the long run. In Manhattan today, each gutter glistens like a horizon, every

window seems a frontier that you could build a life striving towards. What you asked for was not much:

perfection, a pair of numbers on paper, a sheet of salt-ice a hand could harden into shape, a name etched

on a surface harder than a tombstone. I’d like to say you died found out, stripped of your admiralty

or at least forgotten, but America loves your fraud. Postage stamps fly to other countries with your lean

New Englander’s face, and young men die, their bodies the color of uniforms.
Meteor Shower, November 18, 2001, not in Afghanistan

Like a shadow falling into a second
and deeper shadow, light falling into
darkness, we try and imagine space,
wear fugitive blankets around our shoulders,
sit silent as refugees. There is frost in dry sand.
A spasm of branches in late November wind,
a dark green wood that glistens like a wound.

The meteors make no sound; they glide
like rockets, their trails bend like the backs
of dancers, unreal, untouchable, and we
can’t say why they don’t reach the earth,
why they glisten and die out so comfortably
above us, or why here, in along the banks
of the Connecticut River, it’s hard to believe
this stark invasion of ash, ice, and wind.
Manón Voice is a native of Indianapolis, Indiana, a multi-hyphenate—poet and writer, spoken word artist and filmmaker, actor, hip-hop emcee, educator, and community builder. The spirit of her work finds its niche at the intersection of arts and activism. She currently serves as a Music Instructor and Lecturer of Hip-Hop at Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana.

A death of mourning

There was no piling of bodies at the double doors
Flanked with ushers clad in black and white
There were no wide-hipped church hats adorned with a steeple of feathers.
No dark bellowing organ to chorus the sluggish processional of weeping.
No handkerchiefs or starch suits rubbing shoulders of man to man
Greeting grief with sagging grins and hardened half-hugs.
There was no raspy “good to see you,” outfitted with gold-capped smiles
That breathed early bacon and grits,
No burly legs in stretched sheers and aged black flats.

When I see my people en mass like this,
I can’t help but think of one life as being all of our lives
And one death, every death we’ve ever died.
We used to wear t-shirts with a tree relief
Of the names of our forebears hanging above the canopy.
Now, each year, a branch is broken.
A leaf like Frankie leaves,
And falls for good.

She returned her own body.
She redeemed her passage with desire.
Took herself off pills and machines and treatments.
She willed herself to the same ground my great-grandmother tilled,
And now they have both fallen out of time.

They have met the great matriarchs and patriarchs on the other side of the river
We always sing about,
Except now, there is less moan and keening,
Less striated melodies, less belief behind these mouth coverings
And we are in no church,
But a home for leave-takings.

At Frankies’s funeral,
We packed in the time
Like the morticians did the corpse.
We sang two short songs with a 15-minute eulogy.
We sat still, beneath a fluorescent roof
Cued by faceless men and women who sang general benedictions
Over her dead body.
Did she ever wonder
And hope for more,
Even as she flung her body down
And her spirit leapt from her last breath?
Could she have ever imagined the weight of strange soundlessness
Filling the parlor?

Will all of our endings be this ordinary
And non-pompous?
Will our rituals be this stale
With the odd formalities of fist pumps and handwaves?

This dying of language,
And worse still,
A death of mourning.

Is our future sitting forward
Quietly behind masks?


Towers of Babel

The new Lords of land
come not with their boats but blueprints,
button-up shirts and Khaki cloths of conquest,
their gilded tongues slither euphemisms.

They are praised for their expeditions
by kingdoms of city and state
who hand them flags for the nomenclature of “new” neighborhoods and decrees to
herd the indigenous to reservations;

their feet steeped in paper trails of eviction notices,
foreclosures and property tax increases,
the soil of their stories plowed through
to ground palatial estates,

satiate the longing of young professionals
who need posh boutiques,
dedicated bike lanes
a bevy of bars and waterfront views.

Old money takes their pulse
in the adrenaline of urban escapades,
the luring lights of downtown skyscrapers,
high rise towers of babel that shines wealth into their windows.

Beneath them, a world wilting in the nation’s debt
everyday workers who cannot make rent
who make new cities of tents
stretched along underpasses and hailed cultural trails,

or who those of a different language
whose names disappear from shelters, soup kitchens, and statistics
who the aristocracy will call
squatters and surfers,

and agencies will name, “at risk”
and churches label “the needy,”
newspapers, “the vulnerable”
who no one will name, “The New America.”
Dr. Christina Fisanick is a multi-media storyteller born and raised in northern Appalachia. In addition to being the author of more than thirty books and hundreds of articles, poems, and essays, Fisanick creates art and digital narratives. She is a writing professor who sometimes teaches literature. She lives with her son and two cats in Wheeling, West Virginia. You can find her writing, art, and videos at christinafisanick.com.

Oh, what shall we do with the big girl?

You know the one—from flat chested to C cup by the end of fifth grade. The one who has outgrown her peers. Her wide hips and pronounced backside shapely distractions next to her still straight-as-a-board classmates. Somehow the big girl exists simultaneously as ugly, undesirable and as an insatiable slut. Her thighs—thick, lurid—calling thirtysomething men, they say, with their virginal siren songs.

She bleeds first—or so she suspects—and hides it for months until her crimson rags are discovered under the bathroom sink calling a congress of women to the kitchen table. Sweat-slicked round-faced, she peers at them through a cloud of smoke—Blair 100s, Virginia Slims—swirled by the oscillating fan rat-tat-tat-taching in front of the open trailer window. In chorus her grandmother, her mother, her aunts (just two) chime: “Well, now you have to watch the way you act around boys.” That was the talk. All of it. Start to finish.

Oh, big girl, big beautiful girl, someday you will grow into your body and out of the corporal prison they put you in. Your fleshy arms will wrap around yourself again and again like succulent vines. Your despised belly will become a bounty on which future lovers will feast. Oh, big girl, don’t cry. One day you will be more than they can handle. They will see the way you love yourself and try to punish you. You will laugh at their hate like a ravenous Medusa and re-fill your plate sucking the syrupy sweet satisfaction off your fingers while staring them straight in their miserable stony eyes.
I wonder what it’s like to be thin

bird legs propelling me around town
through doors opened eagerly by strangers
not out of kindness but out of appreciation for
stick arms waving hello, hugging goodbye,
flies a kite high above the trees
its yellowredblueness becoming a tiny
diamond bobbing before a backdrop of
suspicious gray clouds sparking annoyance
Faith Gómez Clark (she/they) earned their MFA in Poetry from Warren Wilson. Their chapbook manuscript *Unlock the Body* was a semi-finalist in the *Iron Horse Literary Review* 2023 Chapbook Competition. She has received fellowships from Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and Vermont Studio Center. She has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Their work can be found or is forthcoming in *Salt Hill Journal, Rogue Agent Journal, Huizache Magazine,* and elsewhere.

**Fight**

Duck, duck, duck…  
you chant your eight-year-old  
frame a burden  
you drag slowly  
around the circle  
of school children.  
Duck, duck, duck…  
I already know  
it’s me you want.  
The wind shouts  
in my ear  
as the match  
of your hand strikes  
the top of my head, Goose!  
You think  
because you’re bigger  
you’re also faster.  
You don’t know  
that I outrun  
my father.  
You can’t see this anger  
swelling like a fire  
inside me.  
This blacktop will be  
the last thing you see  
before you burn.
Welcome to the Locked Unit

He had already decided:
it is not safe
here. Stiff white coats saw
the Death fish skimming
the surface of his eyes,
gasping for air.
They rescued the fish
from drowning in the dark
waters of his body.
But didn’t they know
the Death fish belonged to him
the way grief belongs
to the widow?
Danielle Coffyn has been weaving poetry and stories for as long as she can remember. A graduate of the University of Kansas and armed with English, French, and History degrees, she spent nearly a decade teaching before transitioning to the corporate world of learning and development. The start of the pandemic was the catalyst she needed to start putting pen to paper, with the goal of sharing her writing publicly. Born in Belgium and raised in the Midwest, Danielle harbors a wanderlust she feeds by hosting Nature & Nurture hiking and writing retreats around the country focused on reconnecting to the self and one another through writing and spending time outdoors. She currently makes her home in St. Louis, Missouri, with her son and dog.

If Adam Picked the Apple

There would be a parade,
a celebration,
a holiday to commemorate
the day he sought enlightenment.
We would not speak of
temptation by the devil, rather,
we would laud Adam’s curiosity,
his desire for adventure
and knowing.
We would feast
on apple-inspired fare:
tortes, chutneys, pancakes, pies.
There would be plays and songs
reenacting his courage.

But it was Eve who grew bored,
weary of her captivity in Eden.
And a woman’s desire
for freedom is rarely a cause
for celebration.
Wild

Give me silvery strands,  
the milky growth of aging  
intertwined with the sediment  
of youth.  
Give me stretch marks  
along thighs,  
one gleaming stripe  
for each year this body  
survived winter.  
Give me scars and sunspots,  
proof of every season  
weathered.  
Give me laugh lines  
like the hyena,  
rooted canyons along  
eyes and mouth,  
impervious to wrinkle cream,  
so profound was our joy.
Based in Chicago, Shan Shan Song is a Chinese-American, neurodivergent, queer, poet, singer, songwriter and community organizer. Their writing about polyamory and queer theory has also been published in *Queering Anarchism*. When they’re not snapping photos of their favorite landscapes and meals, they like to spend time petting as many cats as they can and making new recipes for their polycule and loves. They have one cat, one sourdough starter and are in the band Shanthony.

**Chi Ku (吃苦)**

My auntie used to say “苦啊“, “苦啊“.
“Bitterness, ah. Bitterness, oh.”
We eat bitterness: we endure bitterness before the sweetness after.

In China, my parents kept their heads down and worked in the fields of the countryside.
Under Mao’s rule, they worked all day then stayed up
To read forbidden school books by candlelight,
Dreaming of a brighter future when there was little hope.

Counter-revolutionaries were forced to confess
To anti-revolutionary thoughts and actions at “struggle sessions”.
Educators were publicly beaten and tortured in the streets.
Some were murdered by students and the Red Guard.
Red flags, red books, red blood in the streets.

The youth were sent to the fields for re-education and hard labor.
I heard a woman died from suicide by rat poison in the countryside.
There was rationing. There was widespread famine.
No food to eat, they ate all the leaves from the trees.

Then in America,
My father worked in the back of the house in restaurants washing dishes,
On the roofs of strangers who hired him to fix their roof,
Hoping for sweetness if he just worked hard enough,
Alone at a university in Rhode Island,
Speaking a foreign language in a strange land.

My ancestors walked their path to become healers.
The healer blood of my family line runs through my veins too.
I draw on the memory of their power to survive.

The first time I remember seeing blood,
I remember seeing my mother hemorrhaging as we went to the hospital.
The redness of blood spilling life scares me still.

Seeing others in pain hurts me,
I too have lived in hurt, the urge to heal is mixed with generational trauma.
Beyond the walls of this system, I dream of building a better world,
Living in love, abundance and healing.
Outside the walls of the medical industrial complex,
Outside of statist communism,
Outside of capitalism,
We can build so much more than this structure.
We live in a nightmare reality
But our hopes and dreams are stronger than the fear.

The first time I ran as a street medic was in 2012.
We march flanked by a line of black-clad riot police.
So many police in the hot summer,
The sunlight gleams off their face-shields.
Batons out. they stand in line with their bodies,
Their line is to control the crowd.
A line made strong by fascist force and ideology.
Batons out. ready to beat the crowd back with their advances.
Lines, bikes, sirens, lights.
Fear is their weapon, but we are strong too.
We dare to dream and fight together.

Two years later, there are spotlights in the dark heat of the Ferguson summer.
Our chants are strong against their fascism and military equipment,
We are strong as we march against their brutality and violence.
United, we stand together. Together we rise.
The system can’t break us, because we’re fucking tough.

My blood is too hot from anger, too sweet from sugary diabetes.
Heat and sweetness running ragged through my anxious veins.
I need cold and bitterness to tame the heat.
Food is life. Sharing food with my chosen family is love.
We have so much now when my recent ancestors did not.
When we eat together, the heat and sweat will be drained.
In these healing moments, the balance will be restored.
Kimberly Ann Southwick is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing and English at Jacksonville State University. Her debut full-length poetry collection, *Orchid Alpha*, was published by Trembling Pillow Press in 2023. Kimberly is the founder and Editor in Chief of the literary-arts journal *Gigantic Sequins*. Find her on social media via the handle @kimannjosouth or visit kimberlyannsouthwick.com for more.

YOUR BIRTHDAY WAS LAST MONTH: A SONNET

*afer Bernadette Mayer’s “Birthday Sonnet for Grace”*

Bamboo & lace, her highness hugging about the rounded trunk of a tree
I need to surmise a summer when spring is still here
The smaller spaces of lines & words like flowers blooming
Just a modest garden, a compost, nothing worthy of a queen
How you have your father’s hair
How it only parts wildly,
Like a nest of whole birds—branches, brambles,
Sticks you like to feed the dogs.

So much younger than the trees, I am almost forty
And working finally a job with salary, benefits
Where there seems so little time for collage, poetry
We were in the barn & you played & then said, “outside?”
How could I resist, how could I say no, the spring weather perfect no mosquitos
& my answer always yes, I love you, yes yes, yes
DELICIOUS AMERICAN POEM SONNET FOR 21ST CENTURY LATE CAPITALISM

after Bernadette Mayer’s “Incandescent War Poem Sonnet”

When we’re almost all out of ice cream, America
buys more, slops it atop an Oreo cookie, double stuf
of course, & sugar snow down the mouth hole
then smash, smash, smash, smash, crunch. He likes
the way Oreo sounds, how many syllables it takes up
even though it’s just four letters. Once,
at a Barnes & Noble, I saw a sign for an Oreo
Dessert Bar, featuring “hand-crushed Oreos”
& I shuddered & even though I wanted the Oreo
Dessert Bar, I got a cookie instead. No one’s hands
should have to crush Oreos in the 21st century
when we have machines who can do that for us. Take that,
capitalism. (The cookie was less expensive.) I want to be
Poet Laureate of Oreos, but they never reply to my tweets.
Carmine Di Biase’s chapbook of poems, *American Rondeau*, appeared in 2022 (Finishing Line Press). His poems have appeared in *South Florida Poetry Journal, The Road Not Taken, La Piccioletta Barca, Italian Americana, The Vincent Brothers Review, Scapegoat Review, Ovunque Siamo*, and other journals. His reviews and translations appear occasionally in the *Times Literary Supplement*. A recent issue of *L’Anello che non tiene: The Journal of Modern Italian Literature* published his translations of thirteen poems by Cesare Pavese. Di Biase writes on Shakespeare and modern English and Italian literature. He has edited and translated, from the manuscript, *The Diary of Elio Schmitz: Scenes from the World of Italo Svevo*, which appeared in 2013. In 2015 Di Biase edited and introduced “Oh! Mio Vecchio William!”: *Italo Svevo and His Shakespeare*, a collection of essays by himself and other scholars who explore Shakespeare’s influence on Italy’s most important modern novelist. This spring will see the publication of Di Biase’s English translation of Carlo Collodi’s *Peepee, or the Tiny Pink Monkey* (North Meridian Books). This will be a bilingual edition of Collodi’s little-known sequel to *Pinocchio*. He is Distinguished Professor of English Emeritus at Jacksonville State University.

**Free at Sauta Cave**

I had seen his slaves that morning, arms and legs
trapped deep inside their marble blocks. Muscles taut,
veins filled with rage and futile indignation,
as if the sculptor, after all that time, might yet
come back to finish everyone, make everyone
a David, polished, self-possessed and free,
a sling resting, at the ready, on one shoulder.

At dusk, on that crowded bridge that joins
the Arno’s banks, the famous goldsmith’s bust:
his angry and defiant stare aimed straight at me.
The pope had pardoned him for killing several men, for God
bestowed such talent only on His rarest favorites.
It was there, before that bust, I was assailed by my old fear.
The first one nearly touched my hair, then flew erratically away.

A second and a third appeared, and soon, darting from all
angles, dozens of them came at me, though none so brazen
as the first had been. The slapping of its veined black wings still
sounded in my ears as I ran madly off that bridge, like a gypsy
who had picked some tourist’s pocket and then fled
the scene. I hoped the goldsmith’s ghost would spare me
and not laugh out loud for all to hear.

Now this hot summer, in this Alabama town where nine
young men once met with grave injustice, it is dusk
again. From the mouth of Sauta Cave a scout comes out
alone to see that all is well, then flies back in to fetch
the rest. The cave’s chill air washes over me as two more
emerge, then three; and seconds later all three hundred thousand hover overhead, the reek of guano in the air.

They will fly off to the lake together now to take their airborne meal, then come back here, one ton of lustrous insects in their sated bellies, to hang once more, serenely, from the cool stone walls of Sauta Cave. Their scene unfolds this evening as it did when no one knew that gold and marble could be shaped, and no one yet had given names to admiration and to fear.

**The Illusion of Perspective**  
(translated by Carmine Di Biase)

The noise of fretting breaks the silence  
of this dead railway station. I see its reflection in the fogged  
windows on my return to this city bleached white  
by age. Life’s every moment slays me.  
I have met my dead.  
I have met my deaths,  
have talked away the time, sweated away the game.

I have fought the moment and the memory of it,  
quaffed down the images gathered on these windows:  
that unhappy look, that burning star.  
Folly is a troubled comet, its concentric halo  
chokes the moon and leaves a bloodless white trail.  
So hangs the scene on my dreamtime wall.

The prospects, the illusion of perspective:  
two rails—  
we shall meet when we reach infinity.
Abdul Aziz Al-Maqalih was one of Yemen's finest modern poets. Born in 1937, he died recently, in November of 2022, having published over fifteen collections of poetry. He worked in education and served as cultural adviser to the Yemeni government. His poetry is known for at once embracing and transforming Yemeni tradition.

Dr. Rashad Ahmed is an assistant professor of English at Jacksonville State University in northeast Alabama. He is a linguist with a multidisciplinary background in TESOL and Composition Studies. He has been granted several awards, fellowships, and scholarships, which included his Fulbright scholarship 2013 to 2017, the Applied Linguistics Concentration Award, and a Summer Fellowship from the University of Memphis.

I Have a Cottage in the Country
(translated by Carmine Di Biase and Rashad Ahmed)

I have a cottage in the country,
as broad as its garden
and cossetted by the scent of roses.
At midnight
I climb up to the roof
and listen to the stars as they make their
dreamy music for me, for my soul.
The stars hold the sky’s night-time face
and write such sweet words
on it that the heart
yearns for it.

I have a cottage in the country
unmatched in its beauty,
which satisfies the hungry soul.
The stones I gathered with my own hands
and built the walls and rooms
like the stanzas of a poem,
but free of any rules of form.
And to adorn the façade it was
Picasso himself who helped me, lending
me his greens and blues.

I have a cottage in the country,
only a few humble, square meters.
The front door is of cedar.
Every dawn, the windows lead my
gaze towards mountains suspended from the sun’s
interlaced beams, towards valleys whose fingers,
covered in crystalline blades of grass,
fill with clear water
that flows proudly, like a scarf
woven by breezes
from the greenish light’s rays.

I have a cottage in the country,
tasteful and luminous,
bathed clean every morning by the sun
and again in the evening by the darkness.
When sadness engulfs me
and tightens round my heart,
I run there,
where I can free my soul
of the burdens it carries
from diseased and decadent cities.

I have a cottage in the country.
The shepherd passes every morning
under my windows
as he makes his way to the valley,
walking behind his flocks,
which grow more numerous by the day.
At noon, when the sun is too bright, too hot,
stillness and silence shade the village,
and wafting over from the far edge
of the valley come soft, enchanting melodies,
from the mouth of the shepherd’s pipe.

I have a cottage in the country
that has no lock or key.
At night, stars that have gone astray
can come inside, where whole flocks
of pigeons find their shelter.
The cottage is open to light,
open to shadow,
open every dawn
to the music
of chirping birds
which wakes the deer
and the water of the sleeping stream.

I have a cottage in the country.
If I go back there
I shall be greeted by the cypresses,
by the warmth of the cedar door
and the green grass of the walkway,
by the butterflies dancing to the rhythm.
of the water, which keeps time as it rumbles
down the valley’s fingers, rubbing
their gravel beds smooth.

I have a cottage in the country,
on the village’s rising slope,
seen by no one but me
and built by hand in a dream,
by a patient hand,
a hand that painted the stones
with the colors of tranquility,
and all of it resting on a paper
foundation, on the marble of words.

Can you believe, my dears,
that I own a cottage in the country,
a cottage which delights in the play of the sun’s beams
and is cossetted by the scent of roses,
and that, right under its windows, a shepherd passes by?
O this … sweet, beckoning dream.
It has lifted the veil from my heart’s eyes
with the breath of poetry, made my soul see
again, from the highest peak
of God’s kingdom,
what cannot be seen.
REVIEWS:
Maria Bucur’s *The Century of Women* is a book that I thoroughly enjoyed reading. As someone who is passionate about women’s rights and gender equality, I found this scholarly work to be a fascinating and informative exploration of how women have transformed the world since 1900. Bucur’s interdisciplinary approach, drawing on history, sociology, anthropology, and feminist theory, provides a comprehensive overview of the changing status of women in the twentieth century.

One of the strengths of this book is its structure—for instance, the seven chapters each focus on a different theme, diving deeply into various aspects of women’s experiences and contributions. By taking this approach, Bucur can offer a nuanced analysis of each theme while highlighting the interconnectedness of these issues.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the book’s main themes and argues that the twentieth century was the “century of women” due to the significant changes in women’s roles and status that occurred during this period. Bucur sets the stage for the subsequent chapters by providing a historical overview of the changing status of women in the twentieth century, charting the key events and movements that have shaped women’s lives, and examining how women have challenged and sought to change gender norms and expectations.

One of the most illuminating chapters in the book is chapter 2, which examines women’s political activism and participation throughout the twentieth century. Bucur provides a nuanced exploration of how women have engaged in activism, from the suffrage movement to the #MeToo movement. She highlights the importance of recognizing women’s role in shaping social and
political movements, as well as how gender-based discrimination and inequality have informed and affected those movements. Her analysis underscores the significance of women’s voices and leadership in creating change.

Chapter 3 discusses the changing demographics of the world’s population and the impact of these changes on women. Bucur examines women’s fertility rates, access to healthcare, and family planning trends, shedding light on the complex issues women face worldwide. She highlights how women’s experiences of these issues are shaped by race, class, and sexuality, emphasizing the importance of intersectionality in understanding women’s lives and experiences. Another standout is chapter 4, which examines women’s changing roles in the global economy. Bucur explores issues related to pay equity, workplace discrimination, and the feminization of poverty. In addition, she dives deeply into the various ways women have participated in the labor force and entrepreneurship, highlighting the barriers women have faced and the progress that has been made.

Chapter 5 discusses women’s contributions to intellectual and scientific fields, including education, literature, and science. It examines women’s barriers to accessing education and how women’s contributions have challenged gender stereotypes. Bucur provides a detailed analysis of how women have been excluded from these fields historically and highlights the ongoing challenges women face in pursuing careers in these areas.

Chapter 6 examines women’s cultural production and consumption roles, including the arts, media, and popular culture. It looks at how women have challenged traditional gender roles and representations and provides a fascinating analysis of how women have used cultural production to assert their agency and challenge gender norms.
Finally, chapter 7 discusses the changing nature of family structures and relationships and the impact of these changes on women. Bucur examines marriage, divorce, and single parenthood trends and how these changes have affected women’s social and economic status. She provides a nuanced analysis of how a range of factors, including culture, race, class, and sexuality, shapes women’s experiences of family life.

Bucur’s emphasis on intersectionality is another standout feature of the book. She recognizes that women’s experiences are shaped by factors beyond their gender, such as race, class, and sexuality. By exploring how these intersecting identities have impacted women’s lives, she effectively challenges any simplistic understanding of women’s experiences and the significance of gender as a category of analysis.

*The Century of Women* is an engaging and thought-provoking read. Bucur’s interdisciplinary approach, coupled with her emphasis on intersectionality, provides a rich and nuanced exploration of how women have transformed the world over the last century. Her analysis of women’s contributions to social and political movements and their changing roles in the global economy is particularly illuminating. I would highly recommend this book to anyone interested in women’s rights, gender equality, or social justice more broadly.
Reviewed by Stephanie Kendrick

As the world collectively creeps toward the proverbial light at the end of a long pandemic tunnel, Katrina Kittle gives a story that many of us are hungry for. *Morning in this Broken World* follows Vivian, newly widowed and coping through the COVID-19 lockdown after the devastating loss of her beloved husband. Kittle cleverly tells this story through the stream of consciousness narration of four characters: Vivian, Wren, Luna, and Cooper. In doing so, layers are peeled back and added to reveal and explore strong themes of community, identity, and survival.

As the novel opens, we meet Vivian and see her beginning the process of ending her own life. Almost immediately we witness the power of being needed and the importance of community when we meet Luna, who, at least temporarily, saves Vivian by offering her the task of looking after her daughter, Wren. Luna is a newly single mother who is struggling with a looming eviction, and Vivian loves her for taking such good care of her husband when he was alive. Serendipitously, Vivian finds the eviction notice and sees an opportunity to move back to her own palatial home and out of her husband’s assisted living facility with the people who finally quiet the dark voices in her mind—Luna, Wren and Luna’s son, Cooper. Luna perceives Vivian’s offer as a sign of her own failure as a mother, even though Vivian needs the support and company of Luna to make it without her husband. Wren symbolizes perseverance and acts as a stark juxtaposition to Luna. Wren depends on literal physical assistance from those around her because of her developmental disability, and is still arguably the strongest character in the story. Cooper, Wren’s brother, goes through his own identity struggle. After being forced to hide who he truly is for so long, living with Vivian gives him the opportunity to come out of hiding, allowing his character to transcend
into a happiness that contrasts the heavier happenings around him. As readers, we get to experience the transformative power that true connection has on all four central characters.

Kittle delicately incorporates tough topics such as suicide, death, sexuality, addiction, and cancer—very human issues that fuel motivation, add nuance to identities, and ensure that this story is anything but one-dimensional. Because Kittle presents these topics so realistically and honestly, this novel is appropriate for a wide audience, including young adults. *Morning in this Broken World* validates that tragedy and hardships are parts of being alive, but also reminds us of the beauty and happiness that waits in the relationships we have with those who love us, and the importance of being seen and honored by those we love.

Poets have much to appreciate in this book starting with the title, which is a line from Mary Oliver’s poem *Invitation*: “believe us, they say,/ it is a serious thing// just to be alive/ on this fresh morning/ in the broken world.” Oliver’s poem implores the reader to appreciate the beauty of birdsong, and uses their music as a call to arms of sort, to live in joy. Then, Kittle opens the book with a poem: *This is How a Pandemic Ends, Not with a Bang But with Cicadas* by Kathleen McCleary. This poem is a perfect welcome to this story. “We went underground this year/ like the cicadas, burrowed deep…” Cicadas provide such a wonderful metaphor for our experience of Covid—our *burrowing* in our respective homes, the shells we create during trauma, and how short our lives are even when we erupt from those shells are all ideas that are speckled throughout this book. The final lines of the poem speak to the desire and importance of connection that veins throughout this story and holds it intact: “And I swear the other sound I hear/ is the crackling of millions of exoskeletons/ the shells we grew to harden ourselves/ against our longing to be touched.”
As the world struggled with the contradictory need of separation and connection, Kittle explores the risky and empowering balancing act of choosing your own family, setting boundaries, and diving headfirst into what it is you want, need, and deserve. This is a story that will feed us all.
Oral history is at once among the oldest and newest methods of practicing history. The oral tradition dates to prehistoric times, long before systems of writing were developed. Sharon D. Raynor explains that Thucydides spoke with veterans of the Peloponnesian War before writing his history of that conflict. More recently, in the 1930s, tape recorders were used to chronicle the lives of those affected by the Great Depression as part of the Federal Writers Project. Since then, oral history has developed into a full-fledged and fully accepted historical approach.

Yet oral history is not uniform. Interviewers, subjects, topics of discussion, time, and memory all affect the craft. This is especially true when interviewing veterans. Raynor’s *Practicing Oral History with Military and War Veterans* seeks to illustrate the peculiarities of interviewing veterans. Raynor’s work not only discusses the nuts and bolts of veteran oral history but also explains why this particular area of oral history requires more careful consideration and preparation and a softer approach.

Veterans, especially those who have seen combat, carry with them the wounds of trauma, which Raynor explains can develop a sort of “code of silence” that helps them prevent reliving these events or sharing their stories with family members to protect them from hearing not only the horrors of war, but also what that veteran may have done in such life-and-death situations. Further, the role of memory immediately after an event and decades later often leads to vastly different interview outcomes. Research has shown that a veteran’s memory of an event changes over time from the highly specific to the more general.
Practicing Oral History with Military and War Veterans is divided into four sections that take readers from Raynor’s origins in veteran oral history through the process of preparing for and interviewing veterans. As a young historian, Raynor interviewed a Vietnam veteran whose recollections were so disjointed and incomplete that it led her to realize that veterans will hide traumatic memories away to prevent reliving. Raynor has dedicated herself to the craft of veteran oral history, and has provided an invaluable guide for junior and senior historians alike.

In section 1, Raynor tells her origin story. Here she chronicles how she realized that veteran’s oral history was vastly different enterprise than other interview subjects. Because of the intrinsic value of recording veterans’ experience, Raynor decided to devote her career not only to conducting such interviews, but also explaining the intricacies of the craft to those who would take on veteran interviews.

Section 2 discusses the human side of interviewing veterans. Interviewers cannot jump head first into the trauma of warfare. There must be a period when trust is built, when the interviewer must learn patience and allow silence, and where trauma must be understood before any interview process begins. Empathy is necessary when interviewing veterans, argues Raynor. The interviewer must learn to bear the burden of the trauma themselves to understand not only what the veteran may be feeling and why, but also what direction to take the interview.

Sections 3 and 4 are a handy guide to the nuts and bolts of preparing for a veteran interview. But Raynor goes beyond a mere how-to guide. She explains that an important part of veteran interview preparation is to build a “structural methodology” that takes the interview beyond a simple collection of stories and facts and creates a therapeutic opportunity for veteran and interviewer. The interview must allow for a more organic interview process that ebbs and flows and does not follow the more traditional oral history chronological approach. An interview may
look like it is disjointed and out of order, but that, wrote Raynor, is part of the process or remembering and coping with past trauma. This is where empathy and understanding play a major role in the interview. The interviewer must do their best to understand and even “feel” what the veteran feels as they recollect past events.

Those who do not regularly practice oral history often see it as a simple process of questions and answers. This reductive approach fails to appreciate the intricacies of the craft. Raynor explains that veterans oral history takes this complexity a step further. The goal of any oral history is not to obtain answers to a prescribed list of questions, but to take the subject to places they have not been to in a while; to give them opportunities for reflection and retrospection. With veterans, this is the key to a successful interview.

It would be a mistake to dismiss this book as useful only for veteran oral histories. Any scholar can benefit from this work. Oral history requires a certain level of empathy and understanding for any interview subject. To be sure, this is the essence of history itself—the effort to understand the motivations behind actions and events and how it may illustrate for us the complexity of the human condition.
A Face from Uranus collects the correspondence between Tedd Burr and Henry Bellamann from 1943 until 1945. Lenny Pinna, the book’s editor, provides an introduction that details his personal connection to Burr, how he came by the letters, and his opinion of their value. Pinna also includes a postscript explaining his goal of transforming the correspondence into a dramatic narrative as well as the results of his research into Bellamann’s life.

On September 20, 1943, a teenage Burr wrote a fan letter to Bellamann in praise of his novel Kings Row and in the hope of reaching a consoling, kindred spirit. The young Burr kept this opening letter brief except to explain a kinship felt with one of Bellamann’s book’s central characters, Jamie Wakefield, a ‘pretty’ young man: “I fell into an utter storm for it was not of Jamie I read, but of myself.” Bellamann initial response is politely welcoming, willingly reading Burr’s history in minute detail and offering advice. Their conversation quickly focuses in on Burr’s gendersex conflicts: preferences for makeup and longer hair; previous sexual contact with men; and daydreams of womanhood. The following quotation illustrates Burr’s distress:

“I want to lie down and close my eyes – I am not Tedd Burr – I am a beautiful woman desired, loved, and cherished.”

Bellamann’s responses demonstrate an attempt at mentorship:

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83 The reviewer has chosen the term ‘gendersex’ because the separation between gender identity and sexual orientation is never made by Tedd Burr and Henry Bellamann.
84 Pinna, A Face from Uranus, 47.
“I am told that such utterly repellent people as Goering and Hitler and many of that horrible gang are sexual invert and perverts. Do you wish to be of that terrible company?”

Bellamann’s advice shows an overarching argument for conformity and what we now understand as heteronormativity. Burr follows Bellamann’s advice unquestioningly, putting away the makeup and keeping a short haircut, even avoiding certain friends. Until the beginning of 1944, discussions of Burr’s gendersex issues are intertwined with their more lighthearted conversations about theater and various novels. Burr sent Bellamann copies of multiple writing projects in the hopes of receiving constructive criticism and praise (although Bellamann is usually less than complimentary): a novel, *The Surf*; a poem, ‘We Regret to Inform You’; several school papers; and a poetic soliloquy.

However, by May 1944, almost all talk of Burr’s gendersex uncertainty ends. Pinna notes, in his introduction, that nearly all the letters after January 11, 1944, are missing. He acknowledges the likelihood that they were destroyed by Burr. On November 20, 1944, Katherine Bellamann writes to Burr for the first time to explain that her husband is too ill to write but would still appreciate receiving letters. From this point on, the letters take on a more personal tone. Burr and Bellamann refer to each other in familial terms and discuss the possibility of meeting in person: “I am as concerned as much as, well, any son could be.”

Another bout of illness leaves Bellamann unable to write in early 1945. Burr received a final letter from Henry Bellamann on June 12, 1945, and a letter from Katherine Bellamann on June 16 that informed Burr her husband had died.

While the introduction contextualizes Pinna’s relationship with Tedd Burr and the letters themselves, the postscript utilizes his research into Henry Bellamann’s life to reveal the lies told

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85 Ibid., 61.
86 Ibid., 228.
to Burr. Pinna details the ways Bellamann’s educational background was misrepresented to gain teaching positions and allay the discomfort of being younger than Katherine. But the most important discovery was Bellamann’s relationship with Albert Berghauser, a childhood friend and the inspiration for Jamie Wakefield. Bellamann tells Burr in multiple letters\textsuperscript{87} that the real-life Jamie was unsuccessful and that his life ended poorly, but Berghauser was a professor of French and German at Furman University. Furthermore, Berghauser lived with the newlywed Bellamanns for five years, including a sabbatical in Europe alone with Henry Bellamann, before Katherine made him leave. Pinna ends the postscript by empathizing with Henry Bellamann despite his lies and manipulation.

These letters are certainly valuable as queer, personal histories. Although there is a great deal less personal information given by Bellamann, both sides of the exchange explore the difficulties of gendersex nonconformity in the 1940s. Internalized homophobia, misogyny, and classism mix with hero worship and impressionable youth to mold the person that Burr became. While I am cautious against attributing contemporary labels to people of the past, Burr’s story feels particularly similar to my own experience as a transgender person. Readers who would benefit most from examining \textit{A Face from Uranus} are transgender youth looking for echoes of their own experiences through history. \textit{A Face from Uranus} is Pinna’s labor of love; he rescues from oblivion a queer platonic relationship and an account of historical gender nonconformity.

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., pp. 21, 53.
Zeny May Recidoro's debut foray into book writing resonates through me like a church bell. Some might say this is a collection of short stories, flash fiction, and poetry that, when woven together, creates a flourishing narrative about the history, inextricable humanity, and community of the island of Balaybay. I say this is a collection of prayers whispered into earthen pits. Recidoro's accolades and awards are numerous, with the Asian Cultural Council fellowship, a BA and MFA in Art Writing and Criticism, and a list of publications from the University of Hong Kong to the *Journal of Contemporary Philippine Literature*.

A summary: the twin towns of Antik and Santa Lucia have a history of suffering. Even as the names suggest, it was the center of a clash of cultures. And nestled between those two towns, an unnamed and "forgotten" church that has fallen into disrepair and disuse. Yet it becomes clear that those who live in the towns have a place of adoration and respect for the church, and even remember the sound of the bell that has long since gone missing. As her own church, Floria Llanes seems forgotten and ignored, yet her existence sends ripples across the community and her family: who she was, how she connected to the community, how her faith allowed her to transcend the struggles of Filipino life. Her life, and her death, means something. Like the memory of a bell, Floria’s echo seems almost subconscious to those who knew her.

There is a timelessness to this book. I did not grow up in the cultures that grew this book, and yet I felt the power of them in my very bones. Awash in Philippine myth and Spanish faith, the two towns of Antik and Santa Lucia could not be more direct in metaphor. Recidoro’s storytelling is concise and lived-in, with a robustness that makes me feel I’ve known this place my entire life, that I am privy to its rituals, sermons, and people. I found comfort in whispering prayers into holes beside the church.

This is a book about people. The multivoiced nature of this commentary—that, I must add, endeavors and succeeds in constructing a shared insight surrounding the disappearance of Llanes—takes a
little getting used to. *I am a Wound* is not chronological and not singly narrated. It is full of differing voices, insights, and perspectives that fill the narrative with a robustness at home in a Saunders novel. Unfortunately, with the prevalence of so many opinions and conversations, sometimes with whole sections titled “Fifteen Beginnings or, Stories without an Ending” that promote an environment of bustling, lively existence but adding little to the primary story, I found I lost the thread of inquiry several times along the way. Yet, it only invited a second read to collect the little bits of information.

Recidoro’s skill with the word is rich and vibrant, haunting, and fleet-footed in turns. This book chases memory. It leaps between times, across decades, the present and past, to tell the story of Spanish colonization, the loss of innocence, and the safeguarding of artifact and self. After several read-throughs, I returned to the first passage titled “echoes from a tender ritual,” where the daughter of Floria, Esther, had her single interaction with the nameless church. Her longing seems to be my longing. Her memory, of course, is her own.

The postmodern, experimental approach often vitalizes the text in ways that straightforward writing otherwise would not. For example, “Subterranean Woman” has two lines but four footnotes that not only take up the remainder of the page with personal reflection, but also bleeds into the next. The beautiful lines “Grounded within herself, she knew her interior life/was the exoskeleton with which she met the world” scaffolds the footnotes almost like a stained-glass window in a church, with the lines themselves becoming symbol for a greater story beneath. It becomes more than a study in footnotes, but a study in life choices determining word choice. On the other hand, the experimental approach sometimes falls a little short in the reading, with added periods, hanging commas, and word choices that might be a miss in formatting, might be an artistic choice. There were—notably few—moments where I had to leave the end of a dialogue, or a poem, uncertain.

For lovers of exploratory journeys, postmodern hopefulness that unapologetically dives into New Sincerity at home in George Saunders’s *Lincoln in the Bardo*, the dreaming lyrics of poets such as Li-Young Lee and Susan Mitchell, or nested narrative journeys made prevalent in Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*, Recidoro’s debut book communicates loss and depth through the messy lens of survival.

Reviewed by Kristen Ruccio

Ernest Owens unabashedly takes on critics of cancel culture in *The Case for Cancel Culture.* In it, Owens argues that vilifying cancel culture unites figures as disparate as Donald J. Trump, Bill Maher, Candace Owens, and Noam Chomsky because all of them have taken strong, even vehement, positions against the practice in recent years. The crux of this book centers on the fact that what many call cancel culture does not actually partake of a process that Owens describes as a fundamentally democratic practice of fighting injustice by exposing and amplifying instances of wrongdoing—and by exposing those who are committing acts of injustice. He writes, “Frequently, people who are being canceled will claim they are being bullied. And some who bully may claim they are canceling. Bullying is rooted in causing deliberate harm, nothing more. Cancel culture is rooted in causing transformative change—something more is being demanded.”

Owens meticulously and engagingly traces the “something more” throughout this significant treatise that considers all aspects of cancel culture with thoroughly-sourced, easy-to-read prose.

Indeed, cancel culture cannot be confused with bullying after reading this timely offering from Owens. He is a journalist, cultural critic, and CEO and he uses all his ethos to build his “case for cancel culture.” In the introduction, Owens traces the popular origins of the term to a December 2014 episode of VH1’s *Love & Hip Hop* in which one character “dismisses” the other with the phrase, “You’re canceled.” Owens argues, “After that, Black Twitter couldn’t get enough of the phrase.” (Rosado, from *Love & Hip Hop,* did note that he remembered the phrase from the film

89 Ibid., 5.
90 Ibid., 6.
New Jack City, but Owens rightly maintains that the phrase became the cultural phenomenon it is now because of Rosado’s utterance of the phrase). This detailed exploration of the origins of the term reminds us that like the term woke and countless other aspects of mainstream culture, cancel culture is appropriated from Black cultural spaces and then misappropriated and used to punish the very Black culture from which it originated. This is particularly apparent in the chapter “Not All Cancellations Are the Same,” when Owens traces the far-harder and longer-lasting damage done to the careers and to the lives of women, especially to Black women such as Anita Hill, who have been “canceled” by both conservative and liberal factions when compared what happens to the lives and careers of white men who are canceled.

Owens maintains throughout the work that cancel culture has not only been present in our cultural history, albeit under different names, but it has been a foundational tool of the marginalized who have no other options left for protest. The Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Stonewall Riots, and the 1960s counterculture movements are harbingers of cancel culture protests such as the Me Too movement, the March for Our Lives, Black Lives Matter, and a host of other protest and pro-justice movements from roughly 2015 until now. Indeed, the scope of this book can work against its message in two fashions—neither of them has an editorial solution, but they exist nevertheless. Owens simply overloads readers with examples of past and present instances of cancelling as a generative and successful form of protest and mechanism for positive social change. That there is so much evidence in favor of the legitimacy of cancel culture that Owens certainly brings his message full-circle. Similarly, reading example after example of cancellations in our culture shines a harsh light on how much work we need to do to bring about significant and lasting change; Owens remind us that there are many bad faith actors who wield enormous power. These aspects of the writing, despite moments of humor in the text, make it a difficult book to read quickly.
And, in the end, perhaps a book full of the worst moments of our collective history deserves a considered, slower reading. The penultimate chapter “Cancel-Cry Me a River” carefully describes the many popular cultural and scholarly arguments against cancel culture. Owens concisely argues successfully each of these criticisms, but makes one of the most impactful statements of the entire book, as he ends the chapter, “Too many critics of cancel culture spend more time worrying about the offender being canceled than asking why such a cancellation was made in the first place.”91 Owens forces us to consider why so many knee-jerk reactions against cancel culture exist, when so little reflection is spent on the actions that cause people to be canceled. We owe it to the historical and contemporary protests that use cancel culture to consider Owens’s trenchant arguments that cancel culture is “democracy unchained.”92

91 Ibid., 209.
92 Ibid., 212.
CONTRIBUTOR BIOS:

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Dr. Adeyemi Doss is an Assistant Professor in the Department of African American Studies at Saint Louis University. Dr. Doss’ research interests are shaped by a growing trend toward producing scholarships that address issues facing African American men and boys. His research raises important questions about black subjectivity, patterns of black spatial mobility, and embodied resistance. Through his research, Dr. Doss sheds light on the challenges African American men and boys encounter as they navigate their way through American society. He examines how these individuals grapple with issues of identity, mobility, and resistance within the context of urban environments.

Nicolas Dowling is a graduate student at Hunter College, City University of New York, in Art History. His research interests include the intersection of aesthetics and the philosophy of death in early twentieth-century painting.

Sarah Ellis is the Assistant Professor of Printmaking in the Department of Art and Design at Jacksonville State University in northeast Alabama. Her studio practice consists of printmaking, drawing, and mixed-media installation, focusing on work that explores personal narratives through agricultural imagery. She has exhibited nationally and internationally, with recent solo exhibitions at the Gadsden Museum of Art and Birmingham Southern University. She lives with her partner, Lauren, and their beloved pets in Weaver, Alabama.

Aubrey Grison is a French artist, model and fine arts teacher. She believes in supporting female empowerment and civil rights, and she uses her creativity to spread her values with optimism.

Gordon E. Harvey holds the rank of distinguished professor of history at Jacksonville State University in northeast Alabama. He is the author or editor of four different books on American history. He is currently the interim department head for the Department of Theatre and Film at JSU.

Chris Heisserer is a recent graduate from the English MA program at Jax State University. He has nearly two decades of creative writing and reading experience to back up his studies. His editing career spans genres, with a special focus in postmodern approaches in literary fiction, science
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**Stephanie Kendrick** is the 2023–2024 Athens, Ohio, Poet Laureate. She wrote *In Any of These Towns* (Sheila-Na-Gig editions, 2022) and is the editor of local poetry newsletter, Periodical Poetry. With a Masters in Social Sciences from Ohio University, she serves her local community in a variety of ways, including through her career at the Athens County Board of Developmental Disabilities. She has been published in several amazing journals including Gyroscope Review, Still: The Journal, Poets Reading the News, Lunch Bucket Brigade, Sheila-Na- Gig online, and elsewhere. See what she’s up to and read her poetry at stephthepoet.org.


**Bessie Rigakos** is a sociologist and Academic Dean for Marian University’s Saint Joseph College in Indianapolis. Her research focuses on policing of women’s bodies, body image, and beauty standards.

**Vivienne Rose** is a Texas based model, performer, and fat liberation activist. Her work is concerned with creating images that envision a world liberated from anti-fat bias. Her work can be found online at Instagram and Twitter/X.

**Kristen Ruccio** is the Director of First-Year Writing and an Assistant Professor of English at Arkansas State University. She focuses on creating an accessible and inclusive writing program with a dynamite slate of writing instructors. She's also proud to serve as the Vice President of the Southern Regional Composition Conference. Her research interests focus on Disability Studies, Rhetorics of Extinction, and writing program administration. In her spare time, she loves yarn crafts, vegan cookery, reading, and pet rescue.

**Irina Tall (Novikova)** is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in design. The first personal exhibition "My soul is like a wild hawk" (2002) was held in the museum of Maxim Bagdanovich. In her works, she raises themes of ecology, in 2005 she devoted a series of works to the Chernobyl disaster, draws on anti-war topics. The first big series she drew was The Red Book, dedicated to rare and endangered species of animals and birds. Writes fairy tales and poems, illustrates short stories. She draws various fantastic creatures: unicorns, animals with human faces, she especially likes the image of a man - a bird - Siren. In 2020, she took part in Poznań Art Week. Her work has been published in magazines: Gupsophila, Harpy Hybrid Review, Little Literary Living Room and others. In 2022, her short story was included in the collection The 50 Best Short Stories, and her poem was published in the collection of poetry The wonders of winter.
Marc Alexander Valle is a writer and K-12 educator from Allentown, Pennsylvania. He’s had a number of his pieces published in Door Is A Jar Literary Magazine, Turnpike Magazine, and Beechwood Review. If he’s not writing or educating our youth, you can find him at open mic poetry events, meditating at local meetups, or singing Prince and Nirvana songs at karaoke. If you can’t find him at any of those places, then he probably doesn’t want to be found at the moment. He can be like that sometimes. Until then you can read more of his work at mavthewriter.com. Feel free to drop him a message at mavthewriter@gmail.com if you read anything that tickled you. He likes that. Getting messages that is, not necessarily being tickled.

MariJean Wegert is a ghostwriter, poet, dancer, mother of two, and place emerging from a fixed point in Northern Indiana. Her writing contemplates the poetics of place, weaving ecology, metaphor, and myth; as well as studying the consequences of ideologies of shame and disconnection from dirt, story, and the animate world. She grew up along the Portage River in Ohio, making forts in the woods and forgetting to change out of her high waters to attend band practice. (Not much has changed.) Her poetry and essays have appeared in Analecta, Tributaries, Tilted House, Geez Magazine, RELEVANT Magazine, YoHo Journal, The Salt Collective, Edible Michiana, PAN-O-PLY, Clarion Journal for Religion, Peace and Justice, and others.

Michael White originally hails from the Calumet Region of Northwest Indiana. He obtained his BA in history and philosophy from Indiana University Northwest in Gary, Indiana, and his MA in U.S. History, concentrating in labor and social movements, from Indiana State University in Terre Haute. At ISU, Michael was the recipient of the Gertrude and Theodore Debs Memorial Fellowship to research American labor and social movements. His research focused on women telephone operators’ national organizing efforts in 1919, connecting it to a local general strike in Linton, Indiana. Michael was an organizer and later General Executive Board member of the Industrial Workers of the World from 2012 to 2018. He has been active in various community organizing endeavors and has worked with other unionization efforts, including the Indiana University Graduate Workers Coalition in Bloomington. Michael worked for Half Price Books for over five years, at both the Greenwood location, and the Bloomington outlet. In the fall of 2021 Michael was the lead organizer who helped initiate organizing efforts at the Greenwood store, served as national organizing liaison, and was part of the contract negotiation committee for the Greenwood store.