



ABOUT



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

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Cover Image: Douglas Hoekzema (Artist) and Hrach Avetisyan (Photographer)

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The *Bazzanella Literary Awards* is printed and published by University Printing and the English Department at Sacramento State, in Sacramento, California.

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ENGLISH DEPARTMENT FACULTY

Thank you to our faculty in English for inspiring our students in their class-rooms and guiding them in their preparation to submit their writing to the *Bazzanella Literary Awards*. A special thank you to the Dean of the College of Arts & Letters, Dr. Christina Bellon.

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Linda Vandermeer Sue McKee

Vi Wesner

Don Bezanson

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Melinda Blaylock

Douglas Wilson

1982 Linda Burke 1986

Marie Anderson

Andrew Neuman

Paula Campbell

Victoria Dalkey

Paula Campbell

Paula Campbell

Renee Kilmer

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Joe Stagner

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Stephen Cook

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Catherine Fraga

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Michael Babb

Don Beattie

Robert Brown

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Rosemary Smith

Fatrick McCorkle

Sue McKee

Ken Miller

Ken Miller

Sharyn Stever

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John Wade Frias Carole Stedronsky

Servin Housen Anne Appleton Paul Whetstone

Sandra Kay Stephen Cook

1987

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Darren Crown Marijean Galloway

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Edythe Schwartz

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2025 JUDGES

Critical Analysis

Mohamed Karim Dhouib holds an MA, a PhD, and a postdoctoral degree in Medieval English Literature. He is an Assistant Professor of English at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Sousse, Tunisia. With a strong focus on Geoffrey Chaucer's works, Dhouib has published numerous articles exploring various aspects of Chaucer's literary contributions.

His current research examines Chaucer's enduring influence and legacy in postmedieval literature and culture, analyzing how his works have shaped and inspired later generations of writers and artists. In addition to his academic pursuits, Dhouib actively participates in scholarly discussions and collaborations, contributing to a deeper understanding of medieval and postmedieval literary traditions.

For more details on his research, publications, and professional activities, please visit his <u>ORCID profile.</u>

Creative Non-Fiction

Amy Butcher is an award-winning essayist and the author of two books, including, most recently, *Mothertrucker*, a hybrid work of memoir and literary journalism that interrogates the realities of female fear, abusive relationships, and America's quiet epidemic of intimate partner violence set against the geography of remote, northern Alaska. The book earned critical praise from *Publisher's Weekly*. Kirkus Reviews, The Wall Street Journal, Good Morning America, CBS News, The Chicago Review of Books, The Oxford Review of Books, Booklist, and others, and early excerpts were awarded an Individual Excellence Award from the Ohio Arts Council. Additional essays have been featured on National Public Radio and the BBC, anthologized in *Best Travel Writing*, and awarded grand prize in the Iowa Review Award and notable distinctions in the 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2020 and 2021 editions of the Best American Essays series. Additional essays have appeared in Granta, Harper's, The New York Times "Modern Love," The New York Times Sunday Review, The Washington Post, The Denver Post, The Iowa Review, Lit Hub, Guernica, Gulf Coast, Fourth Genre, and Brevity, among others. She earned her MFA from the University of Iowa's Nonfiction Writing Program and is an Associate Professor of English and Creative Nonfiction at Denison University.

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2025 JUDGES

Poetry

Brent Ameneyro is the author of the collection *A Face Out of Clay* (The Center for Literary Publishing, 2024) and the chapbook *Puebla* (Ghost City Press, 2023). His poetry has been published in *Alaska Quarterly Review, The Iowa Review, Ninth Letter, The Journal, Hayden's Ferry Review, Salamander*, and elsewhere. He was the 2022-2023 Letras Latinas Poetry Coalition Fellow at the University of Notre Dame. He currently serves as an associate at Letras Latinas and as the poetry editor for *The Los Angeles Review*.

Short Fiction

F.T. Kola was born in South Africa and grew up in Australia. She holds an MFA from the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas at Austin. She was shortlisted for the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2015 and received a Miles Morland foundation grant in 2017. Her work has been published by One Story, The Guardian and Granta. She is currently at work on her first novel.

Critical Analysis

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GRADUATE FIRST PLACE CRITICAL ANALYSIS

THROUGH THE QUEER MIRROR: JOHN RECHY'S NEO-GOTHIC LABYRINTH IN CITY OF THE NIGHT (1963)

By Shay Ingram

Through the Queer Mirror: John Rechy's Neo-Gothic Labyrinth in *City of Night* (1963) "The wan mirrors get back their mimic life."

Oscar Wilde

"And ghostfaces, ghostwords, ghostrooms haunt me: Cities joined together by that emotional emptiness, blending with darkcity into a vastly stretching plain, into the city of night of the soul."

John Rechy

Introduction to Neo-Gothic Homosexual Fiction

ublished 26 May 1967, a *TIME* book review of James Purdy's novel, *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967) inscribes that neo-Gothic "homosexual fiction in which the demimonde of the third sex is fully exposed down to its rawest nerve ending [is] [...] the fastest-growing literary genre in these times" (*TIME*). This type of homosexual genre, the reviewer notes, applies to novels such as Alfred Chester's *The Exquisite Corpse* (1967) and John Rechy's *City of Night* (1963) wherein "there are no happy endings" and characters represent the sadomasochistic and "jaded" "third sex" (*TIME*). Pairing Rechy with Chester is peculiar, given that Alfred Chester posits a scant review of Rechy's *City of Night* in a June 1963 publication of *The New York Review* titled, "Fruit Salad", claiming that "[Rechy] is deaf to the

music in language, and thus deaf to the rhythms of homosexual speech" and thus becomes a mimic, Chester ensures, of Djuna Barnes, Truman Capote, and Jean Genet (Chester). Furthermore, being that homosexuality was not removed from the Diagnostical Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) as a 'sexual deviation' until 1973, it is also evident that homosexuality is pathologized (by both reviews) through a pre-stonewall lens—a lens that markets the queer individual as disabled, as an 'Other', as a 'third sex', as a demimonde, as sadomasochistic, and as melancholic.

Here, the *TIME* review christens Rechy and Chester as familiars within the emerging 1960s neo-Gothic genre—with an assumption that they both prolong the *queer* unhappy ending. On the contrary, John Rechy resolves his neo-Gothic epic with evidence for queer affirmation and agency—a reclamation of his unnamed protagonist's childhood that subverts expectations of the canonical queer writer. Although, the narrator experiences "[...] the death of the soul, not of the body—that which creates ghosts", this "death" symbolizes a thunderous revelation as the traumatic breath that escapes from "the fierce wind [...] of [his] angry childhood" is harnessed with cognizance that although "hope is an end within itself", he must not end his life (Rechy 458 & 460). Instead, he identifies an inability to escape his homeland of El Paso by romancing America's Gothic cityscapes—with their rows and rows of dark hiding places.

Although the protagonist flirts with death, it is only when, following his momentary session with the character Jeremy, in the chapter titled, "Jeremy: White Sheets", that he unlocks his desires and sexual agency, and where he, at the fullness of time, unleashes the potentiality of his newfound opacity. That "which creates ghosts" also creates a softening of self—a healing of self—a transformation: "[...] by fleeing impotently, hadnt I manifested what could be perhaps, a shape of "love"" (Rechy 422 & 458). Here, he chooses desire over death.

As witnessed, Rechy's protagonist defies the *TIME* reviewer's accusation that outside of neo-Gothic homosexual fiction "most men do not live in a neo-Gothic neverland where the entire

range of human experience is dominated by a single obsession" (*TIME*). For Rechy's *City of Night*, it is evident however, that obsessive Gothicism is a latched door, wherein the queer protagonist is manipulated in the confines of the 'closet', —a space that denounces agency in its refusal to celebrate queer consciousness. The *TIME* reviewer's notion of a "single obsession" furthermore implies that homosexual relations are intrusive by nature, where homosexual literature portrays the Gothic as negation and as fantasy. The "neo-Gothic neverland" described, however, is not written for "most men", nor the heterosexual reviewer of the 1960s (*TIME*). This "neverland" functions as an ephemeral vessel for homosexual stories to filter through, undiminished by a homophobic lens or genre (*TIME*). Hence, the Gothic genre has instead "crystallized for English audiences the terms of a dialectic between male homosexuality and homophobia"—a Hegelian binary of desire in *private* and fear in *public* ("Toward the Gothic" 92). This essay will provide an alternative review of the neo-Gothic homosexual novel through an assessment of queer Gothicism in John Rechy's *City of Night*.

John Rechy's *City of Night* has been described as a semi-autobiographical novel, a journalistic novel, a social novel, a Chicano novel, and so on, however, few scholars note the novel's inherent Gothicism. Indeed, John Rechy constructs a haunting Gothic cityscape that operates as a profound projection of his unnamed protagonist / hustler's internal world, presenting a terrain where isolation, desire, and identity intersect in the haze of romanticized urbanity: "Like a spurned persistent lover, the night tries possessively to hug the city—but vainly, sensing the approaching dusk, which already imbues the streets with grayish haze [...]" (406). Departing from traditional Gothic motifs—characterized by desolate castles (British Gothicism) and remote wilderness (Early American Gothicism)—Rechy's urban environment is infused with a distinctive sense of queer alienation and longing in the American cityscape as his protagonist survives in the shadows of sex work. This Gothic urbanity "is marked not by ornate arched vaults and flying buttresses [of English Gothicism], but rather by a secularized version

of the fear and foreboding that such architecture could create" (Cassuto 157). Therefore, the dark metropolis works as a paradox: a realm of forbidden desires that embodies the suffocating constraints of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 'closet,' while offering transitory moments of connection amidst his occupation.

Alongside an urban Gothic conceptualization, George Haggerty's conceptualization of "Queer Gothic" provides a critical lens through which to evaluate John Rechy's portrayal of queer experiences, encapsulating both the allure and the confinement inherent in existing on the margins of societal normality. This paper seeks to examine the plurality of Rechy's protagonist in the Gothic space. Therefore, with reinforcement from the Gothic canon, I contend that Rechy articulates the multiplicities of queer consciousness in *City of Night* through an attentive navigation of both the *public* exposures of the Gothic cityscape and the *private* expressions of the Gothic mirror—intertwined with profound isolation and a yearning for self-affirmative desire. Rechy's protagonist also reclaims bygone innocence through impending Gothicism—innocence first provoked in the novel's exposition as he cries out for his dying dog Winnie: "*If I keep looking at her she cant possibly die!*" (Rechy 17). Rechy suggests that hope exists in the Gothic genre. There is promise that in *City of Night* the protagonist *cannot possibly die either*...

Rechy's Neo-Gothic Cityscape

George Haggerty, in *Queer Gothic* (2006), posits that since the first recognized Gothic novel, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), as Conrad's fiancée vanishes into a "long labyrinth of darkness", that "[...] terror is almost always sexual terror [in the Gothic], and fear, and flight, and incarceration" and thus "gothic fiction is not about homo- or heterodesire as much as it is about desire itself" (2). Rechy's protagonist negotiates desire in the first of many sections titled, "City of Night", after introducing *his* America as a gritty and lonesome place:

Later I would think of America as one vast City of Night stretching gaudily from

Times Square to Hollywood Boulevard—jukebox-winking, rock-n-roll moaning: America at night fusing its darkcities into the unmistakable shape of loneliness (Rechy 15).

He then foreshadows urban-Gothicism with "apathetic palmtrees", "frantic shadows", and "Horrormovie courtyards" that juxtaposes his homeland in El Paso (15). Yes, Rechy's protagonist maneuvers "sexual terror" and "fear" throughout the novel, however, much of the terror mirrors his childhood traumas in El Paso: the death of his childhood dog, his first sexual experience with a female, and sexual trauma via his father (Haggerty 2). Although visions of childhood trauma reappear throughout the novel, in "iron binding echoes [that] you cant shed no matter how you try", what is omnipresent is Haggerty's delineation of "desire itself" even amongst the "gaud[iness]", "apath[y]", and horrors that Rechy introduces on page one (Rechy 15; Haggerty 2).

The cityscapes of New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New Orleans are consequently shrouded in Gothicized darkness, where it is always, as the title alludes: "Night". He subsists throughout the novel to reveal desires that are amputated from the 'self'—isolated from trauma—concealed by the Gothic—and buried in Rechy's "America at night [...]": a rendition of Walpole's "long labyrinth of darkness" (Rechy 15; Haggerty 2). This anguish begins in the El Paso wind and escalates to the haunting New York City.

In the third "City of Night" section, Rechy's first Gothic cityscape emerges in New York City after his protagonist is solicited by his first *client*, Mr. King: "[...] swallowed instantly by that giant wolfmouth of dark at the opening of which the dreamworld of a certain movie is being projected: the actors [are] like ghosts from [a] different world (42). This scene captures a purgatory—or "dreamworld"—that the young hustler begins to become "swallowed" by (Rechy 42). Rechy's urban-Gothic illustration of liminality in New York City is thus underscored by the notion that "ghostlike" spaces are not only sites of self "project[ion]" but also arenas for resilience and identity formation in an environment which exposes queer desire as

devouring: "[...] I felt a violent craving for something indefinable" (Rechy 42-43). John Rechy signals that such "darkcities" are shrouded by self-dissociation, clouded by fairytale, and personified as a voracious mouth (Rechy 15). New York City is monstrous as it *consumes* the protagonist. It is here where Rechy reveals how isolation and ephemeral intimacies coalesce in urbanity, facilitating a process of self-discovery amidst the pervasive hostility faced by marginalized identities in *public* neo-Gothic spaces. And indeed, death is still considered imminent.

Later in the novel, in another "City of Night" chapter, Rechy relocates his young hustler to "southern California, which is shaped somewhat like a coffin" (109). Evoked here is another pseudo-nightmarish sequence (evoked in italics) as the protagonist narrates his night in Hollywood. First, he vanishes into stream-of-consciousness marginalia as he is *captured* by a "youngman" and taken to a park. He then awakens outside of a theatre: "[...] "Right here behind those trees—my 'sister' will watch out for us"—[...] the park so dark, so dark, so dark, under now a starless night—[...] and now coming out of a theatre (the dungeon sex-head) where they exchange partners" (Rechy 220). Here, the park emerges not as a recess from the urban streets, however, as a liminal space between American naturality and urbanity. Yet, it remains public. The sequence furthermore reconjures New York City as the "dreamworld of a certain movie" being that the protagonist designates "Hollywood Boulevard [as] the imitation of a dream" (Rechy 42; 216, emphasis added). As if caught in film transitions, the protagonist migrates from a park to a theatre as if he is an actor in his own life—an "imitation" of a life—so uncertain of how he will survive in the vast cinematic "coffin" of Hollywood or in the personified "wolfmouth" of New York city (Rechy 42 & 109 & 216). Again, like in New York City, death is imminent, and just out of reach.

John Rechy mimics America's first Gothic novelist's exemplification of the American wilderness: Charles Brockden Brown.⁴ It is Brown's second novel, *Edgar Huntly or, Memoirs of a Sleepwalker* (1799) where the American wilderness emerges as an American Gothic jungle.

Brown writes in his preface to *Edgar Huntly* titled, "To the Public", that the "perils of the American wilderness" are endowed with more terror than the "Gothic castles and chimeras [...]" of English Gothicism. John Rechy exchanges Brown's wilderness Gothic for the Gothic "perils" of 1960s America (3). Moreover, Brown's execution of colonial wilderness anxieties mirrors not only Rechy's comprehensive cityscape but also the transitional spaces of bars, alleyways, apartments, and parks that are always cavernous and "[...] *so dark, so dark, so dark* [...]" (Rechy 220). These urban caverns are all-consuming like Hollywood's "coffin", like New York City's "wolfmouth", and like Sedgwick's "closet" (Rechy 42 & 109). Competing between a *public* and *private* world, Rechy's American urbanity is furthermore terrorized by urban phantoms similar to Brown's infamous panther and by hallucinatory dreamscapes like Edgar Huntly's descent into American Gothic terror.

Gothic terror, George Haggerty posits, "shifts in meaning and cultural significance" over time, and for Rechy, as he transforms the mid-twentieth century Gothic novel, not only does he reformulate the historicity of the American Gothic, but also borrows the ingredients of early "[...] gothic fiction [that] anticipate[d] the history of sexuality" to provoke *queer* terror in American cityscapes (1-5). This sense of 'place' *in City of Night* evolves from the "Queer Gothic" canon not only by exchanging American wilderness and English castles for the haunting American cityscape but also, as mentioned here, for choosing not to reduce the protagonist to suicide⁵.

The Unhappy Ending

In the words of Dorian Gray: "When I find that I am growing old, I shall kill myself" (Wilde 28). This exclamation is nothing unusual for the Gothic genre. Following the 18th century Gothic traditions of Horace Walpole and Charles Brockden Brown, Edna Pontellier's suicide in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) remains alongside Dorian Gray's narcissistic death in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) as staple unhappy endings for both

the homosexual woman and homosexual man at the end of the 19th century. It is natural for a protagonist who is unable to escape the *private* 'closet' or the *public* "dreamworld" to seek resolve (Rechy 42). Therefore, the canon explains queer death as a solution to social mobility, agency, and even imposed criminality. Chopin and Wilde furthermore allocate a 20th century language for Clare's death in Nella Larson's *Passing* (1929) and Giovanni's execution in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956) which elucidate theories of race and criminalization of the supposed "third sex", seen also in Rechy's depiction of a queer Chicano protagonist (*TIME*). This is the tradition in which John Rechy publishes *City of Night* in 1963—in the shadow of capacious queer death.

Unlike his predecessors, Rechy's "youngman" does not die in service to the novel. He does not experience death in privacy like the famed Edna Pontellier or Dorian Gray, instead he captures profound sexual agency even though he is crowded by the neo-Gothic 'place' of the novel. He therefore challenges the notion that "there are no happy endings" in the homosexual story as he transcends fear by locating visceral desire in *public* after fleeing from the character Jeremy: ""Babe, I'd like to eat you," said the man in the ballet tights at Les Deux Freres. "I dare you," I challenged" (*TIME*; Rechy 454). Here, is his first moment of *true* sexual agency, just seven pages before the novel's close. Rechy hints at death numerous times, however, in the end, his hustler chooses desire—something outside of the self—something he teases out of the "long labyrinth of darkness" (Haggerty 2).

As evolved here, a conceptualization of "Queer Gothic" history demonstrates the timeline from Walpole to Wilde to Rechy and situates John Rechy's *City of Night* within the "Queer Gothic" canon as a novel that chooses self-affirmation over melancholy—over suicidality and hence, illustrates the multiplicities of queerness. Therefore, a critical work of the English canon that parallels *City of Night*—Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—will be influential to this paper's transition from the *public* space of the American cityscape to the *private* space, and the Gothic trope of the mirror.

Through the Queer Mirror

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde depicts Dorian's decent into darkness as his portrait becomes a haunting symbol of his concealed life and forbidden desire—a 'double' that allows him to conceal his true self. As witnessed here, Rechy attests to these themes in *City of Night* by transposing them on an urban landscape, where the cityscape becomes a *public* Gothic setting. However, Rechy's anonymous protagonist often has fleeting and disguised encounters that are Gothic in tone and surrounded by a sense of existential dread, longing, and secrecy in *private* spaces. Here, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory of the 'closet' serves as a location where danger and desire coalesce as a *private* prison. Sedgwick asserts in *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) that if "[...] homosexuality is not [...] to be considered a matter of *public* concern [...] it [must]subsist under the mantle of the *private*" (Sedgwick 70). The 'closet' therefore, becomes a shadowy, *private* area that conceals the unnamed hustler. It is in this *private* space that Rechy's protagonist and his 'doubles' flee to the mirror.

The 'double' self of Rechy's protagonist materializes in the mirror for the first time at his childhood home in El Paso:

I fled to the Mirror. I would stand before it, thinking: I have only Me!... I became obsessed with age. At 17, I dreaded growing old. Old age is something that must never happen to me. The image of myself in the mirror must never fade into someone I can't look at (26).

Here, in the novel's first "City of Night" section in El Paso, Rechy's hustler confronts his consciousness in *privacy*. He returns to *this* mirror several times through the novel however, it is at the novel's close where he imitates his younger self in the mirror: "([...] I remember the times [...] when I had stood before the mirror, forcing myself to think: I have only Me!) I still look so young" (444). Furthermore, in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Do-

rian's pronouncement that "life was to make his soul would mar his body" echoes the "obsessed" hustler here, as his "image" "fade[s]" into the transitory space between life and death: aging (Wilde 27; Rechy 26). He becomes an actor of his own life even in *private*. "I still look so young": he assures himself amidst New Orleans' Gothicism: "The streets outside....

The Carnival...." (Rechy 444). Dorian's *portrait* is the hustler's *mirror* and like Dorian, he will fade too, although not towards a self-imposed death, however, perhaps further into the concealment of "The Carnival" (Rechy 444). Hence, it is this narcissistic mirror, throughout the novel, where the protagonist escapes labyrinthine cityscapes and enters his labyrinthine mind, where desire coalesces with memory, with trauma, with youth, and with his transgressive sexuality.

Much like Emily in *The Castle of Otranto*, and Dorian Gray, the protagonist of *City of Night* fears the visibility of the *public* space as someone that transgresses sexual norms. Such "sexual terror" is therefore allocated in traumatic consciousness and projected onto "evil" city-scapes: "[...] lost deep down. Inside. In your soul [...] is an evil city" (Haggerty 2; Rechy 351). Therefore, as Rechy's hustler, "insists on penetrating further into the gloom of [private] interiors", including the interior of his queer soul, he becomes incarcerated by repression in Sedgwick's dark 'closet', with "its deformations, its disempowerment and sheer pain" (Haggerty 14; Sedgwick 68). Thus, his mind mimics the *public* labyrinth.

Indeed, similar to *The Castle of Otranto*('s) "long labyrinth of darkness" and Dorian Gray's imprisonment by a "sanguine labyrinth of passion", Rechy's 'youngman' dislocates from desire in the *public* "labyrinthine world" of Gothic cityscapes through an obsession with his 'double' in the *private* mirror (Haggerty 2; Wilde 93; Rechy 329). The pain of closeted trauma, he suggests, is far more challenging than *public* performance. It is not, however, as challenging as sexual visibility in the *public* labyrinth. Thus, traumatic memories of his childhood—and of mirrors and windows—reflect his internal fears of safety beyond the 'closet', beyond secret sexual encounters, and beyond his labyrinthine mind. These fears are projected on-

to the phantoms he meets along the way including, Miss Destiny.

The hustler's encounter with Miss Destiny in Los Angeles, in the chapter titled, "Miss Destiny: The Fabulous Wedding", contains poignant moments that reflect Gothic loneliness and the isolation of the dark urban closet. She is a character aware of her social and personal exile, performing femininity as a mask in *public*, yet closeting her inner melancholic desires in *private*. Her *public* life thus becomes a masquerade⁷, being that, as Judith Butler theorizes in *Gender Trouble*, "[...] the mask is part of the incorporative strategy of melancholy" (66). In one scene, Miss Destiny is portrayed as the young hustler's 'double', much like Dorian Gray, as she too reflects on her melancholic self. "I come unexpectedly on myself in a mirror or a reflection in a window, and it takes my breath" she states, "I want to jump out of my skin! jump out! be someone else!" (Rechy 143). Here, she implies the dissociation between her *public* and *private* personas in the mirror.

Miss Destiny's expressions in the mirror also imply her fear of abandoning the *private* space due to 'otherness'. However, her *public* performance does not reflect her innate humanity—it is however, in *private* where her "desire[s] reflect [...] or express [her] gender"—seen in her inclination to leave her body and become "[...] someone else!" (Butler 31; Rechy 143). She desires to be perceived as feminine and as 'Real'. Therefore, she learns to refuse the melancholic demands of these desires through small moments of resolution in that which lives outside of the self and away from the mirror: "Shakespeare, my dears—a very Great writer who wrote ladies' roles for dragqueens in his time" (Rechy 121). Her literary interests further assert her self-dissociation from reflected gender, as she fantasizes leaping into a Shakespeare play, or into Greek myth: "[...] ah Alexandria, just like the ah queen of ah ancient Sparta [...]" (Rechy 133). At the end of her character portrait, Miss Destiny vanishes like a dead heroine—vanishes in Shakespearean romance—vanishes in mythic nuptials.

As Miss Destiny dissociates from her melancholy after "reflect[ing] [and] express[ing]"

her desires in the mirror, she reflects Rechy's hustler as he loses Pete in the chapter titled, "Pete: A Quarter Ahead" in New York City, and flees from Jeremy in the chapter titled, "Jeremy: White Sheets" in New Orleans during Mardi Gras: "Ive known people who have retreated into a symbolic mirror—[...] [the] devouring need of others to sustain each battered return to the Mirror..." (Rechy 432). Here, the protagonist negotiates escaping the masquerade, while surrounded by Mardi Gras, and all that intertwines him in the "most deadly myth": Jeremy's pure "White Sheets" (Rechy 432). Judith Butler reconciles that "the displacement of desire [is an] (idealized) demand for love [...]" (66). As Rechy's protagonist obsesses over what Jeremy describes as "each battered return to the mirror" and hints at love, he is searching for what George Haggerty denotes as "desire itself", like Miss Destiny, or like Dorian Gray, as he expresses an incessant "demand for love" (432; 2; Butler 66). He reaches for his demands with Jeremy and then refuses them. Here, his "[...] refusal of love [...]", is endowed with profound melancholy as the masquerade coerces his dual desires to oscillate between resolution and negation (Butler 66). Indeed, like Miss Destiny, the protagonist chooses to "retreat" through his "symbolic mirror" and thus becomes his own mimic (Rechy 432). Although, he does recover agency and celebrates his *public* sexuality, both Miss Destiny and the young hustler continue to suppress not only a desperate wish to escape *public* performance but also, an innate desire for queer love in private.

John Rechy's *City of Night*, through the neo-Gothic topic of this paper—through amplifying queer sexuality—through anti-suicidality, arranges a "condensation of the world of possibilities surrounding same-sex sexuality [...]" and confirms that protagonists of the neo-Gothic novel can locate solace in their *own* evolving worlds (Sedgwick 74). As resolved here, Alfred Chester's concern that "[Rechy] is deaf to the music in language, and thus deaf to the rhythms of homosexual speech" is incorrect (Chester). Perhaps Chester, like other "modern critic[s] of the Gothic, [...] views [the genre] as an exploration of "the perverse."" without first considering

his perversity in the neo-Gothic homosexual fiction genre ("Toward the Gothic" 90). Although Rechy examines the multiplicities of queer experience through a setting so melodramatic, Gothicized, and sexual—that one may not expect his "youngman" to survive—his intonation is revolutionary, and his cadence is profound. His voice unveils what James Baldwin assures "will live forever, in the great, uncharted jungle of the human heart" (Baldwin). *City of Night* therefore exposes not only a *queer* reality but also a *human* reality that transcends the *public / private* binary by trekking through the neo-Gothic jungle of American urbanity.

You cannot escape your reflection, your gender, your age, your sexuality—the labyrinthine nature of your consciousness circling you in melodrama. And thus, your reflection, much like trauma, will never flee from you. It hungers for you in memory, leaving its handprints on the many walls of your home—your windows—like Dorian Gray's portrait—like the governess of *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) as she witnesses Peter Quint's apparition at Bly Manor through a window—like Frankenstein's creature as it comes to consciousness in a mirrored pond: "I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am [...]" (Shelley 104). John Rechy enters the Gothic canon in 1963 by relocating the traditional Gothic protagonist to an urban scene. However, as seen, the same canonical terror is revealed through the queer mirror. Yet, perhaps Rechy's protagonist too mirrors a contemporary queer audience, as we rediscover our imagination—our innocence—our agency—our optimism—our self-affirmative desires—away from the mirror and in the bright sun—hand in hand with someone, anyone to love.

Believing that yes, perhaps we can stay alive afterall...

Notes

- ¹ Haggerty notes that this is a crude label for "an odd sexual mood" that is often taken advantage of by critics (2).
- ² See Drescher: DSM-I classified "homosexuality" as a "sociopathic personality disturbance." In DSM-II, published in 1968, homosexuality was reclassified as a "sexual deviation.""

 Homosexuality was not fully removed from the DSM until 1987 (45).
 - ³ See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990).
- ⁴The first American novel is Charles Brockden Brown's Gothic novel: *Wieland or, The Transformation* (1798).
- ⁵ Note the *TIME* review's assertion of "no happy endings" in the homosexual story (*TIME*).
 - ⁶ See Haggerty's *Queer Gothic*, 59.
- ⁷ Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* borrows the term "masquerade" from Jacques Lacan, 66-67.

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JUDGE'S COMMENTS

"Through the Queer Mirror: John Rechy's Neo-Gothic Labyrinth in City of Night (1963)" By Shay Ingram

Graduate First Place Critical Analysis

This paper is a deserving first-place winner. It redefines John Rechy's *City of Night* (1963) as a pivotal neo-Gothic text that subverts the tragic queer narrative tradition. Through queer and Gothic theoretical frameworks (Haggerty, Sedgwick, Butler), it analyzes how Rechy's protagonist navigates urban spaces as sites of queer alienation, desire, and ultimately, empowerment. Unlike canonical queer-Gothic works (such as The Picture of Dorian Gray), Rechy rejects the "unhappy ending" trope, instead affirming agency and self-discovery amid societal oppression. The paper also critiques mid-century pathologizing reviews (particularly TIME magazine's reductive framing) and positions City of Night as a radical departure, where the protagonist chooses desire over death, reclaiming his identity beyond the closet's confines. Rechy's novel emerges as a testament to queer survival in a hostile hetronormative genderland.

-Mohamed Karim Dhouib

GRADUATE SECOND PLACE CRITICAL ANALYSIS

THE FINAL REFINER: ELIOT'S EXPLOITATION OF THE

MATERNAL IN "ASH-WEDNESDAY"

By Elizabeth Shaffer

epictions of women in the poetry of T.S. Eliot have been analyzed by

many scholars over the last one hundred years, resulting in findings both misogynistic and feminist. Hints of sexual violence, lust, confusion, and awkwardness abound in Eliot's earlier work, specifically in his "Bawdy Poems," "Sweeney Erect," and "Sweeney among the Nightingales." Eliot's male speakers are typically burdened by feelings of inadequacy when female body parts, hair, and lives are in view. As his first marriage fails and Eliot converts to Anglicanism, he writes "Ash-Wednesday," his conversion poem that is riddled with religious specificity and contributes to an exploitation of the maternal consistent in Christian culture. Typically seen as one speaker's pilgrimage through the uncertainties of faith with a glorification of the Virgin Mary, I argue that "Ash-Wednesday" should be read differently: not as a worship poem that parallels the conversion of the author, but as an exploitative poem with an anguished speaker. Eliot focuses on the event of Ash Wednesday not only as the first day of Lent—commemorating the forty days Jesus spent in temptation from Satan—but as a symbol of repentance and bodily impermanence, paralleling the dictum, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19). "Ash-Wednesday" becomes the ultimate confession as the speaker prays for redemption, attempting to reach a higher power through a female figure—the Virgin Mary, an idealized maternal figure desexualized and silenced by God. Eliot's inheritance of conservative Anglicanism leads to an intense idealization of religious women to reach God, culminating in a devotion that does not admire but exploits the maternal to prepare the soul for salvation.

In "Ash-Wednesday," Eliot constructs a conservatively religious poem that is innovative in form. His integration of recitation found in the Anglican liturgy, direct citations of scripture, and patterns of specific sacraments are central to Eliot's conversion poem. The six-part structure of "Ash-Wednesday" even correlates to the six weeks of Lent. In Part III, Eliot's speaker describes a journey up three stairs to receive communion: "Fading, fading; strength beyond hope and despair / Climbing the third stair. / Lord, I am not worthy / Lord, I am not worthy / but speak the word only" (Eliot, lines 122-125). The number three, already significant in Christian doctrine in relation to the Holy Trinity of Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, becomes especially significant when placed in the context of the construction of physical churches. Altars are constructed with three steps before them, which the communicant will walk up to receive the host ("The Interior"). Clarity regarding the sacrament is further achieved as the speaker utters the communal prayer typically said before the congregation ascends the three stairs to receive communion. The prayer, beginning with "Lord, I am not worthy," emphasizes the communicant's ultimate unworthiness in receiving the body and the blood.

It makes sense that the speaker is struggling to ascend these stairs, "Struggling with the devil of the stairs," as Eliot puts it, since the shame and stain of the communicant must be confessed to before receiving the body of Christ (Eliot, line 104). The speaker is able to find "strength beyond hope and despair" to continue up the three steps to the altar and receive communion. Though Part III of "Ash-Wednesday" has no formal structure—each stanza differing in length and varying from the five other parts of the poem—its content is formal, intentional, and conservative. Eliot's reverence for the Sacrament of Communion defies the existentialist themes of his other Modernist counterparts and even his own previous work like *The Waste Land*.

This reverence continues as Eliot's speaker prepares for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The penitent must use routine language to begin reconciliation in the Anglican Church. Before stating how long it has been since their last confession, the penitent states, "Bless me father, for I have sinned" (Davis 1). In Part VI of "Ash-Wednesday," Eliot includes this line in the second stanza: "(Bless me father) though I do not wish to wish these things" (Eliot, line 205). Reconciliation is a pastoral healing right in the Anglican Church and the priest stands in to make an appeal to God for the forgiveness of the sinner, similar to someone in a position of privilege advocating on an inferior's behalf (Davis 1). Eliot's reliance on liturgical patterns and scripture is reverential, proving with intense detail his intentions to embrace conservative Anglicanism. This is not the last time Eliot's speaker will rely on the appeal of a holy figure to act on his behalf, but these aspects of Anglican sacraments provide a strong foundation for the religious framework in "Ash-Wednesday."

Why does Eliot strive for a conservatism he was not born into? An answer may be found in Part II of "Ash-Wednesday," when Eliot's speaker embraces the feminine and credits the renewal of the bones in the desert to an unnamed Lady. Just as purgation is a seminal feature of Eliot's earlier work, Eliot's treatment of women has also been essential—though controversial—in his early poetry. Elisabeth Däumer notes that "the fear of utter engulfment by the maternal" had "plagued earlier male speakers of Eliot's poetry" (Däumer 489). Eliot's "Bawdy Poems," "Sweeney Erect," and "Sweeney among the Nightingales" are filled with misogyny, indifference, sexual violence, and overall confusion towards the female body. As Eliot turns from scenes of physical purgation towards a refinement by conservative Anglicanism, he departs from depictions of a human maternal and attempts to find redemption by idealizing religious women. In "Ash-Wednesday," the Lady in Part II is distant and "withdrawn," allowing the speaker to withhold any closeness (Eliot, line 59). Without the intimacy of a more physical connection—for example, a man's first-ever closeness with a woman inside the womb of his

mother in pregnancy and necessary closeness in infancy—the speaker can idealize a distant feminine without being worried about engulfment. This distance creates an idealized devotion and leads to an eventual resurrection of the bones of the speaker: "Because of the goodness of this Lady / And because of her loveliness, and because / She honours the Virgin in meditation / We shine with brightness" (Eliot, lines 51-54). It is because of her "withdrawn" nature, her "goodness," and her devotion to the ultimate feminine ideal, the Virgin Mary, that the speaker is renewed.

The context in which Eliot publishes "Ash-Wednesday" could also account for his embrace of conservative Anglicanism. Däumer, combining a feminist and psychoanalytic perspective, further claims that Eliot made an intentional decision to publish "Ash-Wednesday" in 1930 after his mother's death in 1929:

Completed after Charlotte Eliot's death in 1929, the poem is also an enigmatic tribute from a son to a mother whose persistent effort to come into voice against the strictures of a tradition to which she remained committed became a model for his own decision to gain artistic and religious independence by endorsing spiritual and social values more conservative than those of his mother and family. (Däumer 491)

Eliot converted to Anglicanism in 1927 and published "Ash-Wednesday" three years later. The death of his Unitarian mother—who was also a poet herself—taking place just months earlier could have been an impetus for Eliot to fully depart from his Unitarian past and embrace his British future as an Anglican. The loss of his mother leaves a vacancy for a maternal figure that cannot be replaced in a physical sense. Dennis Brown argues that "The Lady returns as intercessor and comforter (a restored 'internal' mother too)" (Brown 7). This internal mother is wholly unattainable, a fantasy of mother, caretaker, and intercessor being both desexualized and virgin—the opposite of Charlotte Eliot, and a direct endorsement of values more conservative than hers. The speaker's bones are resurrected due to the "goodness" of the Lady

who worships the Virgin Mother, a maternal figure devoid of original sin. Mary's ability to conceive while keeping her virginity intact is something irreconcilable for humanity and further idealizes an impossible scenario of female personhood.

This loss of a maternal figure and anxiety over the female body leads the speaker to an intense reliance on the religious female. As "Ash-Wednesday" moves into Part IV, the Virgin Mary is not only referenced in relation to the Lady, but is introduced to the speaker. The ultimate Holy Mother, Mary's relationship with the speaker is like Dante's relationship with Beatrice. The first explicit depiction of Mary happens in the first stanza, when the speaker describes a woman walking, "Going in white and blue, in Mary's colour," "In the blue of larkspur, blue of Mary's colour," and again as "The silent sister veiled in white and blue" (Eliot, lines 129, 136, 149). Mary is often referred to as "the silent sister," since she speaks sparingly in the New Testament. This silence will become an important facet in the culmination of "Ash-Wednesday," but for now, silence, white, and blue can be seen as characteristics of the Virgin Mary. This woman "moves in the time between sleep and waking," and contains the knowledge that the speaker lacks (Eliot, line 40). Mary acts on a spiritual plane, having access to a God that the speaker can only grasp through scripture, liturgy, and sacrament. She is foundational in the speaker's salvation—she is the channel to the higher power Eliot is embracing in conversion. Part IV ends with a quote from the Salve Regina, a poem that is the final prayer of the Rosary and is also called "Hail, Holy Mother" ("The Salve Regina"). The speaker's utmost devotion to the Virgin Mary, Eliot's inclusion of popular prayer, and Mary's movement on a transcendental plane suggest Mary embodies her role as a religious guide akin to Beatrice.

To understand God or Divine Love requires a medium or an access point—for Dante, it is Beatrice, for Eliot's speaker, it is Mary. As a human, to truly know God is impossible, and in some religions, even uttering a holy name or displaying religious iconography is blasphemous. An interlocutor is necessary for Eliot's speaker to access divine knowledge or spiritual insight.

John H. Timmerman states that for Dante, Beatrice "is the ideal, the entelechy of Dante's questioning" (Timmerman 96). Beatrice is the fully realized potential and protector of everything Dante is searching for, leading him to knowledge of the divine. Her power resides in her ability to exist as a conductor to better aid Dante's spiritual growth. E. E. Duncan Jones suggests the connection between Dante and Beatrice is foundational to Eliot's depictions of a Holy Mother as a guide. Jones writes, "A Dante-Beatrice relationship is suggested in much of 'Ash Wednesday': and Dante's apprehension of God was *through* Beatrice" (Jones 53). The speaker is not just learning from "the silent sister" but requires something more than guidance: intercession. Just as Dante apprehended God "through" Beatrice, Mary becomes both a guide for and the speaker's channel to salvation as a restored maternal figure free from original sin.

Even Simone de Beauvoir concurs with Jones and Timmerman in *The Second Sex*, arguing that "Woman is Soul and Idea, but she also is a mediatrix between them: she is divine grace, leading the Christian toward God, she is Beatrice guiding Dante in the beyond, Laura summoning Petrarch to the lofty summits of poetry" (de Beauvoir 189). Quickly, a tribute to Charlotte Eliot becomes a search for a replacement, a divine maternal that may quell his paranoid conversion. In his embrace of values more conservative than his mother's, Eliot pleads to a maternal figure that is devoid of any human sexuality his mother had. Even though this is a contradiction—Charlotte Eliot had to engage in carnal embrace to create Eliot himself—maybe the speaker could be free from his sins and comforted with divine knowledge if the most powerful intercessor advocated to God on his behalf.

Eliot is not alone in his plea. Mariology, or the veneration of Mary (also known as the Cult of the Virgin Mary), began before the founding of Constantinople in 324 (Warner 347). Intense devotion towards Mary, a woman who transcended human sin, is not new—in fact, it is one of the oldest facets of Christianity. Maria Warner, in her book *Alone of All Her Sex*, traces the history of Mary's veneration and focuses an entire chapter on "Virgin Birth." Through the

virgin birth, Warner writes, "Mary conquered the post-Eden natural law that man and woman couple in lust to produce children. Chaste, she escaped the debt of Adam and Eve. Thus the seeds of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception...spares Mary all stain of original sin" (Warner 53). Lust, a sin that the speaker fights in "Ash-Wednesday" and wrestles with as he approaches communion, is defied by the Virgin Mary. To give birth to the son of God while maintaining her virginity is the irreconcilable religious situation that Christianity has glorified for almost two thousand years, but it can never be attained on Earth. Beatrice is human, a real love in Dante's life, but Mary leaves behind her humanity when she is spared "all stain of original sin" via the Immaculate Conception. Mary's holy, maternal perfection has been alluring to many men before Eliot, and his idealization and worship of Mary as an access point to approach God is a contribution to a deep patriarchal history of Christianity.

Eliot's veneration turns to exploitation as "Ash-Wednesday" culminates with the speaker soliciting the Virgin Mary to provide salvation. Eliot invokes the "Hail Mary" when the speaker asks for her prayer: "Will the veiled sister pray / For children at the gate / Who will not go away and cannot pray: / Pray for those who chose and oppose" (Eliot, lines 185-188). In the prayer of "The Hail Mary," Mary is asked to "pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death" ("The Hail Mary"). Whether they are believers, nonbelievers, or the shame-ridden Eliot himself, Mary acts as the ultimate intercessor. Her silence is holy and graceful, and she devotes her life to listening to others, sacrificing her livelihood for the work of God. Brown, who considers Eliot's depictions of the Lady and Mary as the search for a new "internal mother," also argues that "Ash-Wednesday" as a whole "constitutes an appealingly desperate confession" (Brown 4). The speaker's pleas to Mary are done out of a panicked desperation, akin to going to Reconciliation as a penitent. On his knees in supplication, the speaker admits to sin and begs for closeness to Mary, asking "not to be separated" (Eliot, line 233). Since she is a woman without stain, her proximity to God is alluring to the penitent who feels as if he cannot

reach or be heard by God due to a sullied soul. Mary is not admired in "Ash-Wednesday," but exploited for what she can provide to the speaker.

"Ash-Wednesday" appears as praise, yet when considering the context of the Cult of the Virgin Mary alongside a history of feminist theory, its devotion turns to dust. Filled with the anxiety of bodily impermanence, the speaker approaches Mary without grace, but with a request. Eliot's retreat into conservative Anglicanism can be seen as another way to fulfill a vacant maternal role and to plead for a religious woman to deliver him from evil. This salvation will never come. Tony Pinkney, in his book *Women in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot: A Psychoanalytic Approach* comments on the physical impossibility of a chaste mother and its negative effects on other women: "the Blessed Virgin so monopolises female virtue that it becomes almost an act of public hygiene to 'do in' the women one comes across in daily life, necessarily tainted as these latter are" (Pinkney 117). No human woman can ever be Mary, yet she is thanked for her womb—"The Hail Mary" does include, "blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus"—and her devotion to a God who has rendered her silence as holy. Not only is the speaker's desperate adoration exploitative, but it is also a contribution to the glorification of virginity in Christian culture. Praise of a woman free from original sin renders all women who come after her as soiled, blemished, and contaminated.

Mary is free from original sin as cemented by the Immaculate Conception. All women are "tainted" if sexually active, but this can typically remain hidden from view, as opposed to maternal figures. All mothers become a physical embodiment of the "stain" of original sin with a protruding abdomen. In her essay "A Process without a Subject: Simone de Beauvoir and Julia Kristeva on Maternity," Linda Zerilli connects this physical proof of sin to men's fear of the maternal body. Zerilli argues that Beauvoir views motherhood as a "symbol in a patriarchal culture," a "tomb by him who refuses to acknowledge the mother-origin of his existence" (Zerilli 125). All men have come from a woman's womb yet come to defy the social barriers of being

women themselves as the beneficiaries of a patriarchal culture. This dread from the male is something Zerilli relates to Beauvoir, an "otherness" that "is at bottom a terror of the maternal body that menaces his claims to self-generation and autonomy, a terror he masks with the ideology of sacred maternity" (Zerilli 126). Male lust lacks physicality—a woman must grow, a fact that becomes difficult to hide—yet the female "stain" of sexuality represents a process men cannot do. It is easy for a patriarchal culture to coin maternity as sacred since it is a symbol of man's difference and lack. Instead of acknowledging intercourse or pregnancy, motherhood is idealized and selectively venerated.

In the penultimate line of "Ash-Wednesday," Eliot's diction invokes the relationship between mother and child in another religious saying: "Suffer me not to be separated / And let my cry come unto Thee" (Eliot, lines 233-234). During pregnancy, a mother is connected to the fetus for over nine months until the cutting of the umbilical cord. Even before this separation and delivery of the afterbirth, a loud cry has typically already been heard by the mother. This idea of reverting to that state—to be connected once again in the maternal, to become fruit in the ever-valued womb of Christianity—is infantile. It stems from a fear of separateness, a time when autonomy was physically impossible and would be harmful to the fetus. By ending "Ash-Wednesday" with this desperate plea for togetherness reveals the speaker's hopes to begin again and approach a time before baptism where sin had not yet been committed. Eliot's conversion poem culminates in a request rooted not in devotion and worship, but in panic.

Eliot's embrace of a conservatism much deeper than his own mother's is a way of avoiding the sexuality of his late mother and his uncomfortable feelings around sex and the maternal. However, many would argue that the power of the human female resides in its ability to create life. Simone de Beauvoir dedicated an entire chapter of *The Second Sex* to the mythology surrounding significant women in literature and history. When approaching the Virgin Mary, de Beauvoir argues that the traditional doctrine of Christian maternity, most specifically the Virgin

Birth, is stripped of its innate mightiness when she writes, "maternity as a natural phenomenon confers no power" (de Beauvoir 181). The miracle and phenomenon of the Virgin Birth lacks power due to its patriarchal roots—it depends solely on the will of God to choose a womb that will bear fruit. De Beauvoir continues:

This is the supreme masculine victory, consummated in the cult of the Virgin—it is the rehabilitation of woman through the accomplishment of her defeat...Under Christianity life and death depend only upon God, and man, once out of the maternal body, has escaped that body forever; the earth now awaits his bones only...if she wishes to rise above her original fault, only to bow to the will of God, which subordinates her to man. (de Beauvoir 181)

Mary's silence is seen as a characteristic of humility and grace, since after the Virgin Birth, her life becomes solely dedicated to her son, the incarnation of God. Mary is a mediatrix, yes, and she is a channel, too—but ultimately, she is devoid of personhood in service to God's will. The image of Mary bowing "to the will of God" recalls the imagery of women at Jesus' feet as he awaits crucifixion. Mary's continued popularity suggests women are far from rehabilitation in a patriarchal society, but men are also not closer to finding salvation and a graceful resurrection of their bones. Eliot's search for a replacement maternal in his embrace of conservative religion may indeed be filled with panic—he has been separated once, through birth, and now twice, through the death of his mother. It is a "masculinist victory" as de Beauvoir calls it, that for two thousand years the most prominent figure in Christianity besides God and Jesus Christ is a silent woman praised for her servitude and idolized for her virginity. Though she is the Mother of God, she remains subordinate to all mankind.

The true "indigestible portions" of "Ash-Wednesday" are Eliot's inability to confront human sexuality. Guilt, judgment, shame, stain, temptation—all Eliot's speaker is pleading for-

giveness for and salvation from in "Ash-Wednesday"—may be released when confronted with the bindings of patriarchy for both men and women. Though masquerading as a six-part conversion poem dedicated to the veneration and glorification of the Virgin Mary, "Ash-Wednesday" is an anguished confession that idealizes and exploits an irreconcilable maternal figure. The anxious journey of the speaker through the structured sacraments of Communion and Reconciliation, his quoted Biblical phrases and borrowings from popular prayers, and his plea for an infantile closeness to the Virgin Mary reads as a desperate speaker who is not full of worship, but full of fear.

Though a definite departure from Eliot's character of Sweeney or the young man carbuncular, the idolization of virginity in Mary still embraces many of the misogynistic tropes that pervade Eliot's earlier poetry, just redirected in an Anglican framework. If sexuality and maternity can ever be found in agreement under Christian patriarchy, and Mary's veneration is privileged over her role as intercessor, the long history of glorification of the Holy Mother may continue—but with a long sabbatical for Mary, Mother of God.

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JUDGE'S COMMENTS

The Final Refiner: Eliot's Exploitation of the Maternal in "Ash-Wednesday"

By Elizabeth Shaffer

Graduate
Second Place
Critical Analysis

This paper reinterprets T.S. Eliot's Ash-Wednesday as an exploitative text that idealizes the Virgin Mary as a silent, desexualized intercessor rather than a genuine devotional figure. The author argues that Eliot's speaker, driven by guilt and fear, seeks salvation through Mary while avoiding human sexuality and maternal reality. Drawing on feminist theory, the paper exposes how the poem reinforces patriarchal norms by glorifying female purity and submission, reflecting Eliot's personal anxieties rather than authentic religious devotion. This thoughtful and well-argued analysis merits recognition as a second-place winner.

- Mohamed Karim Dhouib

UNDERGRADUATE FIRST PLACE

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

LAVENDER HOUSE: QUEERING "GOLDEN AGE" DETECTIVE FICTION

By Aaliyah Hernandez

Lavender House: Queering "Golden Age" Detective Fiction

"The gay/lesbian crime scene blends elements that are uniquely lesbian/gay with those that can be found in mainstream detective novels... They abide by the conventions that govern all mystery fiction, including having a crime to solve, finding clues, encountering red herrings, and arriving at a solution. At the same time, gay/lesbian mysteries provide a view of gay and lesbian life—the dreams, fears, love, hatred, and self-hatred—that are not available in mainstream literature" (Markowitz 25).

INTRODUCTION

he rich history of detective fiction, which dates back to Andrew Knapp's *The Newgate Calendar*, has always been entangled with that of crime fiction and the way it stands to act as a window into what is socially and morally acceptable in the eyes of the law and criminality (Link), but as all things do, the progression of time has and will continue to shift these views. What happens when someone once considered a criminal in historical context becomes the heroic detective? How does having a detective who is not simply a white heterosexual man change the course of staple genre con-

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ventions as well as work to change what is seen as socially and morally acceptable? We began to answer some of these questions as the "Golden Age" of detective fiction began to grow out of itself. Authors began to bring diversity to the detective and supporting characters, and with this adjustment came an expansion on the genre. Examples of this can be found with Walter Mosley's Ezekiel "Easy" Rawlins in Devil in a Blue Dress and P.D. James's Cordelia Gray in An Unsuitable Job for a Woman, who shows us what it looks like when a detective is a black man or a white woman. A license which shouldn't be ignored alongside other oppressed groups typically seen in both reality and detective fiction is that of the LGBTQ+ community. Though queer characters have existed in the backgrounds of these stories (i.e. Joel Cairo in *The Maltese* Falcon and James Slocum in The Drowning Pool), and are usually a cause of negative concern, perceived by the detective indifferently if not with a hint of homophobia, are seen as less than what A Man ought to be due to sexual orientation. Exceptions of this have since been made, including Evander Mills, a gay detective written into the early 1950s. Lev A.C. Rosen's Lavender House takes conventions from the "Golden Age" of detective fiction and works to challenge and transform them to be inclusive of queer lives and history, putting queer visibility at the forefront of his novel.

I. Defining "Golden Age" Detective Fiction

"The term 'golden age' has been criticised as being unduly homogenous and seen as inappropriately 'replete with romantic associations': in fact that types of crime fiction produced in this period were far from uniform— the psychothriller and the procedural began, there was a wide range of practice in the mystery and the stories do regularly represent types of social and personal unease which would contradict a notion of an idyllic 'golden' period. However, while recognising variety in the period, as well as the relative uncertainty of its borders, it is still possible to identify a coherent set of practices which were shared, to a greater or lesser extent, by most of the writers then at

work" (Knight 77).

Though, like many genres have evolved over the course of their individual histories, detective fiction can and does encapsulate many different styles, forms, and tropes, the "Golden Age" can be marked by a number of key components. The ones being described by Stephen Knight in his overview of "Golden Age" conventions explored here with *Lavender House* are:

A detective who reinforces the moral/social order and who is an arbiter of justice.

Typically heterosexual, white, and male.

Story takes place in an enclosed location, both physically and socially, where wider politics can be ignored.

Romance is rare, though can occur between the detective and suspect, or between two suspects,

There is the presence of a femme fatale.

II. Evander Mills, the Tightrope of Being a Queer Detective

"Screw you,' he says, getting back up, but it sounds weak and he knows it. I turn around and bounce off the glass door of the bar, which has closed behind me. There goes my heroic exit. The kid starts laughing, but I step back, rub my nose, and turn the handle, walking back in, the kid still cackling behind me...I'm proud to be in his bar at 2 p.m. on a Monday. I'm proud to have thrown some kid out on the street, even though it's not my job anymore. Hell, I'm proud to be jobless, blacklisted" (Rosen 3).

When Rosen first introduces Evander "Andy" Mills in *Lavender House*, he has just been fired from his job as a detective with the police force in San Francisco for being caught in the bathroom with another man at a gay bar. Right away, it is clear that Evander is not the hero-

ic, straight, white, male detective which was so prominent in the "Golden Age". He is instead someone whose very existence goes against the moral and social order of his time and is actively facing the consequences of that, as it was still illegal in the early 1950s to be homosexual. Throughout the novel, Evander goes through an incredibly emotional journey as he works to solve the case of a murdered lesbian woman, Irene Lamontaine, investigating the queer family which live in the Lavender House and beginning to deconstruct the heterocentric lifestyle that was all he knew before, slowly learning to fully accept his own queerness and open up to the possibility of experiencing things like falling in love and continuing to help others as a gay detective.

What Rosen challenges against the "Golden Age" convention here is that a detective must be heterosexual in order to reinforce justice. By the end of the novel, we see Evander do this regardless of his homosexuality, and we also see that Rosen pitches a different suggestion for the entity which is truly guilty of injustice and not reinforcing social and moral order: the corrupt police force.

"The idea that the state through its institutions is the real guilty one in criminal affairs is still a widely held opinion...In western societies the police is the only institution, which has the license to use violence. The role of the detective is far more controversial" (Brynhildsvoll 263).

Corrupt police and other authoritative figures are not new concepts to detective fiction, they are, however, a root issue for not only Evander, but all those who live in the Lavender House. Some of them are far from guilty for events beyond their sexualities, and those who are innocent of truly harmful crimes still cannot rely on the police to help, fearing the violence they could instead face.

Rosen's challenge leads readers to see a transformation of the detective, as Evander

Mills goes on to do his job and do it well regardless of his queerness, setting forth an evolved

version of a detective who reinforces social/moral code. Like black and female detectives, gay ones are able to solve crimes, even if they live in a period where their existence is considered criminal.

III. An Enclosed Location, Physically & Socially

"The flowers,' she says. 'Irene always liked having all the flowers around to pick new scents. Lavender was her favorite, though, so we grow that everywhere. That's why we call this place Lavender House.' She pulls the car forward and laughs, deep and throaty. 'Well, and for the other reason'" (Rosen 13).

Historically, the setting of many detective fiction novels have taken place somewhere we can consider "enclosed", whether that be on a train (such as the famous *Murder on the Orient Express* by Agatha Christie), in a single room, or within a small group of individuals. The purpose of this is so that the characters and the reader can experience a story which is separate from the wider politics of "the outside world", as well as isolate the drawing pool of possible suspects. *Lavender House* honors this convention by playing into the country house location type, an isolated place outside of San Francisco, but it does further expand on this concept. Because of its isolation and the people who live in it, it is even further removed from "the outside world". In the Lavender House, which gets its name from the lavender marriage (where a lesbian woman and a gay man marry each other for appearances), is different from the rest of the world because queerness is normalized here, if not more popular than heterosexuality. The social and moral order that is set beyond the gates of the Lavender House does not apply to them, allowing for the family inside to live freely and, up until the events of this book, safely.

However, the threats of "the outside world" don't still loom over residents of the Lavender House. Because so much depends on the Lamontaine family's ability to keep their unconventional lifestyle a secret, they are highly aware and sensitive to possible threats that could expose them. The result of this is feeling trapped and confined to this one safe space. One of the characters who feels this significantly, Cliff, is quoted saying, "Sometimes it feels more like a prison than paradise" (Rosen 32). Evander later reflects on this and thinks, "As long as the world out there stays the same, a paradise like this keeps you in as much as it keeps you safe" (Rosen 232).

Rosen challenges the idea of an enclosed setting being entirely withdrawn from the politics of "the outside world". It might be easy to set such topics aside when one is writing for a detective who is able to set politics aside (i.e. white, male, heterosexual). But diversify the detective and the supporting cast, and it is quickly obvious that distance and isolation from "the outside world" can't push away the fear of law or social judgment.

IV. Oueer Romance & the Femme Fatale

It is more widely seen that romance is not a driving subplot in detective fiction, especially not from the "Golden Age". With the presence of a femme fatale (defined as "an attractive and seductive woman, especially one who is likely to cause distress or disaster to a man who becomes involved with her {Ostberg}), this point escalated, though it is possible to see a fleeting infatuation happening between the detective and a suspect or between two suspects. Rosen challenges this in two ways, once by representing multiple queer romances within *Lavender House* and then also in transforming who the "femme fatale" could be.

In writing about queer characters, one of the key elements to their queerness is their relationships with other queer people, romantic and platonic. So, naturally, there will be queer romance in a novel about queer people. There are a couple of established relationships in *Lavender House*, and these would be between the characters Pearl and Irene, Cliff and Henry, and Elsie and Margo. All three of these relationships are examined and thought out, layered, and reveal the working dynamics which lead to finding out the truth about Irene's murder. While

Evander interacts with a couple of characters in flirtatious moments, he doesn't actually seek out a romantic connection with the residents of Lavender House, which is not the norm when it comes to handsome male detectives. Instead, Rosen uses this license and this opportunity to show Evander's journey with accepting and being open to pursuing deeper connections with other gay men, breaking away finally from his usual fleeting hookup routine. The result of this is the reader seeing what different queer relationships can look like, healthy and not, and learning about the normalcy of them through the eyes of Evander.

This is not to say that there isn't a femme fatale to pinpoint, however, in fact, there are two characters that Rosen wants readers to look at in this circumstance, and those two characters are Cliff and Margo. Neither truly fits into the role of a pure femme fatale at the end of the novel, but we are misled throughout to pin one of them, if not both of them, down as that role at one point or another. Cliff, Henry's long-term boyfriend, tests some flirty limits with Evander, and later Evander questions Cliff's identity when he turns out not to be an orphan, despite stating otherwise (Rosen). Margo, Henry's fake wife and partner to Elsie, is a beautiful young woman with a past tainted by death (Rosen). Both end up being misunderstood characters in their own rights, and not at all as deadly as alluded to originally, but what Rosen does with Cliff and Margo is challenge what a possible femme fatale can appear to be. Margo might be able to be the femme fatale if only Evander were attracted to her, but since that is not the case, she couldn't be for his detective. While Cliff is a man, he would be better suited as the femme fatale in comparison because Evander is attracted to him as a man. The transformation of this "Golden Age" convention not only makes it more inclusive, but also challenges the notion of having a femme fatale entirely.

CONCLUSION

"Despite the attempt to reach a crossover audience, gay/lesbian detective fiction remains ghettoized, unlike mysteries featuring African American and heterosexual women main characters. Furthermore, mainstream bookstores still allocate very little shelf space to gay/lesbian mysteries— either as part of a separate gay section or integrated with other mysteries— and have thereby made it difficult for these books to make their way into the hands of non-gray mystery aficionados. The end result is continued invisibility of this body of literature which, in turn, restricts the visibility of lesbian and gay life as a whole" (Markowitz 6).

Rosen's *Lavender House* is the first of its kind to showcase a gay detective in the genre, and most certainly won't be last, but it does uniquely take other elements of the "Golden Age" of detective fiction and work to make them more inclusive to the queer community. Through making his detective gay, showing the detective's internal and external struggles with being a gay detective, showing how the setting is still greatly affected by the world outside of it, and by giving readers many examples of queer relationships and seeing traditional roles transformed by a character's gender or sexuality, Rosen paints tells a very vivid and layered story about queerness and all that it could possibly encapsulate. Such a feat is important for readers, as detective fiction works so closely to reflect the ever-changing views on what is morally and socially acceptable. Having a gay detective shows us that queerness is not criminal, but rather, can be a source of justice and good. Allowing characters to be affected by the politics surrounding them makes them relatable. Seeing queer relationships normalizes them. Challenging and transforming the "Golden Age" conventions is necessary, if not to keep the genre alive, but also to diversify readers' worldviews.

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JUDGE'S COMMENTS

"Lavender House: Queering 'Golden Age' Detective Fiction"

By Aaliyah Hernandez

Undergraduate
First Place
Critical Analysis

This outstanding first-place paper offers a compelling analysis of Lev A.C. Rosen's Lavender House, exploring how the novel queers "Golden Age" detective fiction and disrupts heteronormative assumptions. The author argues that Rosen subverts conventionalized genre tropes by centering a gay detective, Evander Mills, and reinterpreting key gothic elements—such as the enclosed setting, romantic sub-plots, and the femme fatale—through a queer lens. The paper thoughtfully examines themes of queer inclusivity within broader societal contexts, including historical queer stigmatization and erasure. Well-supported by primary and secondary sources, the paper makes a convincing argument for expanding diversity in detective fiction and promoting greater queer representation in literature.

- Mohamed Karim Dhouib

SECOND PLACE UNDERGRADUATE CRITICAL ANALYSIS

THE CENSORSHIP OF CRITICAL RACE THEORY IN K-12 EDUCATION: A
RHETORICAL ANALYSIS ON ARGUMENTS ABOUT BANNED BOOKS
AND CRT

By Justin Hite

Introduction

n October of 2021, an in-class reading of Kelly Yang's young adult (YA) novel Front Desk was interrupted by a school administrator after the book was banned from the Long Island, New York school district (Greenfield, 2021). The parents who rallied for the book to be removed stated that its themes of critical race theory (CRT) that portray America as a country where everyone is not treated equally represents a form of misinformation that goes against their core beliefs that racism does not exist in America and white privilege does not exist. In an online letter addressed to the school board and other parents in the district, the writers argued that incorporating critical race theory into K-12 education will "basically teach our children to see color and cause great division," implying that a division between races is not already a factor in American society (Yang, 2021). Additionally, the authors' motivation to rally against Front Desk was fueled by their disdain for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and the rhetoric it uses. Blaming the book's publisher Scholastic for supporting books that cover the topic of police brutality and share values of BLM, the letter's authors denounce Scholastic for excluding police officers from their list of "community heroes," and chastises Yang for her negative portrayal of America's law

enforcement system and its treatment of Black Americans. *Front Desk* is one of many YA novels that have been banned from school districts for their usage of critical race theory and controversial portrayal of cops.

In the American Library Association's 2016-2020 study of book bans in the country, being "anti-cop" was the fourth most common reason that a book was removed from a school's curriculum, with "politics" and "racist content" also being labeled as top reasons for bannings (Pottiger, 2022). Each year the number of books challenged in the public education system increases, with 2,571 unique titles being challenged in 2022, which is over a 70 percent increase from the previous year (WordsRated). Though legal cases surrounding book bans have on occasion been brought to the supreme court such as in *Island Trees School District v. Pico* (1982), book bans are primarily dealt with on a local level with verdicts being made by school board members who are elected by parents within their respective district ("Island Trees," n.d.). Thus, the literary material that children receive from their schools are ultimately decided by the political and sociological beliefs of the adult majority in their region, leaving children no control over the content or quality of their education. To exemplify this issue, I engage in a rhetorical analysis to exemplify the strategies used by those against critical race theory.

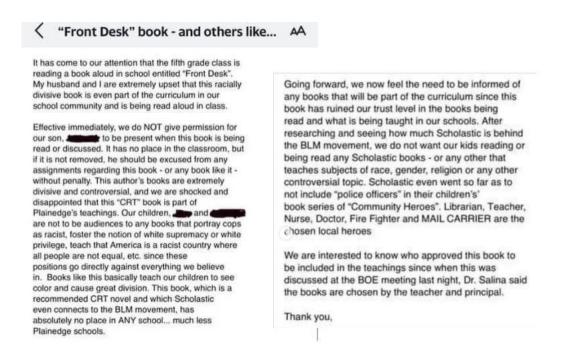
Particularly, in this essay, I argue that book banning has been used as a weapon by conservative parents and school board members against people of color and other marginalized communities. By studying the rhetoric used by Anti-CRT perpetrators of book bans in America to analyze the outrage against authors such as Yang, I will address how the argument that book bans protect the innocence of children is a form of misdirection used to protect an education system that perpetuates white supremacy and unfairly prevents children from learning about the racist reality and history of the country they live in depending on the popular political beliefs of their region of residence.

Additionally, I explore how this censorship and lack of education regarding racial issues in America will enable the further marginalization of racial minorities due to the lack of representation surrounding racial issues that will result in the ignorance of future generations of voters, school board members, and parents. Finally, I will discuss how the federal government's lack of intervention regarding book bans is an indirect act which supports the censorship of critical race theory in America, which will result in the continued marginalization of non-white cisgender heterosexual Americans (Webb, 2023). Overall, the purpose of this essay is to highlight the controversies that are impacting historically marginalized groups and to counter the dominant narratives that tend to perpetuate continuous censorship by removing resources such as literary works.

The Rhetorical Situation

Book banning has had a presence in American society since the 17th century. In 1637, Thomas Morton's New English Canaan, a "harsh and heretical critique of Puritan customs and power structures" was the first American novel to be explicitly banned in the country, apparently for spreading harmful rhetoric that challenged the popular sociological and political beliefs of the time (Taub, 2019). Interestingly, the reasoning that motivated the first ever American book ban is strikingly similar to the rhetoric used to justify CRT censorship in public education today. Though book banning has not become a mainstream topic of discussion until the 21st century, it has always been enforced to "protect" potential readers", from ideas that are too far beyond what society can accept at the time. With hundreds of books being challenged each year, times of heightened political discourse and hysteria surrounding the innocence of American children have magnified book banning rates, with a notable increase every year since 2021. In the 21st century, among the most common reasons for book bans in American school districts are "racial issues," "political bias," and "violence or negativity" (Haupt, 2022). However, these vague guidelines surrounding what literature is or is not appropriate for a school classroom leaves the responsibility of interpretation to the likes of board members and parents within an individual district. Therefore, due to favored political beliefs varying depending on the region in which one lives in, children across America receive vastly differing education based on factors which they cannot control. Because of this, those who live in primarily conservative areas are unlikely to be exposed to books such as *Front Desk* which negatively portray law enforcement and American capitalism compared to more socialist regions because these systems are what maintain the power of conservative bodies (Meehan, et al., 2023). Additionally, in politically moderate areas, though some books may initially get approved by school boards and be implemented into a school curriculum, parents who object against a book's presence in their child's education may rally others against it and pressure board members into complying with their demands.

To highlight this issue, I will examine a letter written by parents who discussed these issues that derive from conservative values and beliefs. The letter that resulted in Yang's novel being banned from the aforementioned Long Island school district used tactics such as intimidation to persuade the school board into complying with the authors' politically-charged demands. With the genre of the text being an online social media post, the parents who wrote the letter relied on the like minded support of other parents within the district to amplify the outrage against Yang's writing and increase the pressure of the board members and employees at the school. Furthermore, being a social media post suggests that the authors possessed the ability to prevent those who would disagree with their claims from engaging with their post. Thus, by cultivating an online community consisting of correlative opinions the authors can legitimize their argument by ensuring that the response to this post was strictly positive. With the authors stating how they are "interested to know who approved this book to be included in the teachings [of our children]," an indirect threat against the jobs of those in support of Front *Desk* was created, intensifying the urgency for a quick and compliant response by the school. Out of a fear of further outrage, and a desire to dissipate the anger of these parents, the district quickly removed Yang's novel from all schools under their jurisdiction.



This hasty and successful attempt to censor CRT in public education is only one of countless situations that will encourage similar attempts in the future. 3923 titles have been challenged from January 1st to August 31st in 2023, which is over a 52 percent increase from the 2571 titles that were challenged the previous year ("Book Ban Data," 2023). Though the reason for this sharp increase in book bans may seem unclear, this unprecedented phenomenon of censorship can be credited to ongoing political conflicts happening within the U.S. Because rhetoric used to counter current social justice movements such as BLM can also be seen within the arguments utilized to censor CRT in public education, one can draw connections between the rhetoric used against the fight for racial equity and the rhetoric used to support book banning.

While the authors were successful in achieving their primary goal of removing Yang's novel from their children's curriculum, it is important to consider secondary purposes that motivated the creation of this letter. The mention of BLM in addition to the authors' denial of the existence of white supremacy and police brutality in America suggests that the letter was a sort of response to the political climate that was sparked by the rise of Black American deaths

caused by police officers in 2020 and the surrounding years ("People shot," 2023). During the time of protests and riots calling for the defunding of the police, the authors' anger against Yang's portrayal of cops likely stems from the ideology popularized by BLM that the American government perpetuates racism and that law enforcement does not value the lives of Black people. From the authors' desire to prevent their children from learning about police brutality and white supremacy, it can be concluded that they believe that people of color are not marginalized in American society and that calls for racial equity are an unfair villainization of white Americans. Therefore, the exigency of the authors' letter comes from a perceived attack against white Americans and an attempt to strip away their political equality. In addition to banning *Front Desk* from their district, the authors' purpose was to discredit BLM and protect the rights and privileges of white Americans. Through a rhetorical analysis of this letter, I will expose the inconsistencies that diminish the credibility of the authors' arguments.

The Rhetorical Analysis

Perhaps the most obvious falsity that can be observed within this letter comes from the authors' belief that racism and white privilege do not exist in America. While the authors argue that Yang is spreading misinformation about America in *Front Desk* with its negative portrayal of the American government and police force, it is hard to support this argument when it is taken into account that Yang's novel is based on a true story, more specifically her own story about coming to America with her parents from China. Throughout the text Yang shares how being an immigrant, a person of color, poor and a non-native English speaker were all obstacles that prevented her and her family from achieving the "American Dream," no matter how hard they worked. Though the "American Dream" is marketed as easily attainable to anyone willing to put in the effort, Yang shares how she learned that America provides little support to people like her through the narrative of a ten year old girl named Mia Tang. Instead, the American power systems and social norms served as obstacles for Mia and her family, with low wages

and public education being major sources of stress and anxiety for the Tangs due to their wealthier and non-immigrant peers receiving preferential treatment. In addition to the struggles of American immigrants, Yang also includes themes of police corruption in *Front Desk* such as when a Black man is wrongfully accused of a robbery and loses his job because of it, or when the same man is arrested for protecting Mia's mother from physical assault. Though these events in the novel are based on real experiences from Yang's personal life as an Asian immigrant in America, the authors of the letter completely disregard this aspect in order to further their argument that racism does not exist in the country. By disregarding the non-fiction elements of Yang's text, the parents insinuate that Yang is fabricating the events that take place in *Front Desk*, and therefore imply that similar situations do not occur in the real world. It is possible that this belief originates from the authors' lack of experience witnessing racism in their own lives, it should be considered whether these were intentional rhetorical decisions made out of self-preservation.

Those who are not marginalized in America gain the most privilege and advantage over others in the country. Because of this, privileged individuals often see the methodologies behind movements such as CRT and BLM as threats to their own well being because they seek to gain retribution for marginalized racial groups in the country. Therefore, it is in the best interest of the privileged to discredit these movements in order to protect their privilege. The authors spreading the belief that racism and white privilege do not exist could in reality be a tactic to prevent the dismantling of white privilege in America.

Of course, the logical next question is how book banning and censorship of CRT assists the continuation of white privilege. This question is easily answered when one considers who book banning affects. While children in K-12 education are mostly unable to participate in politics due to being below voting age, these students make up the future generation of voters who are currently the most important demographic for conservative politicians to appeal to. As

younger generations of voters continue to largely support the democratic party in each election, it is sensible that conservative parents and school board members would attempt to influence education in order to skew younger voters in favor of the republican party. Through the censorship of racial issues in America and a lack of education on the history of systematic racism in America, schools in primarily conservative districts support the popular anti-CRT belief that systematic racism, white privilege, white supremacy, and police brutality are nonfactors in America. Furthermore, by reinforcing these beliefs conservative influences on public education can simultaneously discredit the ideologies that movements such as BLM are founded on. Though BLM seeks to highlight the injustices faced by Black Americans at the hands of the government and police force, students are unlikely to believe the claims made by BLM leaders or support their cause if they have never received education on what modern day racism looks like through literature.

Due to the involvement of BLM in the authors' letter, it is imperative to analyze how similar rhetoric is used both to challenge books in education and to attack BLM and the rhetoric behind it. By applying similar logic against two separate matters, the authors are able to gain the support of those against BLM for their objections against CRT and Yang's Front Desk, effectively applying the concept of affective drift. Similar to how rhetors against BLM argue that the outrage around police brutality is overly dramatized and that racial equity has already been enacted in America, the authors of this letter argue that CRT is unnecessary in literature because "America is [not] a racist country." Though these arguments fail to acknowledge the shamefully racist history of the United States, they do imply that because legislation has granted equal rights to all citizens regardless of their race or gender that racism no longer needs to be addressed by the government or the education system. These statements are undeniably incorrect. The reality of racism within the country goes beyond simple legislation and requires further attention in order to reverse the effects of America's racist history (Soken, n.d.). Whether through events such as the murder of Breonna Taylor and law enforcement's protection of the police of-ficer responsible, or the barriers that non-white immigrants face when trying to enter the coun-

try, racism is still a huge contributing factor to the climate of American society, and it is incorrect to deny this fact ("Breonna Taylor," n.d.).

Finally, it is important to consider the rhetoric behind the decisions of school boards regarding book bans. Although it is easy to assign all of the blame on the parents who wrote the letter protesting Yang's Front Desk, one can gain valuable insight by investigating the school's willingness to comply with the censorship of Yang's text. Through the official banning of Front Desk, the school district's compliance with these parents' demands is essentially an agreement that discussing the challenges that racial minorities face is unnecessary and inappropriate for an audience of students in public education (Montaño & Gallagher, 2022). Though no official statement regarding the book was addressed by the school, the banning of Front Desk serves as an announcement to parents that the district is willing to favor conservative beliefs regarding racial issues instead of progressive ones. Additionally, because the censorship of CRT is a common occurrence in American K-12 education, every school district that allows literature that empowers marginalized voices such as Yang's to be silenced reinforces the white supremacist belief that racial minorities do not inherently deserve representation, which is problematic in a country that prides itself on its status as a cultural "melting pot." While school boards are meant to optimize the learning experiences of the students within their respective districts, it is apparent that too much control is given to these local legislatures. With how book banning has unfairly affected literature that uplifts marginalized voices, it is obvious how the personal prejudice of parents and board members is taking precedence over quality of education in these decisions. Therefore, it is essential that federal legislation is made to protect literature that includes commonly banned themes such as CRT and address the belief that CRT is inherently prejudiced against white Americans.

Additionally, extra measures must be taken to accommodate for the injustices that marginalized groups have faced due to racially targeted book banning. In order to appropriately uplift these commonly underrepresented groups in public education, procedural justice must be

enacted through federally mandated inclusion of books in public education that focus on the experiences of marginalized groups in America. While school boards should be given control over a certain amount of texts utilized within their respective districts, it must not be possible for these texts to be banned due to their inclusion of social justice rhetoric regarding critical race theory. Neera Tanden, Director of the United States Domestic Policy Council, states "Book banning erodes our democracy, removes vital resources for student learning, and can contribute to stigma and isolation," which encapsulates why book banning must be abolished on a federal level (Ordoñez, 2023).

Conclusion

Ultimately, the ambiguous nature and guidelines by which book bans are allowed to be orchestrated has resulted in a disproportionate amount of bans on books involving CRT. Though books with CRT themes serve to educate students on the prominence and effects of racism in America today, conservative parents and board members have portrayed CRT as a form of propaganda that teaches students false information regarding the political climate of America. However, it is important to note the possibility that these bans are in reality used to purposefully prevent children from learning the reality of the country they live in, and in turn become ignorant to the prominence of racism in America. Because of heightened political tension in the country due to events such as the killing of Breonna Taylor and the prominence of socialist movements such as BLM, it is likely that conservative parents and board members use book bans as a method to skew the material used in public education to be more conservatively focused, which will not only turn the public resource of education into a political weapon, but will additionally hinder the quality of young students' education. Therefore, it is essential that federal intervention is taken in order to protect the involvement of critical race theory in public education.

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Reflection

This paper contains an in-depth rhetorical analysis while also arguing the point that book banning is used by Conservative parents to censor marginalized authors. I chose this paper as my writing sample because it represents my values as both a student and a human. As a student, I appreciate the concision that is demonstrated in this paper. A large amount of evidence was included without taking away from the analysis which creates an argument that is both nuanced and trustworthy. Additionally, I analyze social media posts to deconstruct the rhetoric surrounding book banning and dissect the political subtext that fuels the book banning movement. Despite social media being an unconventional form of media to include in an academic paper, I am satisfied with my decision to focus on it because it would be negligent to ignore the most popular media kind of outlet when discussing current events in American culture. Because the books discussed in my essay were banned recently, I discussed how factors such as the Black Lives Matter and Stop Asian Hate movements and the injustices that inspired them were likely related to the outrage against books that acknowledged the existence of racism. Throughout my academic career I have developed my ability to understand cultural context and I do not shy away from using unconventional sources in order to broaden my view on a situation before writing about it. As someone who is extremely interested in social justice and equity work, I hope to focus on current issues in graduate school and conduct research in a way that continues to challenge my current understanding of the world.

The Censorship of Critical Race Theory in K-12 Education:

A Rhetorical Analysis on Arguments about Banned Books and CRT

By Justin Hite

Undergraduate Second Place Critical Analysis

This paper presents a good rhetorical analysis that critically examines the censorship of critical race theory (CRT) in K-12 education across the United States. The author integrates diverse forms of evidence, such as social media discourse and statistical data, to contend that conservative-led initiatives to ban books like Kelly Yang's Front Desk are primarily aimed at preserving white privilege and silencing marginalized non-white voices. The analysis is layered and perceptive, exposing the political and cultural underpinnings of book bans while highlighting the inconsistencies within anti-CRT rhetoric. With a well-organized structure and a carefully constructed argument, the paper thoughtfully explores the intersection of education, race, and politics. A compelling and polished work, it is a deserving second-place winner.

- Mohamed Karim Dhouib

FIRST PLACE GRADUATE POETRY

ANA CASTILLO ME ABRAZA CADA VEZ QUE LA LEYÓ

By Andrea Martinez

María

María la quien tu querías

Exotic dream of heavy-lidded eyes. Puzzled words, pillowed lips.

Apparatus rooted in assimilation. soy tu das ewig-weibliche

Sound of your own fist made your head throb, concealed by

a singing ripping through my throat; I trust the voices that join

Es la Celia

Chavela

Natalia y más.

Es Paquita la de Barrio

Que descanse en paz (así sea)

Your definition of critical thinking nearly killed me at fifteen

Our feet tap in different ways. Mine have always been bigger

So, I have always been louder. Shortest in my family,

The fall will be minimal when they bring out the axe.

Do not mistake

my brown for victimhood

but some self-reflection

surely would not hurt

Whistle your tune to the empty cage. Asi seguimos-tercas

como mi abuelo. With constellations scattered on his flesh

An asteroid took him out years ago. Undone like a ball of yarn.

My hands are no good at making, but they held you like a dish

Before the plunge. Witness to your baptism.

Mi padre era Tolteca

Chicano real cool

Vato Loco ya tú sabes

If you know what that means- to be a daughter of this
I suggest that you read Ana Castillo, but with caution.
my mother's arm, like clay - adobe ovens abuela made.
Learning love always comes with a burn. Do these seeds
count as generational wealth? My ancestors were Jack Pines too.
And you would never understand until a man looks at you
Con ojos que ven a La Virgen handing over a hot plate
With calloused fingertips.

Ay Ay Ay.

Ana Castillo Me Abraza Cada Vez Que La Leyo By Andrea Martinez

Graduate

First Place

Poetry

This homage to Ana Castillo is written with a strong voice in two languages. Clearly connected to their poetic and cultural lineages, this poet displays both their lyric grace and intellectual prowess. This poem joins a multi-generational chorus of feminist voices and embodies Xicanisma. The surprises, the moments of lyric exploration, and the experimental form are all executed in a way that make me want to return to this poem again and again.

- Brent Ameneyro

SECOND PLACE GRADUATE POETRY

CERSIA
By Austin Aragona

Nana's tears slid like raindrops down a window pane, Connecting to the streaking water that pooled In the shower basin. Her tears did the same in the ceramic Sink, and, while she gardened, they soaked the soil for her orchids. She always came back with a houseplant From the grocery store. She found that the life dependent on Her cancer-blotched hands were what made her grow, too. The frog's back in her garden soon glistened with her tears, And then finally arrived in the Florida air that sticks. She was once Mayor *Pro Tempore*, you know. La Palma, CA. Dairyland, Disneyland, Knott's Berry Farm. She was A Democrat. She was Woman of the Year in California. 2001. Now, there's a shrine dedicated to President Trump Above their piano. Her son thinks it's because his father brainwashed her. Here's part of a letter she wrote To Florida Times-Union in 2009: I wish people would stop the foolishness of "political correctness" and just appreciate everyone's traditions. Just smile and say thank you to anyone who wishes you a "happy" day however they express it! Now she thinks Putin has invaded Maine. Her grandfather was a lighthouse keeper In Portland. He can't guide her through the fog anymore.

Nana's son is a general contractor. He said he loves his job

Because he and the homeowners have a vision.

When he materializes the vision from the ground

He watches their faces. He watches their eyebrow

And smile wrinkles crack from their frowning

Position and transition into awe. He has made their dream.

Nana's daughter is an MD. When the daughter was young

She had a horse named Cersia. Her and her brother

Would ride Cersia, a beautiful Quarter whose brown

Hair matched the ember-lit mud, and whose muscles

Looked like tectonic plates on a world not tainted.

Back at the stalls, one dull, February morning,

The daughter heard a loud wail travel the woods.

Through the trees in the forest she ran to Cersia–

Mimicking the horse as she had been running just before.

When she found her, Cersia was on the ground, trying to rise,

With her left hind-ankle in the wrong direction.

A large mud pit had fallen beneath itself.

Nana's daughter vowed to never feel powerless again.

Nana asked me if I remembered Cersia.

I am not your son, I wanted to say, but instead

I said yes. She asked me if I remembered the way

Cersia would run through the trees with her nose high.

How she would gallop on the canopy and upwards

Towards the clouds. Beyond the blue and into the dark

Where you can see the stars in the reflection of her eyes.

Beyond the dark into the nothing as well as everything.

My Nana said: She was trying to reach the end

Of the fog, my son, and you will not hear her cry.

CERSIA

By Austin Aragona

Graduate

Second Place

Poetry

The poem "Cersia" tells a common story of a 21st century privileged American family, one that includes sick grandparents in Florida who are susceptible to conspiracy theories and corrupt political ideologies. The speaker neither idolizes nor despises the aging person who lies at the heart of the poem—the "nana"—but rather acts as an almost omniscient observer who catalogs the lives of the people in this family. The speaker is both in the story and outside of it. What is most compelling about this poem is the way the poet moves down the page, jumping from the nana's life story to the stories of other family members, all while using fog as a metaphor for cognitive decline.

- Brent Ameneyro

FIRST PLACE UNDERGRADUATE POETRY

LA BARCA, JALISCO

By Pilar Avina

And while I sit in class, listening to my Professor speak about Anaya, Rechy, and all the other amazing influential Chicanos

All I can really think about is what the soil in La Barca, Jalisco, smells like

If the sky is as blue as the rivers that flow beneath it

I imagine my old self, 4 year old girl, playing outside with my grandmas dog who didn't even like my presence

But it all felt right

Being an immigrant, who can't visit, shatters my heart every time I think of this

But all I can do is visualize it through the eyes of others

Others like Anaya, stepping into his thoughts, his stories, his experiences

To understand what I am missing out on within my culture

Para entender por qué mi gente luchó tan duro como lo hizo

Lucho pa poder ir a la escuela sin que alguien que les diga algo

Pa poder tener libertad y no ser separados de nuestras familias

Visualizing my hometown through videos, pictures, stories

En mi mente me veo, jugando con el perro de mi abuelita al que ni siquiera le gustaba mi presencia

Pero todo se sentía bien

Queriendo quedarme en ese mismo tiempo

But that 4 year old girl sits in time

Because she is now 22

Filled with thoughts that are only memories

Filling the gaps through the conversations of others...

"Would someone like to read chapter one of Bless Me Ultima?"

La Barca, Jalisco By Pilar Avina

Undergraduate

First Place

Poetry

Code-switching is more than just moving from one language to another, it is a complex, conscious and subconscious phenomenon that involves negotiating two cultures simultaneously. In the poem "La Barca, Jalisco," the speaker captures this experience in an environment that can be especially challenging for immigrants: the classroom. The poet effectively conveys longing for a place, for a culture, for a home that can only be visited in memory.

- Brent Ameneyro

SECOND PLACE UNDERGRADUATE POETRY

A FRIEND I MADE IN THE WAR

By Marcos Estrada

"Only the dead have seen the end of war". General Douglas MacArthur

I was trained to be a machine, to not feel a thing never showing remorse to what happened to Frank

(an Afghan soldier whose name I never knew)

I turned 23 that summer, in a war torn land,

where mud huts surrounded the perimeter of our base.

Preparing my station inside of the medical tent where I

lived for 9 months

Tourniquets. Gauze. IV bags. Morphine.

the necessary ingredients for a young Corpsman like me

We had a plywood made floor, the plastic of the tent covering

the tan color of the wood. It was so fragile

Any slight movement felt like an earthquake.

Suddenly the floor rattled. Shook

as the loud booms we heard in the distance inched closer and closer

Until BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

The screams tagging along.

"Take shelter, we are being attacked by mortars!"

Yelled the Four Star General inside the loud speaker.

I strap on my 100 pound gear, rifle in hand.

Clicking it to Fire,

with a medical bag on my back

I Run to a small shelter of concrete slabs,

where mortars rain from hell above.

Those six hours felt like six minutes

I walk out of the concrete haven

The smell of ammonia. Petrichor, Burnt metal

Lingering in the air, with an eerie silence all around us

I walk back to the medical tent, but along the path

I see frozen eyes. Limbs with no owner. Intestines and brains

Scattered on the reddened sand.

I enter the tent drop my gear, and then I met Frank

Brought in by soldiers. His blood dripping like a faucet with a bad leak

Onto our floors,

his body thuds on top of my gurney

Wrapped like a burrito from a taqueria

I unwrap Frank slowly,

His eyes frozen. Left side of his head missing

A tennis ball sized hole exposing his brain.

I clean Frank up and put a chux pad under his head

As his brain flops out of his hole

gliding aimlessly onto the floor.

I pick up his brain and stuff it back in,

then run outside to vomit last week's MRE.

I go back to wrap up my friends head with gauze

To prepare him for his final departure.

Frank must have known I returned his brain

Probably still on his mind. Cause as he thinks of me

he sees me in a dark room, with no visibility

but as I see him, he is standing at the foot of my bed

Head tilted to the side. Battle dressed. Blood Dripping

As I still taste the metal,

smell the aroma of the sand all around me.

Frank is dead, as I try to convince

my PTSD that Frank is still dead.

A Friend I Made in the War

By Marcos Estrada

Graduate

Second Place

Poetry

War poetry has served many purposes over the course of civilization. It is as old as poetry itself. The mental health diagnosis of PTSD, however, is only about half a century old, which leaves plenty of room for fresh exploration from a craft perspective, and plenty of hope for healing from a human one. Stanley Kunitz once said that poets are the most intimate relators of what it means to be a living person on this earth. The poem "A Friend I Made in the War" tells a heartbreaking story that portrays many aspects of the human experience, from suffering and violence to empathy and the pursuit of inner peace. It is not easy to successfully implement onomatopoeia or gruesome imagery in a poem, but this poet manages to do both in this powerful narrative.

- Brent Ameneyro

FIRST PLACE GRADUATE SHORT FICTION

FLESH PANIC
By Wren Hoggan

melia, sloppy body packed into a rented red convertible, had found her way roaring down the interstate, passing the splatter of an unfortunate cyclist and a congregation of emergency vehicles which she paid no mind, instead enamored with the static roar of fuzzy desert radio, some portions of signal lost along the way – And I wanna be your dog / Well, come on / And now I'm ready to close my eyes. She was, in alternating bursts, overly meek and too abrasive, never quite committed to one character; those who interacted with her in the incidental fashion found her to be sweet and perfectly reasonably; it was those who knew her well that found themselves with mixed impressions. The burden of a long history with someone was that it gave them more and more chance to accrue negative moments to the point of breaking, and it left them to sort through the pastiches of a million different versions of a single individual. She could never seem to find the balance of honesty and deception that would make someone fall in love with her.

She was going to visit an aunt. She had a cousin that had died. She found out only through an unexpected afternoon voicemail: "Um, Amelia. Hello. This is... it's me. I wanted you to know, I was going through Cynthia's room. I had found something that was for you. I hate to ask you to come all the way here, I know it's been a while. But... it would be nice. Anyways call me when you can, okay, bye."

She hadn't seen her cousin in, she thought, eleven or twelve years, not since childhood. Her aunt she had seen once or twice at her mother's house more recently, although she was also a part of a distant past. She confirmed some details in a brief phone call: Cynthia had died and her aunt didn't want to talk about how, just that she'd been having some difficulties as of late – an ugly breakup and a growing malaise towards a retail job in the nearest town – and whatever it was that she had for her was something that, frustratingly, her aunt hedged around speaking of on the phone. She merely said, "I think it would be best if you came in person," towards both further inquiries and the idea that this mysterious something could be sent by mail.

Amelia remembered with some regret a snippet of a phone conversation that had occurred with her mother during their period of falling out (an incident that she didn't think of much anymore – her mother told her grandmother a lot of things about her that she did not want her to know), in the weeks before a rare planned family reunion which had ultimately never manifested due to her absence:

"Cousin Cynthia is really looking forward to seeing you, Mel," her mother had told her.

"Well that's just lovely," she had said at the time, intending to sound entirely sweet – although later she found that this had been construed as a jab.

She fell into a period of estrangement with the concept of family as a whole; the process by which her friends seemed to have entirely normal relationships with their relatives had seemed to be entirely arcane. Over the intervening years, she made some paltry efforts to meet her mother halfway, but had found her effort scorned every time. They fell out of contact until her mother's death. Which was in a car accident, she was thinking, as she drove the rented convertible down the highway; the ridiculous car was a conciliatory gesture from her aunt, who had told her that the best advice which she'd ever gotten was to rent a convertible every once in a while. Because, the fact of the matter was, she claimed, that owning one was too expensive and

impractical, but renting one let you get all the fun for a weekend. Her aunt called her, rented it on her behalf, and told her to take it down to visit her. Insisted. Amelia had some reticence about the need, but found herself enjoying it nonetheless.

Her aunt lived in a ranch house in the desert, and Amelia had to take several laps around the same stretch of highway trying to find the correct obscure gravel turn-off; it was a horribly bumpy road in, and as she bounced along it, she found herself drifting towards the past, towards the last time she went to her aunt's house, for a family get-together which she had ultimately mostly forgotten until now. Her parents always complained during the drive to her aunt's house, bemoaned her unreasonable choice to live in the middle of the desert (her aunt had decided to move back homeward, much to everyone's chagrin, after her husband disappeared in the throes of a marital spat), her father grumbling about how little he desired to return to his home state of Nevada, griped because they knew they would arrive and Cynthia would still be getting ready for them, because she was habitually late and disorganized.

But when they'd arrived that day, they found her perfectly ready with a child that none of them knew sitting on the couch next to Cynthia. At least, it was Amelia's assumption at the time that her parents also did not know the child. Her father had been momentarily stunned when they first walked in, pulled her aunt aside, and had a whispered conversation that was not at all quiet.

"Who's this?" he asked.

"Her name's Layla," she said.

"But who is she?"

"She's... well... shit, you know."

"I can't — I honestly can't fucking *believe* you," he said, and it was the first time she'd ever heard her father swear. And her aunt looked her right in the eye, saw her watching them,

and said something low to him and they went into the other room.

Her mother grabbed her hand and they sat next to Layla and Cynthia, and her mother asked Layla the kinds of questions adults ask children. Like, what grade are you in, or how old are you, or what's your favorite subject in school? But Layla seemed vaguely angry and not really interested. So, her mother suggested the kids go outside and play and they did.

Feeling dislocated, as one does when they're in a place they know very well but haven't been to in years, she walked up the cobblestone pathway to her aunt's door. It still looked exactly the same, but everything wore a brand-new veneer of age. The white paint on the slats of the house was chipping off, revealing the grey beneath, and her garden gnomes (which Amelia found, frankly, creepy) were overgrown with moss and covered in grime, and the yard had become long and tangled with weeds. The blinds were closed. It was so quiet out in the desert; no birds there, no traffic, no electrical hum of the city. It was still.

The off-season wreath on her aunt's door had fallen off, so she bent over and replaced it. She knocked. Her Aunt answered; they exchanged some pleasantries, some words alluding to how long it had been since they had last seen each other, and she was invited in for coffee.

Her aunt was bedraggled; she supposed it was to be expected after the sudden death of a child. Or maybe it was just the span of years between the last time she saw her and now. Likely, it was both those things. Her hair had gone grey; it was still soft and wavy and beautiful, but it was grey and split at the ends and getting thinner. She had new wrinkles and new bags beneath her eyes, and her face looked tired and not-so-gently worn. Or was it the lack of makeup? She used to wear so much makeup, but now had none on.

They sat on a couch, the same couch from years before but now sheathed and wrapped in uncomfortable plastic, and drank coffee. They were awkwardly quiet for a long time.

"You look very different," her aunt finally said. Then, after another pause, "Beautiful.

Don't get me wrong."

"Thanks," Amelia said. She knew her aunt probably disapproved; her parents certainly did. New body and a collection of tattoos and piercings, dyed hair; she had become profoundly different from the strange and shy person she was.

"I mean it, you look gorgeous."

"Mmm. Okay. How are you doing?"

"I'm doing."

"She... was young. I get it. It's horrible. How... or, can I ask?"

"It's fine. I haven't really told anyone. She was *so* young, one of her dad's old guns. I didn't even want to take it with me when we moved, but I didn't want to throw it out. It was a mess," she said. Her breath shuttered and hitched as she spoke, but she wasn't crying. She was running her hands together in her lap, and couldn't quite look her niece in the eyes. Childhood room with a splatter; the image ran through her head, ceiling fan dislocated by a stray bullet, and the collection of things she had found under her bed.

"Fuck."

Amelia was in the yard with Layla and Cynthia. She'd suggested playing tag, but neither of them were really interested. Layla was talking about stealing from the liquor cabinet, but both Cynthia and her were doubtful. They were standing on a solitary lawn that stood in defiance of the desert; well-kept, mowed, watered to an overt degree to keep the ornamental grass alive in the dry summer heat. It was sunny.

"Don't be children. We do it all the time at dad's, they won't even know. Just cut the rest with water," Layla said.

"Who is your dad?" Cynthia asked a little breathlessly, without much consideration.

There was a long, wide silence. Amelia was crouched in the grass looking for ladybugs, only vaguely listening. She liked to collect them as a kid, liked to tear out grass and make a little home for the ladybugs, a nest of compressed grass and flowers for them to run around in. Little constructions in the desert, in the field at her elementary school, in the backyard of her house in California. She thought she was doing them a great favor. Would buoy the dome with sticks, twigs, pencils. She considered in the present day that she never seemed to see ladybugs anymore, not in a very long time. She remembered, distinctly, watching them clump and crowd the middle of the make-shift nests, and wondered now thinking back on it if they weren't suffocating in there.

"Frank. My dad is Frank," Layla said.

"Are we related?" Cynthia asked.

"I think she's my mom," Layla said.

Amelia remembered thinking that something in Layla's eyes looked weird. She didn't wash her hair enough; it was oily and long, came down in clumped straight strands, like butcher's twine. She had fat cheeks but was thin, and had looked a little red the whole day and wouldn't stop balling her fists as she walked. Cynthia didn't say anything.

"Whatever, let's just play tag I guess," Layla said.

Layla played rough, but so did Amelia. They both liked to trip and kick and scratch, but there was nothing malicious in it. Just kids having fun, practicing their first instances of violence, still learning what exactly it meant to be violent towards someone else. Cynthia hated it, found herself thinking about it again, in later years, every once in a while. Layla and Amelia had liked playing together, felt that there was something between them that drove them to exclude Cynthia; Cynthia was a shy little girl, but so was Amelia. Amelia just knew how to fake it every once in a while, knew how to put on a brave face, knew how to get messy on occasion; at

school, at home, she was quiet and awkward and withdrawn but she realized that out there, separated from everything she conventionally knew, she was allowed to be whoever she wanted, didn't have to worry about being any kind of way, and eventually agreed to swipe the liquor with Layla, although the plan was later foiled when Cynthia tattled on them.

In the living room, on the couch wrapped in plastic, Amelia sipped burnt coffee that came from the percolator. She was thinking about how her aunt's house smelled like Lysol.

"Some people, I read some people won't even go into the room. I've been reading a lot online... forums and things. How to live with it. I was supposed to go to a support group thing, but it was too much of a drive anyways. It makes me think of my father – he was never in any support group for anything. I don't think anyone was back then. They made it by okay, didn't they?" her aunt said.

"Maybe," she said, "I don't know. That generation kind of got fucked up, didn't they?"

"Not in my house, not that kind of language," her aunt scolded, rolling her eyes. She looked down and sipped, let the thought pass, didn't say anything. "Anyways, forget it. Cynthia talked about you a lot, you know? She wanted to see you again. Said she... admired you, everything you did. I don't know. She liked it when you came over, when you were kids and would hang out together in her room. Maybe it would've helped; I told her you were too far anyways, and the family was all too split up. I mean, you probably didn't think about her that much, did you?"

"I... well no, I guess I didn't. I don't know. Maybe things should've been different."

"Could have."

"Hey, can I ask you something?"

"What?"

"Last time we were here there was that girl, Layla. Who was she? Where's she now?"

"Who?"

Amelia looked away. Frowned. "Never mind."

Cynthia had gone inside. Amelia was sitting with Layla, on the bench, watching the sunset, and neither of them fully knew why they insisted on sitting outside together while everyone else was inside eating dinner. She remembered Layla grabbed her hand. Nevada was so different from home; patches and valleys of desert separated by gulfs and mountain roads, and it all looked the exact same for hundreds of miles. Sand and brush and shrubs, fences, sometimes cattle, occasionally a ranch house like the one her aunt lived in – it stretched, and then climbed hills, and sometimes Amelia wondered what was beyond those hills, past the highways and roads; presumably, more desert.

"Why are we holding hands?" she asked.

"Because, I'm a girl and you're a boy. That's what we're supposed to do when it's like this," Layla said.

Amelia curled into herself a little; didn't know, at the time, why that had made her so uncomfortable.

"Do you want to kiss me?" Layla asked.

"No thank you," she said.

"It's just a kiss. Why not? Am I pretty?"

"I just... don't want to."

"Why are you such a wimp?"

"I don't know."

Layla kissed her anyways.

"Well," her aunt said, "do you want to stay for dinner?"

"I don't think I can. I have work, and it's a long drive back."

"You can stay the night, if you want. Leave in the morning."

"Sorry, but I don't think that that's going to work for me."

"Okay. Well... here, follow me. I'll show you what she left for you."

Her aunt stood up, and then she did. The lights everywhere else in the house were turned off, and she seemed reluctant to turn them on; they walked down a dim hallway only illuminated by the light that bled in from the living room. Nails and small holes in the wall stood as reminders of the photographs that she knew her aunt must've taken down, although she couldn't imagine why. The walls were barren now. They went past the bathroom, which was closed, and past her aunt's bedroom, which was closed, and past the room where they'd left things that accumulated that didn't fit anywhere else in the house, which was also closed. Then there was Cynthia's bedroom, and the door was cracked open.

She followed her aunt in. She hadn't been in Cynthia's room for years, but she remembered it was painted pink and was filled with the expected sundry artifacts of a young girl — dolls, toys, posters, whatever. Now, it was barren. No bed, no nightstand, no drawers — completely empty. It was painted grey; a stepladder, a paint roller, and a tray suggested that it was recent. There was a hole now where the ceiling fan was. Plaster patches were there where recent damage was repaired. A large square section was cut out of the carpet. The only suggestion that someone used to live here was a plastic tub full of things, with a few articles stacked on top of it in the corner. Her aunt walked over, grabbed a wooden box, and extended it to her. It was old, polished wood with some dents and scratchers in it; a decorative groove ran around the top, and there was a brass latch on the front.

Amelia took it, almost reverentially, with both hands. She held it, and then unlatched it

and opened it. There was nothing inside, just sanded wood.

She looked at her aunt, confused.

"She wanted to give you the box."

"Oh? Okay. Well... thank you."

"She said you'd understand."

"That's very sweet."

They returned to the living room, and she finished her coffee without talking much. She must have been there for not even an hour yet, and they spent most of it just sipping from their mugs. She kept looking at the box, which she set on the glass coffee table. Maybe it terrified her, too much, to think about it. When she finished her coffee, she stood up.

"I should get going," she said.

"I'd really like it if you stayed," her aunt said.

"I'm sorry. I've gotta be going."

She walked to the door, stepped outside, and her aunt caught her for a few last goodbyes. Suggested she come back and Amelia lied and said she would. Tried to ask her about her father and some more personal things, asked her, "Are you doing okay? With your mother and everything?" but Amelia repeated that she had to go and made it final.

She walked down the gravel path to the convertible. Her aunt ran after her, holding the box.

"You almost forgot it."

"Oh. Thank you."

She packed herself again into the red rented convertible. It looked so ridiculous, covered in sand from the long dusty road, and she was worried about the whatever extra cleaning fee there might be until she realized she wasn't the one paying it. It would be her aunt, who was standing by the door and waving at her as she reversed and turned the other way. In the rearview she saw her lingering while she went all the way down the road. Amelia left the box in the passenger seat. When she got twenty or so miles out from her aunt's house, she threw it out of the car, into the desert, and kept driving.

Flesh Panic By Wren Hoggan

First Place Graduate Short Fiction

"Flesh Panic" is a story that leaves us with more questions than answers, but it never feels unsatisfying. A gently drawn portait of a young woman who is drawn into a familial grief, it situates family as the place of ultimate mystery — who exactly are these people, to whom we are inevitably bound, but who so often feel like strangers? And how do we live on in the memories and consciousness of others? With rich environmental detail — the cinematic landscapes of the West, and the stifling living rooms of the grieving, "Flesh Panic" invites us to consider who we are in the context of others, and why we open some doors, and leave others safely closed.

- Fatima Kola

SECOND PLACE GRADUATE SHORT FICTION

THE SHITTY NIGHT THAT REALLY HAPPENED By Steven Abel

n elderly black couple waited at the concession counter for their food and drinks. Two sodas, large popcorn, two hotdogs. The old woman's long pink fingernail tapped the glass top of the candy display, tapping harder the longer Cody, Darrell, and I made her wait.

The more she tapped on the glass, her sighing and clearing her throat lost its subtlety. Ahem. Ahem. Her husband shifted his weight back and forth, his hands never leaving the pockets of his cardigan, shaking his head as his wife became more agitated. I watched the timer tick down on the hotdog machine. There were four minutes left until the Nathan's Famous Hotdogs were cooked all the way. I listened to Cody's and Darrell's conversation, facing their direction to better hear what they were talking about.

"There's a crazy rumor going around," Cody said, pouring the couple's sodas without looking at what he was doing. Soda overflowed the cup without him doing anything to stop it. When he finally noticed the cup was full, he moved the cup from the fountain and put a lid on it. He put the wet cup on the counter, leaving a pool of soda to form a carbonated ring around the cup. He stood behind the register waiting for the popcorn and hotdogs, not bothering to dry off the cup.

Cody is white. When Cody works the register, the rare instances he makes eye contact with the customers is when he flirts with girls he deems *fuckin fine*. If you don't fall in that category, you simply receive an uninspiring iteration of how much you owe. But outside of

work, and at the random moments he speaks to customers, he is the coolest one out of the three of us. Rarely since he hit puberty has he been without a girlfriend. Not that me and Darrell were bumbling idiots with girls, but Cody laid on the charm with members of the opposite sex way out of his league — successfully more times than not. His weight never held him back like it did me. He was thinner than me, but still had a gut of a third trimester pregnancy. I walked around insecure about my weight, crooked yellow teeth, patchy peach fuzz, and hairy unibrow. I'm certain Cody could charm off a nun's habit, no matter how much he smelled like an entire bottle of Axe-Body spray.

Cody cracked each knuckle one at a time. This was Cody's ritual posturing when he knew gossip that was true. If he knew which coworker was caught giving a blow job or knew of a guy in school who cried during his first-time fucking, he put on this same staged performance before he let Darrell and I in on the news. His dopey grin wouldn't leave his face until he shared every detail down to the secret's bone with us, never telling us a story that wasn't true. His left index pointed to his right wedding finger — tap, tap, tapping.

Darell scooped popcorn into a bucket, shocked when he figured it out.

Darrell's my black friend. Him being black has nothing to do with how he scoops and pours popcorn. I mentioned his skin color since it affects his life. People say they don't see skin color, but that's bullshit. To say to a person of color that they don't see skin color denies their existence. A person of color's American experience is unfortunately tied to their skin color. Americans look at him and see his dreadlocks and conclude that he must be poor and ghetto. Or they stare at him and wonder if he is addicted to some drug, since his frame made him look malnourished. He was, after all, skinny, tall, and his lengthy arms resembled an alien tentacle more than human arms. A stoner, with glossy and glazed over eyes, his iris' are notoriously red and dilated. Where I love horror movies and Jim Beam, he prefers weed and buddy-cop mov-

ies. *Lethal Weapon*, *Bad Boys*, *Hot Fuzz*, *Rush Hour*, and his favorite, *48 Hours*. But movie taste and weed aside, it's rare for anyone to talk shit about him once they get to know him.

"Oh, shit. Mothafucka put a ring on a ho!" Darrell said. *Dawg, bro, brotha, motha-fucka, bitch* was the extent of his gender-neutral pronouns. His firing off obscenity laced pronouns was more of a verbal tick, a linguistic nasty habit.

There's no doubt that my embarrassed face is even uglier than my normal face. Paleness mixed into my brown skin, transforming me into a sickly creamy version of myself. My thick eyebrows lowered, and my eyes caved inward. Wrinkles crunch on my forehead. My left breast was the center of an acid-reflux attack, and the right lower end of my stomach played host to a series of bubbleguts.

"Please go light on the butter and salt," the old woman said, the word *please* much more out of habit than an act of courtesy.

"Fuck, man. Don't talk about her like that. And it's just a promise ring," I said.

I met Christine two years before I developed the balls to ask her out. She sat in front of me in Mrs. Delano's freshmen English class. I wish I could paint a picture where we slowly but surely talked to each other, starting out by accidentally bumping into one another, both of us slightly smiling as we said excuse me to each other before taking our seats. From there, maybe I save her from her possessive and abusive boyfriend, which leads me to stick up for her in the hallway when he berates her in front of the entire school, concluding with my fist hitting his face, knocking him down to the scuffed lilium floor, and taking her to prom. The truth is that me, an overweight, nervous Hispanic kid couldn't muster the courage to talk to her in person, settling on looking at the small of her back, studying her white ass crack when her blouse rose, and her jeans gave way to her thong.

She rejected me the first two times I asked if I could take her on a date. Her reasoning for shutting down my romantic dreams was a solid, thick concrete barrier, which was too tall to climb over and too deep to crawl under. She was fucking a freshman from UC Davis, believing that the number of blowjobs and sex she offered him would lead past the occasional hook-up to a more stable romantic commitment.

Having a girl you obsessed over for years tell you unequivocally she prefers to get dicked down by someone else is a level above castration. Your heart is shoved into a glass case in the museum of love and the plaque near the bottom reads *Here Lies a Fool in Love, A Heart Not Loveable*. So, when she caves in and decides it's possible that she can try to love you back, you overcompensate with trust. When your texts are ignored, you convince yourself that it's not a big deal; it's simply a matter of them being busy. And if your significant other goes to a party that you're not invited to, and in Instagram posts wears clothes they never wore when you take them on dates, and there are good looking strangers in the background of those photos, you convince yourself that it's not a big deal; it's simply a matter of you preferring to be a homebody and that you're one hundred percent sure they wouldn't do anything behind your back. Then there are the moments when you're walking down a hallway and it feels like people are looking and laughing at you because they know a punchline to a joke you haven't heard but you convince yourself it's not a big deal; it's simply a matter of rumors spreading, and you can't trust rumors since *everyone else* is a hater.

But it didn't work out between them, and when I watched her go live on Instagram and she was drunk, I got lucky when I sent another DM.

"Danny, the ticket-taker from the afternoon shift, said he saw her with another dude today. Said they watched *Dead Love*," Cody said.

"Fuck him," I said.

"I heard she took two guys at one time before she met you," Darrell said.

"I don't believe that. I never did," I said.

"That's a spit-roast," Cody said.

"Fuck off," I said. "That's why I didn't tell you guys, because you would give me shit about it."

"We're your best friends. We want to make sure that cock of yours isn't mistreated," Darrell said.

"We love you, and we love that fat cock of yours," Cody said.

"Whatever. I'm surprising her tonight," I said.

The things that come out of Cody and Darrell's mouth don't shock me anymore. Where people find them stupid and some keep their distance from them, I find them funny and gravitate toward them. It's been like that since we were in fifth grade. Saying fuck or cunt or dick doesn't bother me because we grew up on *South Park*, horror movies, nineties professional wrestling, and early dial-up porn. Our weekends were about watching movies, having a couple of beers, and smoking blunts more than going to parties. Besides Christine, Darrell and Cody were the only social life I had.

Ten seconds left on the hotdog timer. Spinning on the rolling grill, the hotdogs plumped and burned. The buzzer beeped, and I took out the hotdogs and placed them in buns inside of a decorated box wrapped in foil. I turned around and placed them on the counter.

Cody punched buttons on the register and spoke as if he had no joy in his life.

"Twenty-one dollars and seventy-five scents."

The old woman stared at him, as if she could rip him limb from limb with her

eyes.

Cody didn't flinch.

"I can't believe you guys are asking for fifteen dollars an hour," she said.

"That's fast-food workers," Darrell said.

A chubby hand on my shoulder spooked me. I jolted back and saw my boss, Mr. Burrows.

I never knew where Mr. Burrows' real chin started, but I knew when he had come back from a lunch break because his chins carried the evidence of a greasy meal. It's not an exaggeration to say that he was morbidly obese, fatter than me and Cody combined. His white dress shirt never buttoned fully, and his bow tie got lost in his neck. Flabby pink cheeks and bright blue eyes couldn't hide his receding hairline. But his jovial smile and overall kind nature helped save him from people laughing in his face over how his enormous nose made his glasses look comically small on him. But for a boss, I liked him. He was never a dick to me or the guys.

The longer I listened to Mr. Burrows speak, I saw his normally pink face turning into a bright shade of red, and sweat flowed down his forehead.

"Now listen up, boys. We got five auditoriums showing *Dead Love*. Corporate called and told me to expect it to break opening weekend records and that we need to be prepared. That's corporate jargon for *get your head in the game*. So, I went ahead and watched the movie earlier today to see if it lived up to the hype. And I can't lie, it's fantastic."

"I don't think it will be bigger than The Fault In Our Stars," Cody said.

Darrell, Cody, and I built our friendship on movies — the good and the bad, the

fun and the boring, the horrific and dull. Working at a movie theater never stopped us from talking about movies. Our coworkers bled from their ears when the topic of movies comes up after their shifts end. But we were cinephiles. Movie dorks. Film nerds. Screen geeks. Watching movies didn't require a shit ton of money or resources. All we needed was some booze, weed, a TV, a couch, and the three of us.

"Remember when Hazel Grace Lancaster was told by Augustus Waters that his cancer came back," Darrell said.

"And when Hazel Grace Lancaster recited a poem in the ambulance," Cody said.

"And read Augustus Waters letter at the end," I said.

"Hazel Grace Lancaster," Cody whispered.

"Hazel Grace Lancaster," Darrell whispered.

"Hazel Grace Lancaster," I whispered.

Mr. Burrows' face turned a dark red as he grabbed a handkerchief from his back pocket. He sneezed, coughing up phlegm, hacking to clear his lungs. He looked at the rag much longer than he should have and then dabbed the sides of his glistening neck.

"You all right, boss?" Darrell asked.

"You aren't dying on us, are you? Do you got the cancer? I had an uncle who had cancer. All kinds of pot and pills in his system," Cody said.

"No, no. The wife had my in-laws over the weekend. Anytime they come over, I get sick. My wife says it's because I hate her side of the family. Maybe she's right."

"Good, because my uncle died," Cody said.

Mr. Burrows coughed and struggled to breathe. He balled a fist and pounded on his chest. Sweat from his neck dripped down onto the floor.

"You don't look good, sir" I said.

"I'm OK, I'm OK," he said, shifting his weight to one foot and then the other to find his balance. His white dress shirt was soaked through with sweat, revealing a hairy chest and large, bumpy nipples. Clutching his chest, he spewed a coughing fit into his fist. His eyes matched the color of his cheeks: crimson. "I got a complaint from an usher in auditorium six, but the walkie-talkie is busted or something. Can't get a reply. I might need your guys help."

Customer's cussing and crying for help pierced my eardrums when we walked into auditorium six and crossed the doorsill. The raucous of confusion and panic froze my brain, short circuiting the hard drive in my brain where rational ideas form of what I see and conclude what I should do. I snapped out of the brain lag just as soon as it started.

The calls for help, people vomiting and the disgusted reaction of the surrounding people, the uproar of unexpected chaos drowned out the sound of *Dead Love*.

The guys and I moved down to the center aisle, watching Mr. Burrows tripping over his feet, stumbling towards the front of the auditorium. He ordered the customers to move out of the way to give the people convulsing on the floor space. His voice was never one of proper authority, so it was gibberish in the commotion.

One time there was a group of six-graders on a field trip to learn how the movie theater worked. Mr. Burrows gave the tour around the building, stopping to answer questions the teachers and chaperons posed. His tone was that of a jolly fat man, the intonation of his soft voice filled with the desire to please. So, when it came time to serve the kids popcorn and hotdogs, he never raised his voice when a few boys and girls kept spilling out the ketchup and mustard onto

the floor, ignoring his polite request for them to stop. Before he had the chance to tell them to stop again, they had poured popcorn and mustard into small cups, and bombarded him with condiments. When they ran out of condiments, they threw popcorn at him, chasing him down the hallway where the only reprieve he found was when he closed the door to his office.

Kneeling, Mr. Burrows held an elderly woman by her upper body.

He yelled into the walkie-talkie, "Turn the lights on and call 911!"

The lights came on and *Dead Love* stopped. The projection screen fizzled with grey dots.

A kid we knew from middle school was out on a date that night. Derrick Lesley, who kept getting the same buzz cut he had since the seventh grade, and who once farted in class and blamed it on the class bully Russell Gonzales, was the only white kid in our grade who never cried during a beat down or any form of public humiliation Russel Gonzales could retaliate with. In the middle of a row, he rose from his seat, clutching his stomach, dropped down to both knees and like a high power, expensive Super Soaker, rinsed his girlfriend's hair and face with blood and bile. Screaming louder than a final girl in a straight to DVD horror movie, she pushed him out of her way and ran out of the auditorium.

Mr. Burrows grabbed his radio, struggling to breathe, and forced out a cry for help on his radio.

"We need help here! Call an ambulance!"

People ready to sit through a ninety-minute teen movie were now victims of an aerial assault of diseased bodily function, pouring out the mouth of strangers and significant others. The smell of rotten bacteria infested human insides masked the popcorn, hotdogs, and scented vape which usually filled the auditorium air.

The people unaffected by convulsions and spontaneous bouts of vomiting pulled out their phones, pushed others out of the way for a better view, and chanted "World Star!" and "they need some milk!" as they recorded.

Mr. Burrows held on tight to the old woman, his posture one of defeat when her body stopped moving. As if the bodies on the ground or bodies propped up on seats were set to synchronize to the death of the old lady, a mass wave of death hit the auditorium and the silence deafened.

Mr. Burrow's body jolted. The sound of his shoulders snapping out of place rang in my ears. He dug his fingernails into his forehead and cheeks, scratching almost to the bone and wide enough for blood to flood onto his shirt. His kind eyes now completely blood red, like Satan's eyes when he gets stoned. He hurled a screech a human shouldn't be able to make.

"Ah, hell nah," Darrell said.

"Fuck this," Cody said.

Mr. Burrows tackled an old man and chomped on his face. The old man's wrinkly skin tore from his face like how a fat kid devours a piece of KFC extra-crispy fried chicken—pulling the skin first, savoring in the crunch before ingesting the meat. If the old man's liver-spotted epidermis was an appetizer, the nose, eyes, lips, and tongues were a combination plate with extra entrees. Dudes in the crowd grabbed Mr. Burrows by his arms, but he rag-dolled all of them. Tossing two of them a few feet back into the rows of seats, he strangled a third dude, crushing whatever bones make up the throat.

An obese white lady ran toward us with the speed of a blue whale swimming across oceans. It's scary enough as it is to see a fat person run fast, but you add in a blank stare, bloody vomit, stinky butter, a mouth full of fucked up teeth, I nearly shit my pants right then and there. If we had hesitated and not sprinted toward the auditorium's door, we would have

made for a delicious multicultural cuisine.

Cody and Darrell pushed their weight against the door, staring at zombies through a small, diagonal window. Zombies growled, pounding on a door with no locking mechanism. When the door became ajar for a split second, we screamed. I know there's nothing manly or cool about screaming, but we cried out like little bitches. Thinking on my feet, I grabbed one of the metal recycling bins near the door and jammed it under the door's handle.

We took a collective deep breath and turned around to see the lobby in ruins.

Muzak played over the lobby's speakers and for a moment the theater collapsed on me. My feeble existence crushed to a horrible end without ever having a good beginning or a decent middle.

"What the fuck is happenin?" Darrell asked.

A zombie ate a coworker inside of the popcorn tub; shards of glass littered the beige linoleum floor. Another Zombie, a little boy, chewed on a man's hand near the Icee machine; the man's other hand was detached at the wrist and gripped the lever to release blueberry Icee, pouring a pool of blood and sugary slush to the floor. Two of my coworkers ingested the intestines of an elderly woman in front of the woman's restroom.

"We have to get to your car, Cody," I said.

Cody patted himself down, his keys jiggling in his pockets. "Yeah, yeah, let's get the fuck out of here."

A door sprang open from the employee lounge.

Our chubby Asian coworker charged at Darrell. Until then, I never had a problem with her. We were friends by association because Darrell brought her around when they were hooking up, but the extent of our interactions was a *hey* or *what's up*? The once quiet and sweet girl grabbed onto Darrell, shaking and thrashing him from behind like a cannibalistic bearhug. Blood raced down her chins and her eyes were void of any life, a light grey where dark brown used to be. Darrell screamed for help.

"Dude, she's a fuckin Zombie!" I said.

"What the fuck, dude, Zombies aren't fuckin real!" Cody said.

"Bitch looks dead and trying to eat him!" I yelled.

"Oh, shit, she's a fuckin zombie!"

Cody grabbed a broom from the rolling janitorial bin and swung at Leslie, hitting her in the face with the bristles.

"Wrong side, asshole!" Darrell cried.

When people watch zombie movies, they believe deep down in their core that they would become a bad-ass shit-kicking zombie killer. Films don't take into account a major human variable: most of us are pathetic. Watching a dead person kill and eat a person will make you piss a little in your pants.

Cody removed his right hand off the wheel and gripped the emergency brake. He pulled the emergency brake in one smooth, quick motion; the

tires screeched, and the car jolted to a stop.

The little girl flew and crashed into the side of a dumpster. Her tiny body exploded on impact, as if we popped an enormous balloon full of blood.

"I can't believe that fuckin worked!" Darrell said, reaching over and patting Cody's shoulders. Cody drove towards an exit, the zombies losing interest in us the further we drove.

"What are we going to do now?" Cody asked.

"Find our folks," Darrell said. "We can get Christine on the way, too"

"Fuck her," I said. I meant it. "Whatever we do, we're in the shit together."

JUDGE'S COMMENTS

The Shitty Night that Really Happened By Steven Abel

Second Place Graduate Short Fiction

We begin within the warmth of a friendship kindled amongst bros on the most unremarkable of days, and some rollicking, grotesque, odorous, blood-spattered, and panic -filled pages later, we find ourselves watching our misfit heroes fighting off zombies in a parking lot. It's tempting to say that the zombie story has been done to death, but "The Shitty Night That Really Happened" revives and reminds us of the honorable traditions of the genre: that zombie attacks always happen in shrines of capitalism (this time, the multiplex) and that in fighting off the undead, we are reminded of what makes us human (our loyalty to each other). This story is just the start of a much bigger adventure, but as our still-human band (trained by the movies for just this moment) set out on the gore-covered road, you truly believe that, as they tell us in very literal terms, they're "in the shit together".

- Fatima Kola

FIRST PLACE UNDERGRADUATE SHORT FICTION

ABOUT HAPPY

By Brandon Karcher

appy left shit on the chair again. It was a thin brown cigar shape, just about the spread width of the average pair of ass cheeks. Miles had to run over it several times with a paper towel dampened with cleaning fluid, digging deep to break through the thin caked on layers. How long had it been there? All night and all morning? How many people sat on that chair unaware, thinking the smell coming off it was somewhere else and not right underneath them, or checking the soles of their shoes but finding nothing, and rechecking when the smell persisted?

Cathy surely smelled it this morning. Tricia had surely smelled it last night. How could they not? The stench was overpowering. Perhaps it was just another day to them. Perhaps they'd become so desensitized to the smell of piss and shit, like farmers did, that it no longer fazed them.

Miles had come to associate this acrid odor with Happy. Whenever Happy was in the store, he emitted an invisible Pigpen-like cloud that seemed to carry hundreds of feet in every direction. It was a smell that produced involuntary gagging. Yet Miles had seen Store Director Stu standing right next to Happy and say nothing, not ask him to leave, barely react at all.

Tricia was Miles' direct supervisor, and she had pushed back on Miles' when he said he intended to ban Happy from the store. "We can't kick people out just because they smell bad."

This was after Miles had told her about the excrement Happy left on the chair and had recount-

ed the broken crack pipes found in the bathroom and the freakouts in the stall where Happy sat on the toilet screaming in terror, likely at some drug-induced horror. She zeroed in on the weakest part of Miles' argument just so she could deny him any authority. But Miles vowed that the next time he saw Happy, he was going to kick him out.

Everybody knew Happy. He was a semi-permanent fixture out on Fulton Avenue, standing on the sidewalk in those same filthy rags day after day, stooped over and windmilling his arms around like some exhausted orchestra conductor. The streets were littered with the likes of Happy; sunbaked and beaten people pushing shopping carts along sidewalks past rows and rows of used cars they'd never be able to afford again.

Miles had recently moved to the area for the job. Though he regularly saw Happy on his way to work, Miles didn't immediately recognize him for what he was, a relic of Miles' past. He had predicted this scene thirty years ago. Or rather, it was his invention. He had created Happy. Miles didn't name him Happy though. He didn't have a name at all, he was just a homeless man standing in the middle of an intersection, screaming and windmilling his arms in the opening paragraph of a novel Miles was writing about the end of the world. Miles' character stood straighter, though, but was still high on crack and driven mad by the circumstances of the life he led, sleeping in his own shit, scrounging through garbage for food left by some glutton who'd ordered too much and just couldn't get down those last few bites. He had to weather the frigid rain, cold that penetrated to his bones, heat that cooked his skin to a ruddy hue. He wasn't exactly Happy, but he was close enough to make Miles wonder if he'd invented Happy in that story he wrote way back then, and then somehow manifested him. He wondered if, in Happy, he was now seeing the beginning of the end.

Miles had been culling the fresh fruit that was about to expire when Happy came shuffling in, looking dazed, but intent, in his uniform of a brown fleece-lined jacket, a dark gray shirt, and baggy blue jeans. The colors he wore had dimmed so much over the years that he looked like someone had dialed down the saturation levels on him. One of his shoes was held together by a shoelace tied around it just above the toe. His eyes bulged with far away visions.

Miles set down a party-size fruit medley tray and immediately headed Happy off. "I'm sorry, but you can't be in here anymore."

Happy seemed to understand at once. This couldn't have been the first time he'd been kicked out of an establishment. He flashed an astonishingly white smile that confused Miles and said, "Can I just use the bathroom?"

"No."

Happy's smile disappeared, and his face darkened. He turned around and shuffled out, looking back at Miles with hooded eyes.

After Happy left, Miles fought the internal recrimination that told him he should have let him use the bathroom at least. But what if he just lit up a pipe and had another breakdown, terrifying some little boy finally getting to use a public restroom without Daddy holding his hand?

As he went back to culling the fruit that was shortly destined for the compost bin, he noticed how good it still looked. He considered that he could have given some to Happy, but worried that he'd come back for more, like a hungry cat you made the mistake of feeling sorry for and fed with no intention of housing and even stopped feeding after the first couple of times, but which continued to come around hoping for a regular meal.

Thor had been such a hungry cat. His name wasn't Thor, but Miles could never remember his name, if he ever knew it at all. He called him that because Thor had claimed to have once repelled an alien invasion with Mjolnir while on observation duty aboard a Naval ship somewhere in the South Pacific. He'd been honorably discharged shortly after that incident. "They said I damaged the ship, but I dealt a decisive blow to the Mothership—with Mjolnir!"

Thor spent some time hanging out with Angela Davis and her circle in Los Angeles before winding up homeless in Arcata where he met Miles. He was a short, burly man, who looked well-fed despite his lifestyle. He reminded Miles of a Tolkien dwarf, with a matching temperament by turns jovial and angry.

They'd spent some time together, chatting on the sidewalk, grabbing the occasional cup of coffee, and Thor would regale Miles with stories of his exploits and recite poetry in iambic pentameter to him while stroking his thick beard. He knew words Miles didn't know, like 'apposition'.

Miles had driven him hundreds of miles up to Oregon and he'd thought that was the last he'd see of him, so he casually mentioned that if he ever made his way back down to Arcata, maybe they could get a place together. "Maybe," Miles stressed, but it was clear from Thor's look of surprise that he hadn't heard the stressed 'maybe' and Miles instantly regretted extending him the offer. It wasn't that Miles wasn't willing to do it, he just wasn't sure he could. He had recently become housed himself, having been homeless for the past couple of months, sleeping out of his car and showering in the nearby wildlife refuge with a camp shower he'd had the foresight to pack with him when he left Sacramento. But he was always just one paycheck away from being homeless again and he had to be realistic about his situation. Thor was an acquaintance; someone he helped out every now and then. Ultimately, Miles had to look out for himself.

Many months later after Miles had moved to Eureka, he found himself visiting Arcata and stumbled upon Thor who, after some pleasantries and brief catch-up, began ranting and screaming at Miles that he never came for him and then roared at the sky, "I GUESS GOD MUST HATE ME!" He calmed down unnaturally fast and said, "Anyway, it was nice seeing you again, Miles."

Finished cleaning shit off the chair, Miles approached Cathy and asked about Happy.

"I seen him come in earlier," she said and, anticipating Miles' next statement, began making apologetic gestures with her head and shoulders. "But it was so busy, I didn't have time to go and tell him to leave." She laughed at the end, flashing her big smile, as if the whole thing were not only no big deal, but funny and uplifting as if they were starring in a feel-good comedy and not a depressing slice-of-life drama.

Miles wanted to reiterate that they had to be on the same page about Happy, but he knew she knew and so he let it go. The shit stains were limited to the chair this time and had not been transferred to the table at the end of the night like before when the cleaning crew turned the chairs upside down to clean the floor. He'd seen a family sitting at that table later that day with their baby crawling on the table and thanked God he'd been the one to open the store that morning, caught the scent of Happy shit, hunted it down, and disinfected the table and chair thoroughly. That had been the inciting incident for Miles to kick Happy out.

But he couldn't be there every day, all day long. If Happy knew he could come in and stay awhile when Cathy was watching the front of the store, then he would, and there was nothing Miles could do. His ban meant nothing if no one but him enforced it.

Driving to work one morning a few days later, Miles saw Happy shuffling out of a Taco Bell, holding a bag of food. Taco Bell had bathrooms, too, Miles thought, and felt some alleviation of guilt about kicking him out. Happy wouldn't starve. He wouldn't have to shit in the bushes.

But the next day he came to work on a late shift and was almost immediately approached by a customer complaining about the mess in the men's bathroom. "It's horrible, man. It's just horrible. You guys really need to do something about it. It smells awful in there."

When Miles investigated, he saw the tell-tale signs of Happy. Sure, anybody can leave a

mountain of shit in the toilet enough to clog it up, they could even leave shit smears on the seat, Hershey's kisses droplets on the floor, maybe even some brown fingerprints on the wall of the stall, but the broken crack pipe was the giveaway for Miles and, though he didn't have absolute proof, the whole horrific scene screamed Happy. Miles thought back to seeing Happy come out of the Taco Bell and was reminded of the urban legend about the worker getting caught shitting in the beans; apparently, he'd been doing it for some time. Miles couldn't help but hope that the story was true after all and that it was currently happening at the Taco Bell Happy shuffled out of the other day.

Miles briefly regarded the brown fingerprints on the wall. There were three of them, and they looked like tiny footprints, two next to each other and one in front, as if some miniscule man materialized out of nowhere, took a single step, and then vanished. Miles scrubbed away any trace of the little man.

The crack pipe came last in the cleaning as Miles gathered up all the trash. Happy had a full meal in there on the toilet. The remains of a salad, a soda, and a bag of chips were all piled in a heap on the floor next to the broken pipe. As Miles picked up the pipe stained brown with rock smoke, he noted how thin and cheap the glass was. He figured it was because they had to be manufactured at a high volume and were being paid for out of the same government fund that supplied clean needles to heroin addicts. Some corners had to be cut. Needles were also left behind, though fewer than the pipes, and Miles had noted how flimsy the metal of the needle was. These were Dollar Store drug paraphernalia, the cheapest around. They were Cracker Jack box prizes.

When Miles finally surfaced from the bathroom, he was too tired to be livid. He just existed in a state of high disappointment for the rest of his shift. He already hated the job for other reasons, and having to unnecessarily clean up Happy's shit what seemed like every other day didn't change his mind any.

Tricia had been trying to get rid of him for a while now. "Culture is huge here. We're like a family," she told him when he was first hired. Miles had cracked a joke when she introduced him to the team, and she laughed hard and hopped around in a full circle, clapping her hands. "Yes! I knew you'd be a good fit!" But when it became evident that he wasn't fitting in, she pulled him into her office. "You just don't seem like you want to be here. I don't see you connecting with anyone. I mean, is this just a pit stop for you? There are people here who, I mean, this is their life. This store is like a second home to them." She wore a company t-shirt in ketchup red and folded her hands together on the desk as if she had made up her mind. Within the first week of the job, a customer had threatened to shoot Miles in the face. If he wasn't being called out to fight, he was breaking up fights; customers either constantly threatened to have him fired or haggled over pennies; he'd had his car window smashed, his locker broken into, and hangers and hot coffee thrown at him. Miles told Tricia that he had other plans for his life. She was never happy to see him after that.

Miles made the rounds about the checkout lanes, looking for items that customers had changed their minds about or couldn't afford after all, and tossed them into a shopping cart to be put back on the sales floor.

A tall, lanky man with long, shaggy hair touching his protruding shoulder blades, and a scraggly, uneven beard that tickled his collarbone walked past him pushing a cart and yelling into his phone, "I get so sick of having this conversation with him! He needs to be a man and stand up to his wife! That's what a husband does! He doesn't let his wife push him around and call the shots! If he wants to buy some fresh, organic blueberries and she tells him, 'No, take them back,' then he needs to go back to the store and buy *more* fresh, organic blueberries! And if she still tells him no, then he needs to buy *more* and *more* and he needs to *keep buying* fresh, organic blueberries until she gets it!" He was wearing a t-shirt that said, 'I Make Gluten-Free Look Hot'.

The deaf-mute woman who shopped there every day got Miles' attention by waving at him and letting loose loud ululations. She smiled and gave him a thumbs-up and he responded in kind. She would need his help later with her transaction. She always looked for 'four for five dollars' deals, thinking that it meant she got a five-dollar gift card in return. Miles never tried to tell her otherwise and always pretended to be confused about why the register didn't automatically recognize the deal and give her a five-dollar gift card. He always ended up just giving her one anyway. She'd give him a big, gap-toothed grin and a thumbs-up and always made sure to get his attention and wave goodbye when she left.

When Miles picked up his girlfriend, Tabitha, for a late drink that night, they stopped at a light right next to a panhandler standing on the median. Panhandlers seemed to be at every intersection on every street these days. Miles never even bothered to read their signs anymore. "I know it's never going to happen," he said, "but the State should make the medians pointed, you know, like a Toblerone, so that these people can't stand on them. It's not the begging for money that bothers me, it's a safety issue. They're standing on this narrow strip right in the middle of traffic. They're tired, hungry, strung out. I'm surprised more of them don't get hit by cars."

The man on the median looked briefly into Miles' car and, seeing no hope there, moved on down the line.

The next morning, a little hungover on his drive to work, Miles saw Happy doing his orchestral bit. Happy was precariously close to the edge of the sidewalk and, bent over as he often was, put his head right out into oncoming traffic. He seemed oblivious to this danger.

Miles briefly entertained a fear that Happy would fall right in front of his car, of all cars, and there would be no explaining it away. The story would be that he hated Happy, kicked him out of the store where he worked, and finally just ran him over with his car. A quick lane change solved the problem, and Miles made it to work without any dents in his hood.

Hours later, Happy showed up.

Miles walked right up to him and said, "Hey, man. I told you, you can't be in here."

This time Happy stopped and looked at Miles. His eyes were like empty burned-out tenements. "Why not?"

Miles drew a deep breath. How specific should he be? "Because you're a health hazard for our customers."

Happy seemed to consider this. "I'm not healthy. I know that. Is that what you mean?"

Miles couldn't be sure what Happy was playing at. The first time he'd met him, Happy had been doubled over and sobbing in long, deep moans in the facial cleanser aisle. Miles asked him if he was all right and Happy's sadness immediately broke and he became lucid and dignified. "Oh, I'm all right, thank you," he said calmly. "Do you need me to call someone?" Miles asked. "No, I'll be all right. I'll leave now. Thank you. Sorry." The same type of exchange happened when Miles had been called to the bathroom about a man screaming in the stall. "I'm sorry. I'm all right. I'll leave in just a moment." To Miles these seemed to be glimpses of Happy before the drugs, before his life went to shit. He was an intelligent, well-spoken man and he seemed, at one time, to have his shit together. So, it was difficult to determine whether Happy was intentionally misunderstanding him now or not.

"No, that's not exactly what I mean." Miles realized he was just going to have to say it. "You've been leaving feces in the café seating area. We just can't have that. You understand."

Happy bowed his head and was quiet for a moment, and Miles sensed that he felt deep shame.

Miles was standing within three feet of Happy and had to choke back a gag response. He had to maintain his professionalism. "I'm sorry. I'll go. I won't come back."

He shuffled away but turned back before leaving. "I've been coming here for seven years. It's kind of like a home."

Before Miles could leave Sacramento and move to Arcata all those years ago, he had to wait around for a little over a week for his final check from the temp agency. He was technically homeless then, and slept in his car, and he had nowhere to shower. After a week of not showering, he began to smell pretty rank, but before that, on a day when he'd had a shower, he ran into Sara, whom he'd met a month before at a party, and she recognized him with a smile and a nod. "Oh, you remember me," he said. "You have a face that's hard to forget." She was so beautiful, he'd considered staying instead of moving, but that didn't happen. However, a week later, he ran into her again in a bookstore. He smelled sour like old milk. She caught a whiff of him, exhaled with a sound of small astonishment, and moved to another part of the store.

He crashed at Liv's house that she shared with other students from Humboldt University. He wasn't a student, just a failed filmmaker, deeply depressed, but trying to make a new start.

He slept on their futon and wet it one night. He went to the house's de facto leader, Gabe, and had to stand there reeking of urine as he was told he needed to replace the futon and get the blanket dry-cleaned; it was a gift from Krista's grandmother, Florence, and held special meaning. Liv broke the news to him that it had been decided he couldn't stay there anymore. When Miles made like he was going to protest, she said, "No! You're just using me!" He spent the next two months living out of his car while he looked for a job, and once he had that, a place to live.

One freezing morning, as he prepared for a four-a.m. shift at the Grocery Outlet, he started up his car and let it run with the heater on full blast as he caught a few more minutes of

sleep in the cabin's warm oven. When he turned off the engine and got out of the car, he heard a man shout at him, "HEY! YOU!" from a nearby apartment window. The man seemed furious that an engine had been running at three o'clock in the morning for the past several days. Miles took a single step forward, clenched his fists, and shouted back, "ARE YOU TALKING TO ME?" The man didn't reply.

"Why do you call him 'Happy'?"

Cathy smiled that big smile of hers and said, "Because he's always smiling! He always seems so happy!"

Miles frowned at that.

Later, in his small, cramped apartment, Tabitha draped her legs over his thighs, and he traced the contours of her knees pensively. "Would you want to be happy all the time?"

"Sure, who wouldn't?"

"I don't know. I don't think we're meant to be happy. Look around. The world has never been a happy place."

"You make me happy. Do I make you happy?"

"Of course."

"Maybe that's all that matters."

"Maybe."

Months later, Miles found another job working for a law firm. He showed up for his final shift at the store, smiling at everyone, cracking jokes one after another. Tricia looked bemused and said to him, "Wow, where's this guy been?" He gave the deaf-mute woman a tendollar gift card instead of a five. She began crying and started to give him a thumbs-up, but hugged him tightly instead. He asked her name. She wiped away tears and typed on her phone

and showed it to him: Helen. Miles thought back to his novel. He'd had a character named Helen. He didn't know she was deaf and mute.

A woman strung out on drugs came into the store repeatedly, stalking around at a fast clip the way tweakers and the paranoid do. She sprayed some tester perfume on herself, broke a sensor that called a key carrier to unlock a cabinet holding toothpaste, and was kicked out. She kept coming back, leaving a filthy mess in the bathroom, tearing down signs, then stealing a random armful of merchandise. She ran out of the store, holding up a twenty-dollar pair of earrings in her hand, screaming, "THEY'RE STEALING DIAMONDS!" She kept coming back and destroying property and stealing until the cops came and scooped her up.

A boy said to his father, "That lady just got arrested for stealing."

His father, who wore an olive suede jacket, and had skin like a white peach, and a perfectly manicured beard, said, "That's unfortunate."

That was the day protestors cut the power to a nearby Tesla dealership. Miles' whole world went dark. Only the daylight streaming in through the windows lit the store, casting it in a cool blue glow.

Miles looked at the faces of the customers, his coworkers. They looked soft, helpless. He wanted to help them suddenly. He wanted them to know everything was going to be all right.

He hadn't seen Happy since that last conversation with him, but when the lights came back on, there he was.

As soon as he saw Miles, he turned around and shuffled back out of the store.

Miles called to him, "Happy! Happy!"

But Happy didn't respond or turn around or acknowledge at all that someone was calling his name.

JUDGE'S COMMENTS

About Happy By Brandon Karcher

First Place Undergraduate Short Fiction

"About Happy" is a confident, accomplished story — right away, you know that you are in the hands of a controlled and masterful writer. In its portrait of a man working at a Northern California grocery store, "About Happy" powerfully depicts the tension between frustration and empathy for our fellow humans that we all experience daily. Through the experience of its central protagonist, Miles, it asks the reader potent questions: to whom is kindless rightly directed? What responsibilities do we owe those around us? Do our own broken and flawed histories make us more empathetic? What consitutes safety, and where and what are we allowed to call home? In its depictions of environment and character, "About Happy" achieves total aliveness — we have no doubt that this is a real place, that these people are really breathing, that this humble grocery store, the scene of so much profound event, might be the next one we walk into, or the last one we walked out of. This work achieves the greatest aspirations of short fiction: fidelity to the life, realness in character, and the raising of essential questions about the world as we have built it.

- Fatima Kola

SECOND PLACE UNDERGRADUATE SHORT FICTION

AND GREAT WILL BE THEIR PEACE

By Faith Morris

hrough the deep snow, he carried me on his back. Night's coldness pricked at my left ear, left open to weather's sweet whims, while my right ear slept comfortably upon his woolen sweater. His breath was heavy and hot, and with every step he took his lips conjured up a great plume of mist that flew backwards before floating down into the Earth where it would eventually stay forever. I knew about those sorts of things long before I should have known them, and most people thought I didn't, and I guessed that was fine.

Every Tuesday and Thursday, a loud thundering would start up between the hours of eight and ten at night. Father would have us take cover from it in Mr. Gogol's church. He'd been a friend of Mr. Gogol's for a while: when he was young and still married, he did free repairs around the place for them. Said that it was the least he could do for people as poor and pious as the Gogols, and I suppose that was just the kind of man he was. Miss Ishchenko helped around the soup kitchen they opened there on the weekends too with her little daughter, Bohdana, but they stayed in the church most of the time anyways. Miss Ishchenko was hardly a woman herself, anyhow; because something had happened to her, something I wasn't quite ready to understand. Sometimes the older boys would stay the night too when they were not out playing in the storm. They would only come in if they were all together, though. Mr. Gogol called them "stitched at the hip." Father called them "a bunch of stupid bastards." I think they were named Ivanko, Dima, and Sasha at one point or another. And sometimes, when you were angry with them, it was Ivan, Dimitri, and Alexander too. It didn't really matter to me what

they were called. Whether they came in hollering and laughing, "possessed by the devil's drink," or quietly shuffling around, their rough, frozen hands outstretched toward the warm fire; I always dreamed of the day I'd be standing around with them. They looked like knights out of Canterbury, telling long, beautiful tales to the rest of us, with minimal interference from Father, who took care to remind them that they were in the company of a few children. On more than one occasion, the oldest and loudest of them, Ivanko, would throw out his hands to me, as if asking for my blessing, and shout:

"Well, lil' Pav, you don't mind at all, d'ynow?"

I would shake my head, and he would clap his hands on his knees, and Father would roll his eyes and tell him, quite sternly, something like, "knock it off, before I give you a knock upside the head." They would settle down, but only a little, snickering about themselves like mice over a hidden wheel of cheese, whispering about the whimsical, secret things Father always kept me from hearing.

It was Tuesday night then, and the thunder had not started just yet. Mrs. Gogol called us in the morning to tell us that the thunder would be extra bad; that the boys would be there for sure this time. Over Father's shoulder, in little glimpses, I could see the orange light leaking from the small, battered windows of the church, and the flickering lantern set on a stick at the end of the tight, dirt driveway. Above it, a flimsy piece of paper had been stapled to the wood there:

"I WAS HUNGRY AND YOU GAVE ME FOOD,
I WAS THIRSTY AND YOU GAVE ME DRINK,

I WAS A STRANGER AND YOU WELCOMED ME."

ALL ARE WELCOME IN THE HOME OF GOD

WHETHER IN TIMES OF STRIFE OR GLORY.

These words were printed. In the margins of the page there were doodles of tiny frogs fishing in tiny ponds, tiny bears wearing tiny hats and tiny shoes, and tiny cats licking up tiny bowls of milk. These were certainly done by little Bodhana, who had little else to do those days but color. But a fancy drawing of two fencing jackrabbits, their posture staunch and each of their open arms rigid behind their back, must have been the work of the young Dima, something of our resident bookish artist. I remember their offering me the paper to add to, but I did not know what to draw nor how to make it look quite as good, so in the corner I bashfully wrote, in the smallest lettering I could manage, the letters of my name. Dima took it back from me when I was finished, saw what was there, and did not push me like Father or Ivanko might have.

He smiled instead—a great, stupid, worldly smile, made up of chipped teeth—and said, "You've got some beautiful handwriting there, little man. Who taught you how to write so well?"

We reached the porch, and Father, careful to set me down where the ground wasn't too wet, jiggled the door handle for a bit until he could get that awful, old door unstuck. So furious was the wind that, when it finally came undone, the door swung open and slammed against the wall, making the sad little church shake all over.

I rubbed the snow off my boots on the mat while Father used what was left of his

strength to shut the door on all that deathly cold behind us. "Just us comin' in!" Father bellowed, and a few familiar gasps of merriment came from the glowing kitchen.

Before she had even got to the living room, Mrs. Gogol was already leaning down, prepared to give me a big, wet kiss on the forehead. "Aren't you cold?" she asked, and she patted up and down my limp jacket before giving a look to Father, "Put some clothes on the baby, why don't ya, Grygoriy? He'll freeze to death you keep dressin' him like this. He might as well be wearin' nothin'!"

"Give 'em a moment, Nona; they've only just come inside." Mr. Gogol teetered in on his walker, already talking, already laughing, already smiling, and I thought, for a moment, if he'd just been born with his face stuck on like that. "Now, they must be hungry—that's what'll do it. You're hungry, aren't you?" He turned to me while Mrs. Gogol stared daggers at the side of his head, and I was too afraid to pick one or the other so I just took as many steps to the side as I needed until I was safely clung to Father's pant leg.

"Hungry and cold, then. What a father you've got there!" Mrs. Gogol put her arms on her hips and, without another word, marched away on her brittle, bony legs.

"She's a bit ornery today, isn't she?" Father said with a chuckle. At that, if it was possible, Mr. Gogol smiled even wider, as if very, very pleased to hear someone else think so.

Still, he waved the words away, like he was shooing a flock of geese from the yard. "Only makes sense—it's been—" he glanced down briefly at me, and I felt suddenly like I did not belong there, "--it's been a strange couple of days. But I'll talk to you later. We've been hearing things."

Father guffawed, his big beard jumping right along with his lips. "Sure. People hearing things all the time. It's a strange world."

"Like I was saying: we'll talk later. Now come on." He stretched out his hand, rich with wispy, white hair, and patted the back of my head. "We've got sausage and buttered bread, a little honey too, if you want it— and a fresh loaf— we've already prayed, mind you, so you can go on and say your own together— Halya Ishchenko and her little girl— quite the little bakers they've turned out to be. Skilled too, like they were born with it in their fingers— I don't know, I always mess it up— getting the yeast to rise and all that, it's like a careful science— a practice—"

He went on mumbling and tottering away to the kitchen while we followed after him. We didn't get a chance to stop by the furnace in the living room, but I hardly minded, so sweet and strong were the smells of baked meat and hot dough that mere fire seemed their little protégé. Father started fixing a plate for me at the table, mostly because he'd sooner starve to death before he ever ate before anyone younger than he was, and that got Mrs. Gogol going again.

"Stop that, Grygoriy. It's a housewife's duty, but you wouldn't know anything about keepin' one of those, would you now? C'mon now. How about I warm up a little glass of milk for you, Pav? How about that? Don't worry about drinkin' nothing for now, Grygoriy, the boys gave us a call; Ivan's bringin' a pretty malt, you know how those boys are, always drinking. Only if you want to, that is—I say you shouldn't—I'd like a glass of wine better but I know how you men are, you can't be seen drinkin' somethin' different between each other."

"I hoped you thought better of me," Father said. For a moment, I thought he would laugh, but the creases at his lips set down as fast as they'd come up, like it exhausted him to do it.

"Oh, I'm just teasing. Really. You want a malt, you get a malt, you work like a dog these days, anyway. Now how about that warm milk—? Here y'go, Pav; go on now."

"Go on, say 'thank you."

Father and Mrs. Gogol were looking at me, and it felt just as it did before, but Father's

leg was too far down for me to hide behind. So, I just grabbed the cup and started drinking it, as fast as I could, like a thirsty, newborn calf; figuring they'd just go away if I couldn't see them in front of me anymore.

At this Father finally laughed, and I suppose that pleased me enough on its own. "That's his way of saying *thank you*, I guess. Thank you, Mrs. Gogol. If you only knew how much he ate at home; you wouldn't be feeding him at all. He eats more than I do."

Mr. Gogol piped up from the living room, but his voice was still fickle as wind blowing through winter branches, "How'd you expect the boy to grow if he isn't eatin'?!"

Mrs. Gogol snorted and, nodding at Father, began mindlessly cleaning the wooden counter, "About the only true thing he's said today! Ugh, you should've heard that man this morning, we spent about half an hour arguing about whether it'd snow tonight and look outside—! It might as well be Christmas—! But, now—"

"The oven timer's goin' off, Nona!" Mr. Gogol shouted.

"I hear it-! Now- oh- where'd I put my mitts?"

Getting her hands on every single little thing, moving around like there was always something very important she needed to get done— these were essential parts of her being, I think. And acting like he always knew what came next, like time was running on a slower clock for him than the rest of us, were part of Mr. Gogol's. In fact, when I looked at Mr. and Mrs. Gogol for long enough, they began to come together until they were one single entity, like staring through a stereoscope: always shuffling and mumbling and fussing over little things that didn't matter much.

Miss Ishchenko and Bodhana were down at the end of the table, fortunate enough to

ignore most of the bustle. Because her mouth was full, Miss Ishchenko just gave me and Father a polite smile when we first came in. Bodhana was licking the honey off some of her fingers and wiping the rest of them on her nice, new blue dress, but I don't think her mother noticed because a new commotion started in the living room, and Mrs. Gogol was running about while Mr. Gogol was going, "Oh, where's the rest of ya'?" I thought it all too loud, so I stuffed a huge, warm chunk of bread in my mouth and started chewing at it, hoping my ears wouldn't work as hard if I worked my teeth a little harder than them.

As soon as Ivanko and Sasha appeared in the rounded, stooped doorway, the whole room lit up with talking and hugging and kissing. It appeared that I had more chewing to do. Ivanko was doing the bulk of the shouting, while Sasha was no doubt lumbering behind him, crossing his arms over his chest and looking real serious about things. He was the most knight-like out of all of them. Quiet and solemn, like he didn't care what you thought of him or how he looked standing around like a member of the King's Guard. I guess that made Ivanko something of his loose and drunken squire.

I nearly choked on a piece of sausage when he slapped my shoulders and gave me a good, hard shake, "How'y'doin', lil' Pav? Huh? That's a big plate, you got there—you better have left some for me. And hey, old man, how're you holdin' up? I've got your favorite!"

He shook the pretty, golden brew towards Father and they got to talking, and for a while, I was just staring up at the bottom of his face. If he didn't act like such a clown, he probably would've been more like a prince. His jaw was cut out of iron, and his blonde hair, sprinkled with bits of snow, came up in soft curls behind his ears and corralled with ease at his forehead. His cheeks were still pink with the cold, and you could see the bright, fern green of his eyes under the warm bulb hanging over the kitchen table. I hadn't been more than ten steps out-

side of our town, but I'd decided right then that Ivanko must have been the most beautiful man in the whole world. At the end of the table, Miss Ishchenko was staring at him too, but only half-so. Every time he happened to look her way, she'd quickly turn her gaze to her empty plate like she'd found something interesting there. I thought, for a moment, that she must have decided the same thing.

"Where's Dimitri?" I heard Father say.

"Oh– well—" like before, if only much worse this time around, Ivanko gave me a brief look. It was something like fear, I think. "He's just had to stay back, busy makin' snowmen is all. You ever make a snowman before, Pav?"

He winked and nudged my shoulder, but I didn't move, and I didn't laugh, mostly because I wished that he'd start taking me very, very seriously just then. Yet, he didn't even give me another look after the first. He just turned his cherub face, which had already grown wistful and distracted by the smell of hot pork, and made his way to the stove. But Father was looking at me, and that was always the worst thing of all. When Father looked at me, my shoulders trembled under all the weight of the world in his eyes. If Ivanko was Earth's most handsome man, I think Father was certainly the saddest, and maybe even its oldest. You could see it in the early whiteness of his hair, and the harsh ridges on his fingers, and the purple bags under his eyes, and the way he looked at you like he knew when you were going to die and where you'd be going afterwards. You could see it from a mile away. But for me it was different; it was horrible. He would look at me like a shipwrecked sailor would a bright, pretty lighthouse; like a kicked dog would a little girl's gentle, outstretched palm. There was something he saw in me that was precious, and I did not know what it was, and it made me afraid to lose it because I knew he had lost so much already. I don't think he quite knew how much I knew- all those things he never did tell me about but I would end up hearing from someone or other—but the walls were thin at home, and I knew he cried in his bed after herding the goats most days, and

maybe that's all a son needs to know about his father to recognize that he must not trouble him.

Someone was watching the news at the table then, and after what must have been years, Father quit looking at me and leaned forward to hear it. Sasha had his phone in his hands and was staring—very stern and grown-up like, of course—at the screen. He hadn't any food, but he was sipping on a neat malt, and I suppose the snow was falling and the moon was in the sky now too. Ivanko was sitting across from him, his smile dangling off his face as he looked somewhere in the corner of the room, like it'd help him listen better. I realized it was a lot like chewing when you don't want to hear anything, so I decided I'd do it too. I looked real close at the red, gold-trimmed blanket thrown over a rod above the farthest window and tried to listen:

"Peace talks resume today under new restrictions as to the country's involvement—"

"Oh good Lord, turn that nonsense off," Father moaned. "The children are around." Mr. Gogol made brows at him because I suppose he used the Lord's name in vain—though I didn't exactly know what that meant for us anyhow. I made brows at him because I couldn't hear over his talking. He didn't seem to notice me. None of them did.

Sasha huffed. "Well, they better get used to it quickly then. Things are coming to a head, I'd say."

"--though what a resolution might look like for displaced families—"

"Can't lil' Sasha look at the pretty American newslady, Greg? Just look at her figure n' that hot pink suit!"

"Don't be disgusting, Ivan," Miss Ishchenko scowled and put down her cup.

"Shut up." Sasha's brows tightened on his wrinkly, tanned forehead.

"--remains unclear, knowing so many have already been forced to flee the country and lost their homes—"

"See, this is what happens when you don't beat y'children hard enough."

"--it becomes relatively easy to understand why so many Americans believe the war to be a waste of tax dollars– tax dollars that could go into infrastructure, into healthcare—"

"Trust me, my mother beat me hard enough. This nasty scar under my ear—this one right here—that's from a serving spoon. A serving spoon! Not even an edge on the thing and she nearly cut my ear off my head."

"You, shut up. Turn that off right now, Alexander, I'm serious."

"--we turn to our correspondents reporting from Kiev-"

"He's *eleven* years old, Mr. Grygoriy. Are you just gonna' let him be a child forever? How's that gonna' help him— if some rocket comes down on *our* heads?"

"Sasha_"

"That's enough!"

"Sasha, be kind!" Mrs. Gogol cried. I hated when they argued. It was too loud. I wanted to stuff some more bread into my mouth, but then I couldn't, because I wouldn't be able to hear the rest—

"—Thank you, Miram. We're in Kiev, Ukraine's capital, home to the majority of Ukraine's population, following the aftermath of yet another missile attack. So far, reports say that one person has died and three people have been injured—"

"And look at this moron in 'is big puffer-!"

Father stood up and, shaking all over with rage, ripped Sasha's phone from his hand and threw it against the wall. It shattered, it blew up.

There were no more pink ladies, and no more puffered jackets, and no more Kiev.

Everyone had just about frozen in place. Ivanko still had his hands sprawled out in front of himself, as if he were a jester and the court wizard had cursed him into stone before he could finish a bad joke. Mrs. Gogol gripped onto the countertop in horror. Mrs. Ishchenko stared at her hands.

"Nothing's happening. Not *near* us, not *to* us, so my boy and I— we got nothing to do with it. You boys wanna' go kill yourselves and laugh about it, you can all go and do that. But don't bring it to me, let alone bring it into this holy place. This is a sanctuary. As soon as you walk through that door, there's no war, there's no hunger, there's no nothing— *especially* when the children are around."

Father was breathing hard. He looked three times his age. He looked like he was ready to keel over and die.

"Do you understand? ...Do you?"

Sasha did not smile, and he did not move. He sat with his hands clasped under his chin and his eyes shut.

The room had gone quiet, except for the sound of Bohdana's crayon scribbling away in her coloring book. I picked up a piece of bread and put it to my lips, and only then did I notice they were trembling, and that there were hot tears on my cheeks, and that there were no snow storms or down pours or cyclones like they'd said but there was a pile of dead men, dead women, dead children—plagued out and buried somewhere—just like I must have known but never really thought about—all of them dead, all of them God's children, and all of them cold and unwelcome and hungry and lying out the street and blown all apart like I thought I'd seen on the

TV peering around my bedroom door that night last month when Father told me he was watching a scary movie. And everybody was looking at me, and I felt like crawling in a hole someplace and staying there forever because Father was looking at me too, and that made everything worse again.

"Oh- Oh, well, Pav. Don't you- don't listen to that silly little thing. They're just talkin'. They always need something to talk about, the news people over there. What they do know anyway 'bout our country? Hm?" That smile clung to Ivanko's face like a bad wart, and I think I started to hate him.

"Why don't we say a little prayer?" Mr. Gogol suggested, and he was smiling too and waving his hands around like a fool, and I thought he looked like a liar; I thought he looked like pretty news ladies in pink suits and handsome men wearing puffer jackets in Kiev. "We'll be alright, Pav. Like your Pa said. You'll be alright."

"What about those people in Kiev?" The words left my mouth. I smacked my lips to make sure that they really had—that I hadn't only thought about them in my head—because no one was saying anything. They'd all turned to wax again. "Papa?"

Father kept looking at me, his fingers clenched around both of his hips, like to keep himself from falling backwards.

"Papa?"

"What, Pav?"

"What'd we do to them anyway?"

His cheap boots squeaked against the floorboards as he went shifting from foot to foot. "Well– Pav. I don't know what. They just– it's– there's a lot of history between us. And they have a president and– he's– a difficult man. A mean man. Like that Mr. Karol that lived down the street. Remember him? You were little then. But he just figures he can have everything he

wants, like when Mr. Karol came and stole your little nativity set for his girls out of the window. You remember that, Pav? But see, we didn't do anything. They just came and took– *tried* – to take. Just like you didn't mean nothing by leaving your toys out there."

"Then- did we do something to God?"

If the air in that kitchen could become any heavier, it would have dropped right down to Hell. Even Ivanko's hands came falling down, and Mr. Gogol's silly grin sunk into just about the saddest frown I'd ever seen. I wanted to sink down with it. My face was scorched with shame, and Father was looking at me like he looked at everything else: tired. So, so, so tired.

At the end of the table, Bodhana had stopped her coloring, and she was turning and looking at all of us sitting in that unbearable silence like she'd just landed in from Mars. And in her new, frilly blue dress stained with golden honey and her small, fern green eyes bright with curious joy and her black, little curls falling down her head, she looked like the devil Himself, so I jumped out of my chair and went running.

I don't know where, I don't know when. I just started running. I'm sure I heard them calling after me, but I'm even more sure that I didn't turn around, not even once, not even when I heard the older boys clambering out of their chairs. Something was calling me out there, or something was trying to hurt me in here; I don't know what. I ran as fast as my little legs and a pound of freshly-baked bread could carry me. The door opened and shut, and I still feel like somebody must've opened it for me.

The cold hit my teeth first, then it spread all around me, down to my fingertips and up my nose. I thought, for a moment, that God must've frozen the Earth over, or thrown down another flood, what with how angry he must have been with all our fighting and blowing each other up. I thought he must've looked as sad and tired as Father did. Fresh snow tumbled inside

my boots as the ground became steeper, and once it melted away and wetted my socks, my toes started aching from the raw chill gnawing at them. I had passed a few pines, and now I was in the woods, and now I was still going, still running. To anyone looking out their window that night, I would've looked like that crazy doctor on his dogsled, chasing after his monster; or that pitiful murderer paying his penance out in Siberia. I was freezing to death, and I don't think I minded it much so long as it kept me from thinking about Kiev.

Then, I ran into him like a brick wall. I don't know how I didn't see him coming. How I didn't swerve around him, or find a nice, mangled bush to crouch down in. Maybe I'd been running with my eyes closed. Maybe I was meant to barge into him like that. But, what matters is that I ran into him, and he was kneeling down in the cold snow and holding my shoulders:

"Hey, you alright? You alright, Pav? Pavlo? Breathe. Breathe now."

He put his hand to my forehead, and I felt it there, and it felt good. I thought, for a moment, that I must have been in the presence of an angel.

"You're coming down with something. How long you been out here? Does your Pa know you're gone? Or did you lose him? It's about to start thundering again, c'mon, now. Let's go inside—"

"No!"

"No?"

I crossed my arms across my chest and puffed it out, looking real serious, real grown-up, real solemn-like. I spat. Big, fat tears welled up in my eyes, and I sucked them up in wheezes like it hurt. "You're a liar. God's a liar—you're all liars."

Dima wavered as I tried squirming out from his hands, but he didn't let go. Like a little, sprouting tree rooting itself in a dense, breezy forest, only if it was red-headed and freckle-faced. He'd always looked more like a priest to me than a knight. Like he had a piece of parchment tucked away in his pocket, and he was waiting for me to say something important so he could write it down. I think I must have just then.

"Come on then. We won't go back to your Pa just yet. Get on up. Come on."

He lifted me into his arms, and I buried my nose in the collar of his jacket. There was something wet and warm and red there, but it didn't matter much. I breathed it in, and it smelled like a dozen little wires trapped under his shirt, and I started to imagine I was in the metal embrace of a big, strong, waterproof robot that'd swam from overseas to save me from all this mess.

We came to a log at the utmost edge of the woods, and he sat down on it and pulled me onto his lap. He glanced at his watch, an ugly, bulky thing, before placing his gloved hands on either side of my head. He guided my gaze upwards, upwards, still, until it was set on the horizon.

It was quiet, if only you did not listen close enough. The bear had ducked away into his deep, rocky crevice, and the doe had gone to sleep under a mass of thorny, purple-flowered brush. The frogs had long gone away, lying in wait for their sweet summers, while the owl, perched in his high branch, hummed to himself all night long. From very far away, I could hear a flock of goats bleating under the soft ring of a herder's cowbell. The tiny white, weedy flowers all about our feet seemed to inch toward my boots heels, as if in cowering anticipation.

Dima checked his watch once more and pressed his hands against the sides of my head again, only harder this time.

I thought, for a moment, that it was the sun rising:

It crashed with a muffled boom and burned off, in like colors of orange, red, and a harsh, glowering pink. Pebbles shook about and hopped around, startling the sleeping doe from her sleep. Cowardly white petals clung onto my soles with all of their might, while frogs huddled together beneath the ground at the ugly sound. Pine branches swayed and hit one another like dominos, crows flew out of them in cawing hoards, and the owl soared from his home on trembling wings. The cowbell stopped, and the goats wailed and ran in tandem to their master. I watched the shades decay, and they began to give off black smoke.

Dima had let go of my ears, and now he was talking, and I was still alive somehow, and he was ruffling my cropped hair:

"I'm sorry for lying to you, Pav- but it isn't like this every night. Tonight is pretty. Isn't it?"

"Uh-huh." I'm not sure if I said it out loud, but: "Uh-huh."

I leaned back into his chest, and began to wonder about God and Russia and another frightened boy in a garden and a scared little village full of scared little people everywhere, absolutely everywhere; and I thought, for just a moment, that if that pink-suited newswoman knew there were no knights or squires here—only priests and goats—maybe it wouldn't be such a waste after all.

JUDGE'S COMMENTS

And Great Will Be Their Peace

By Faith Morris

Second Place Undergraduate Short Fiction

Like a strange and ancient folktale, "And Great Will Be Their Peace" feels both enchanted and mundane. It is difficult to write from the point of view of a small child — but little Pav's voice immediately intrigues us, and the inky, dream-like tint of the world he observes and colors for us draws us in. This is a compulsively readable story. Adults appear at turns monstrous, pathetic, and divine; children are rendered with touches of creatureness and mundanity. I was deeply impressed by how the narrative captures the surreal veil of fantasy inherent to childhood, while the greater political events in the background (and the terror they arouse) are filtered through to us, amplifying both their realness and their horror. This is an entirely unique authorial voice, and I am eager to see where this writer's talents take them.

- Fatima Kola

FIRST PLACE GRADUATE CREATIVE NON-FICTION

DEFENSE OF THE LOW-BROW

By Steven Abel

hen I plop down to watch a horror movie, all I need out of it is to be entertained. That's all I'm concerned about. Since the days of pushing VHS tapes of *Last House On The Left* and *Return Of The Living Dead* toward the old Asian man behind the counter of the brick-and-mortar rental shop that he owned, looking first at me and then my mom, nothing matters more to me then when I devote those ninety minutes except for my self-ish visual and mental pleasure. But as an adult, the problem is that I often have just enough time to watch one movie a day. Yet, considering I have a deep love for fried food and value meals, I cannot propose that I will have a long life— a life where I would become an old man happily withering away, stuffing my face with Mcdoubles, while my eyes are glued to a television. So, what time *I do* have left, I endeavor to do what has always made me happy since being able to rent movies for ninety-nine cents: watching horror movies.

Having spent time in academia, I am inclined to take the horror genre that I love and deconstruct each bit to define, analyze, and categorize what captivated me in my youth and still consumes my bouts of laziness. I am asked to look deeply into the subject matter to draw conclusions about race, sexuality, and social and economic class structures. But if I can only fit one horror movie into my day, can I watch horror films without looking at each frame or line of dialogue for a more profound meaning? Is it possible to remove theory from my viewing of a scary movie? Are we simply bullshitting ourselves, engaging in an academic circle jerk? Are

we taking the fun out of the flicks by overanalyzing the horror genre?

However, my most pressing concern is whether horror films should even be viewed academically or theoretically.

Before I entered my thirties, I would have participated in placing specific subgenres and eras of horror films into the realm of an academic. Be it Giallo of the sixties, the social horror of the seventies, the slashers of the eighties, the meta craze of the nineties, torture porn of the early two thousands, the words "post horror," "art horror," "slow horror," and "elevated horror," would have easily been thrown around. I was very much guilty of what David Church claims in *Post Horror: Art, Genre and Cultural Elevation* about the die-hard fans of horror:

Whereas many horror fans suggest that "elevated" and "post" demean the genre as a whole by implicitly upholding its presumed lack of cultural capital — which fans' own deep knowledge of the genre's historical and artistic diversity would challenge — it is unsurprising that professional critics are more sympathetic to such labels. After all, their (economic) raison d'être primarily resides in making evaluative judgments of individual texts. ¹

Indeed, like the coiner of the term post-horror, Steven Rose, I too was all too happy to brag that the great horror films "refashion[ed] horror tropes with an auteur sensibility," in my hopes to be professional within film criticism. To me, horror was an art form, complete with talented filmmakers and wizards of special effects. Like all other genres, it deserved to be brought to the upper echelon of mainstream education by the strongest critical minds of culture and film. Matt Hill made a similar argument, suggesting that the "lines of cultural demarcation around film as art are stretched as avant-garde legitimacy is discursively borrowed when the umbrella of avant-gardism is extended to analyze seemingly low texts." ³

But now I know what my parents knew back in the nineties when they would rent those VHS tapes for me. There is no way around this truth: horror movies will always be low-brow

for the Lowbrow.

However, where my parent's thoughts on horror were based on taste, the Highbrow—the wealthy—discusses horror in scholastic and theoretical terms but cannot recognize the connection between the Lowbrow, low-brow, and horror. Low-brow and horror are not a matter of taste but refer to the group of people from which horror was born and who share in its owner-ship—the Lowbrow. Lowbrow's culture, which includes horror, is predicated on the bank account of one's parents at the time of their birth and the lack of money in their upbringing. The wealthy Highbrow is unaware that low-brow culture, horror films, Lowbrow, and the poor are the same thing.

Mellissa Mercero correctly points out that "the horror genre has always been understood as a popular genre, significantly oriented toward what critics have often called a working-class audience, and argues that it is not only designed to appeal to the working class but is also crucially about the working class." ⁴

Despite agreeing with Mercero that the genre is of a specific economic class, I do not appreciate those who substitute the poor for the working class. While one may switch between low-brow, Lowbrow, and poor because they are the same, the idea of being working class is too soft for describing those who enjoy the butchering of teens, impregnation by Satan, and raperevenge stories for entertainment. After all, wealth determines cultures. Morris Holbrook suggests that,

members of a given social class are characterized by a habitus, a lifestyle -shaping "generative principle "that governs dispositions to prefer certain cultural objects whose appreciation helps to confer class-based distinctions. In part, the habitus results from some combination of economic capital (wealth, income) and cultural capital (family, friends, education, training).⁵

The generative principle that creates the dispositions of the Lowbrow who designed and shaped horror stems from a continuous period of poverty. The people of the low-brow—which should be considered an ethnic group in itself for horror is inclusive to religious, national, and racial backgrounds—have formed their culture based on their living with no, or little to no, wealth. In poverty, one only accrues cultural norms rather than a position to garner wealth or increase social standing over another. The Lowbrow does not have a hierarchy between people nor create hierarchical systems for traditions and art. In the case of the horror genre, there is no hierarchy between subgenres. The only concern of horror and the Lowbrow regarding hierarchies is when it compares and contrasts to the mainstream.

Back in 1974, Henry Winthrop helped separate low-brow from the mainstream (highbrow) when he dumbed down his description of the low-brow arguing that "Lowbrow culture is characterized by greater vulgarity and crassness than mass culture." Unlike dramas, which want their viewers to think critically, and look for innovative ways to create verisimilitude to extract emotional connection to the picture, who avoid crassness, horror, at its core, revolves around the murders and terrorizing of humans.

But if we are looking for a more accurate, less technical summary of the people of the Lowbrow community from which I was born and reside, the lovers of horror, I find that Walter Murdoch does it best:

By "low brow," then, I mean not merely the stupid person, but the person who is content with his stupidity; not merely the ignoramus, but the person who glories in his ignorance. I mean the person who stares at the procession of life as a cow stares at a passing train; the person for whom material comfort means everything and a high civilization nothing; the person for whom the intellectual achievements of the race have no meaning; the person who cares not at all for art or letters, or even science except as science supplies him with convenient gadgets....his ideas are crude, his tastes barbaric; he has no fineness of mind and he scorns fineness of mind in others.⁷

Believing Murdoch to be correct, then that which stems from the Lowbrow's culture, which horror is a product of the Lowbrows, any critical exploration into the genre is a waste of time because the current goal for the Highbrow and learned individual is to select films within the horror genre to determine if they are elevated-horror, art-horror, or post-horror. These films cannot be brought to the mainstream, for they are barbaric in content and derived from barbaric Lowbrow minds. But what makes these films truly incongruous to elevation or academic acclaim is not that the Highbrow cannot understand the finer parts of filmmaking, but they do not understand the language of horror.

Like all cultures, horror and the Lowbrow have their own language. Where Gilles Deleuze believes that "a minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language," I have determined that the new minor literature is the horror film, and the language of horror films are unable to be constructed. One cannot put one morpheme in a position next to another to form a word. The syntax and grammar of horror films are unreadable. "Only the possibility of setting up a minor practice of a major from within allows one to define populature, marginal literature, and so on". Thus, this indecipherable language born into and living within the mainstream built the Lowbrow and lowbrow culture.

Conversely, the language of horror films cannot be deconstructed. It cannot be explained, defined, analyzed, or taught. The expression of its directors, actors, special effects teams, editors, etc., is incomprehensible. One must have been born as a Lowbrow and lived in the low-brow to know what is being expressed. Still, what appears on the screen and the audio of the moving pictures are even to the co-owners of the genre unable to be grasped, expounded, or digested. As Deleuze said of Kafka and Prauger-Jewish writers forced to write in German, suggesting that "Prague German is a deteritorliazed language, appropriate for strange and minor uses," ¹⁰ I now rip off his idea and demand that horror is a language from the low-brow, of the

Lowbrow, with its own rules that, just as with porn, we know it when we see it.

Additionally, Deleuze's reference to a collectivization of a minor language may be appropriated to address the horror genre's communal and concentrated life force. Deleuze comments that for minor languages, "there isn't a subject; *there are only collective assembalges of enunciation.*" I contend that all components of horror films (acting, directing, writing, special effects, editing) bind the people of the low-brow insofar as language, food, and clothing band ethnic groups.

What we see on screen and hear through speakers are the cultural connections held together by a language shared throughout the slums and ghettos of any capitalist society. In the United States, the vast majority of major crimes that occur within both rural and urban areas are committed by and upon the poor. In the slums and ghettos of the United States, the violence, terrorism, and criminal activity of its communities support the law enforcement and the firearm industries, which fuels the Highbrow's continued dominance over the Lowbrow. But where the cultural and academic Highbrows believe the images and sound of horror films are a representation of the culture that they oversee, they ignore that all the consequences of crime and poverty are not themes or representations but are the components of the language. The murders, rapes, theft, blood and guts are the vowels, consonants, syntax, subject, and verbs of the Lowbrow's language. Stated bluntly, all that a horror film presents is the Lowbrow's language.

However, it must be noted that I will not appropriate Deleuze's second characteristics of minor literature for my defense of horror as low-brow. Deleuze believed that minor literature was inherently political. He argued that minor literature's "cramp space forces each individual intrigue to become political". I, however, adamantly stand firm on the notion that horror films are incapable of being political. The crudeness, vulgarity, violence, sexuality, sexism, and racism are symptoms of the culture in which it belongs, a culture that holds no seat in any political realm. In other words, the nature of horror movies prevents them from being political because

the Lowbrow are not represented in the political sphere. More to the point, horror cannot be political since the power of politics resides with the Highbrow. For the overeducated and the rich, horror is a genre of the poor, and just as they do with the poor, horror and its low-brow culture are easy enough to have their fun with but never settle down with.

But that does not dismiss the idea that horror films provide an outlet for the poor to find a cultural footing by artistically "eating the rich," as the communists like to say. Horror movies are often the site for the poor to combat the need of the wealthy to dominate. For Sharon Diane King, the wealthy, those of the highbrow, prefer to "triumph those that have much in taking from those that have little or merely less. It is the tensive link between rapaciousness and impoverishment: pleonexia." She goes on to argue, "It is the sense that their riches are to be enjoyed at others' expense; the sense that they, and only they, are entitled to them, and may use them in any manner whatsoever to get their own way." The Lowbrow man uses horror to steal the Highbrow man's pleonexia and uses it against them.

We only have to look back at the biggest slasher film of the eighties to see the working class hunting the Highbrow. In *Friday the 13th*, Pamela Vorhees, a single mother, takes revenge on middle-class camp counselors— teens who can be carefree with labor because it is only a "summer job." However, "summer jobs" are the prerogative of those who do not need to hold onto any job that comes their way. For Kara Kvaran "slasher films can be seen as a counterpoint to the dominant ideology, one that through incredibly violent allegory represented the failings of the modern economy." Thus, if one is inclined to waste time on layering a low-budget slasher with economic theory, Pamela Vorhees's assault on Camp Krystal Lake employees can be viewed through the lens of capitalistic domination failing the lowest economic class to deliver goods and services— an exploitation, or robbery, of the poor's hard earned money in a modern economy of low-quality goods and service for high profits.

It has become apparent that these films are rooted in the poor and poor tastes. So, if the

characters that moviegoers rally behind are the slashers, the embodiment of the low social and economic classes, and those of the low-brow partake in the crass that the mass rejects, how then can the Highbrow uplift these films?

All attempts to move these films into the world of Highbrow, where they can be validated, empowered, and legitimized, make those attempting to do so look foolish. Ultimately, I fear that we are trying to take one of the lowest aspects of low-brow culture— one rung above professional wrestling, a glorious pastime of the poor in its own right— and place it into the hands of the Highbrow. If it is true that "every generation has coined its own slang for that combination of stupidity and ignorance and complacent contempt for things of the mind which we, not very successfully, try to sum up in the term low-brow," then now elevated horror and the like is the method by which academics maneuver to take what I love most dearly and warp it into something past unadulterated entertainment. To view a horror film other than for entertainment is a waste of one's time.

One reason for this misstep of academics and the Highbrow in pursuing analysis and theory of horror is that those with bright minds and a love of horror need work. With print media dying, and no one ever actually reading academic papers, "the economics of film criticism is now largely driven by web traffic." He went on to suggest that this exploration or *deep dives* into horror "actually is a symptom of traditional gatekeepers' loosened grip on film-critical discourse as journalism's economic model shifts." Yet, the educated and man of means cannot let go of their upper-class interest in the socioeconomic classes beneath them.

The mistake by academics and the wealthy of hoping to find work by vivisecting horror by often looking for allegories, themes, filmic techniques, and representations is because they are blind and deaf to the concept of images and sound components of a language that opposes wealth and any association of highbrow. All horror "oppose a purely intensive usages of language to all symbolic or even significant or simply usages of it." Indeed, horror draws audi-

ences to the cinema or invites subscribers to stream because it defies those in positions of authority. Horror does not have to dare to defy oppositional forces. Its very nature combats Lowbrow's subjugators. Like minor literature, horror's low-brow nature defies the Highbrow since its language preserves the "revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature." ²⁰

It must be noted that non-horror classic films are products of the wealthy establishment, just as horror films are products of the poor. No different than horror perpetuating the language of the Lowbrow, the films of the upper classes perpetuate the language of the Highbrow. They reinvigorate their audiences by going back to the *good old days*. They showcase men being gentlemanly while staying true to the virtues of courage and manliness. They highlight women who uphold their subjugation but tease flawed behavior. All one has to do is sit down to watch Anthony Mann's *Men in War*, George Cukor's *My Fair Lady*, Budd Boetticher's *Bullfighter and the Lady*. Even contemporary films, which at first glance subverts the tropes of the Highbrow's classic cinema, still engage in the language of the wealthy. Where *Brokeback Mountain* reverses the affair narrative by having its protagonists engage in a homosexual affair, there still lingers a conflict of one character upholding their homophobic subjugation while his lover shows courage to combat homosexual prejudice. Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* dazzles audiences with its technical scope, delivering a statement for ecological protection and education funding, but still revolves around a woman's need to be reunited with her lover and a father upholding a sense of manliness to get back to his family.

The films of the wealthy, curated into the categorization of classic or award-winning, can never push back against authority. Dramas are products of the Highbrow's language, which aims to instill in the general public that they are the authority. These are the films that are being pushed back by horror. The content of a film like *Brokeback Mountain* or *Interstellar* does not matter. To Deleuze, "there is nothing that is major or revolutionary except the minor." It is the

Lowbrow's horror genre that is revolutionary due to being the ones on the marginalization of the dominant class, who, with their murders, premarital sex, and thin plots, are the ones cursing out, swinging at, and refusing to give into the center's demands.

Then, it would only be practical to agree with Thomas Cripps that the new minds of film and cultural studies are "the academic highbrow who earns his keep by studying the low brow."²² But the problem for the Highbrows heehawing of the merits of horror films is that they cannot admit they are not members of the low-brow. After all, those born or learned in highbrow culture share the affinity of fearing to be an elite. Even in 1937, Walter Murdoch knew it was luring to be a member of the low-brow, demanding that the "highbrow is quite usual to boast of being a low brow; you never hear anyone confess to being a high-brow."²³

But the Highbrows are also manipulating the conversation by suggesting that those of the low-brow who are firm in their knowledge of their genre, of their culture, are themselves elitists. Church implies that owners of horror are averse to critical discourse for the sole purpose of losing a cultural commodity:

An important subcurrent of counter-discourse exists among fans who specifically frame the horror genre's value not despite, but precisely because, of its cultural reputation as a "low" and/or populist form. Though these fans share the stance that horror does not need qualitative modifiers like "elevated" and "post," the doubt they cast on post-horror's critical embrace is rooted less in advocating for the overall genre as always, and already worthy of cultural esteem than a nagging feeling that cultural esteem is an undesirable goal in itself.²⁴

To an extent, I agree with Church. I do not want nor need those who seek to pluck one of the few articles that the poor own and move it into the hands of those who cannot understand the genre. In that sense, I am a horror elitist. However, it is manipulative of the Highbrows to position this cultural theft as a poor man's elitism when it all but amounts to cultural gentrification. Not content with cosplaying as a Lowbrow, the Highbrows love to ramble on about *cultural capital*. One only has to read David Church's *Post Horror: Art, Genre and Cultural Elevation* to absorb academic nomenclature akin to 1966's *Batman*. One might expect Adam West to camp up a performance with the lines:

both professional film critics and genre fans may know how to appreciate the "difficult" formal and stylistic qualities of art-horror films that alienate viewers with less cultural capital. Yet, when fans' high cultural tastes and practices are nested within niche appreciation of a genre too often considered beneath "serious" aesthetic contemplation, we might use the conjunction "(sub)cultural capital" to connote the provisional status of cultural capitals that are not yet seen as fully "legitimate" because originally honed within the realm of subcultural tastes. ²⁵

When Church speaks of subcultural capital, we are witnessing a forced divorce of subgenres. Make no mistake, there are subgenres of horror. One can't help but differentiate *The Fly* from *Cannibal Holocaust*— one deals with the body (body horror), and the other represents documentaries as exploitation (found footage). Or, to deny that *Black Christmas* (slasher) and *The Exorcist* (paranormal) are not branches of the same genre tree, one runs the risk of talking out of their ass. But one would definitely be talking out of their ass if they claim or imply that one subgenre holds more cultural capital than another.

It is pointless to parse horror subgenres to denote which films are elevated, to decide which subgenre weighs more in cultural capital, when all horror movies are inherently Lowbrow and low-brow. It is no different than one homeless man gloating over another homeless man for being not as poor. Though, Church rightly states that professional critics and academics still perform the charade of assigning more cultural capital to one subgenre than another. It is a worthless endeavor to make one subgenre wealthier over another "because subcultural capital is more difficult to convert into recognizably "legitimate" cultural capital when accrued around media genres that are already considered culturally disreputable."

Still, Church does engage in using the art-horror and elevated horror terminology to make the distinction in the technical prowess of horror filmmaking. In the manner of someone who knows they're doing something wrong but still forces an excuse, he reasons why:

the compound noun "art-horror" is far less an evaluative modification of the genre label than a much more literal means of evoking the combination of art cinema as a formally distinctive mode of film practice and the horror genre as an established set of storytelling conventions, iconography, and themes. In other words, I am not using the term to effectively say "These films are 'art,' unlike most horror movies" (as the epithet "elevated horror" implies), but rather to directly allude to the stylistic methods used by these filmmakers in approaching the genre. ²⁷

For Church, to be worthy of elevation is not a matter of content, but if they are aesthetically pleasing.

Therefore, we start to see the methodology of how the Highbrow robs the Lowbrow of their film genre. They perform the gentrification of horror movies in the Lowbrow's neighborhood in two ways, both of which avoid the language of horror. First, for new films, they focus on the aesthetic and technical creation of horror films. Second, for films of the past, they investigate themes in horror movies. In the end, both reach the same conclusion: these films are not quite horror because they are elevated above the genre.

Take, for example, cultural and film critics' love for *It Follows*, *The Witch*, and *It Comes at Night*. To be granted an overview of the highbrow's positive reaction to the aforementioned films, Church's writings can be read as speaking for the lot. To him and other upper strata of film intellectuals, these post-horror movies

emerged from the crucible of major film festivals like Sundance and Toronto with significant critical buzz for supposedly transcending the horror genre's oft presumed lowbrow status. These films represent one of the horror genre's

most important trends since the turn of the twenty-first century, as a major site of both artistic innovation and cultural distinction. As just one example of how traditional gatekeepers of cultural taste have embraced these films, three-quarters of the entries on a recent New York Times list of the best "21st Century Horror" films belong to the emerging corpus of films that, for the sake of expedience, I will refer to across this book as post-horror. ²⁸

As mentioned earlier, to Church, these post-horror, elevated horror, or art horror films are tied by aesthetics. He writes that "form and style are far more functional elements uniting these films as a shared corpus than the morass of critical labels more promiscuously applied to horror films that may or may not evince the distinctly austere aesthetic seen at the heart of the corpus." Church seemingly approves of this aestheticism over genre conventions by suggesting that their box office success is evidence of elevation. He writes, "post-horror films are increasingly finding a home in multiplexes," because new horror films are "more likely offering de-sensationalized takes on genre conventions and privileging visual restraint over exaggerated displays of spectacularly opened bodies." ³¹

Certainly, *It Comes At Night*, or *The Witch*, were not putting asses in seats by advertising a fast pace and a high body count. By associating *It Comes At Night* and *The Witch* with slower-paced but critically acclaimed Ti West films *House Of The Devil* and *The Inn Keeper*, the highbrow man praises movies that are "leisurely paced narratives, atmospheric restraint, and eschew graphic violence and jump scares."

For all the good qualities *It Follows*, *It Comes At Night*, and *The Witch* possesses, which one admits there is plenty to be found, these films take on the visual and sound manner of the Highbrow preferred film style: void of quick cuts, a lack of immediate moments that scare the shit out of a viewer, and poor decision making by its characters. What these elevated horror movies represent is the adoption of a genre to please the Highbrow. Since the Highbrow cannot admit they are Highbrow, they find it easier to adopt the low-brow specifics they enjoy but rearrange them to fit their sensibilities. Matthew Flanagan likens post-horror to slow cinema since

both are "aesthetically distinguished by "(often extremely) long takes, decentered and understated modes of storytelling, and a pronounced emphasis on quietude and the every day."³³

Consequently, the movies that require one's heart to beat faster, grand sets, and all the blood and gore a special effects department can afford are often disqualified from receiving an elevated status. In art horror, the filmmakers aim to provide audiences with places they think their viewers have been, with pacing as if they have nothing else to do that day, with very little to no atmospheric reminders that they are watching a movie blaring from the auditorium speakers.

But since the Highbrow cannot admit they are Highbrow, they often turn to sociological theory to justify their influences on horror. Church suggests that slow horror "resonates with "slow food," "slow scholarship," and other movements framed as reactions against the increasing speed of twenty-first-century life." If Church wanted to be succinct with his words, he should have written those other films don't look as nice or have the same pacing as the ones I like. Or he could have written, those horror films that don't require too much brain power are too low-brow to be saved.

For it is only in academia or among the Highbrows that there is a current to slow things down. This campaign for a slower way of life is a cry for leisure, an activity that has always been for the privileged few. The Lowbrows have always found it necessary to make proper use of their limited free time. Thorstein Veblan notes that for the poor, "labor is their recognized and accepted mode of life, they take some emulative pride in a reputation for efficiency in their work, this being often the only line of emulation that is open to them."³⁵ To take one time's is not viable for those who spend their days working. For if an American is in the low-brow, their entire day is consumed by labor: one must wake up earlier than the body wants, must prepare themselves for the day, forced feed themselves, and travel to work, all before spending the required eight hours—add into the time to return home, do household chores, eat, all one has left

is to sleep. If in "the nature of things, luxuries and the comforts of life belong to the leisure class," the Lowbrow are not afforded the practice of taking things slow. This attempt to slow things down is a reminder that "the performance of labour has been accepted as a conventional evidence of inferior force." And, as noted earlier, horror films are synonymous with the poor. This means that to propagate slow horror as an advanced stylistic form of the genre, one must infer that the academic and Highbrow view horror and the Lowbrow as an inferior force.

While contemporary films claim elevation for stylistic purposes, horror films of the past are judged by their themes if they want to be referred to as art-horror, post-horror, or elevated horror.

We do not need to look further than what cultural and film professionals are doing to George Romero. In the case of Romero *Of The Dead* trilogy, Romero becomes a left-wing radical, not only making statements but raising Texas-size flags for anti-consumerism and a champion to combat white toxic masculinity. Steven Shaviro cannot hide his erection when he describes Romero as "the pornographer, the anthropologist, the allegorist, and the radical critic of contemporary American culture. He gleefully uncovers the hidden structures of our society in the course of charting the progress of its disintegration." In fact, Shaviro's love for Romero's thematic sensibility is none apparent as to when he coopts Deleuze's quote "the only modern myth is the myth of zombies—mortified schizos, good for work, brought back to reason," to place the mantle of myth-maker to Romero.

In the case of *Dawn of The Dead*, theorists situate their intelligence on Zombies attacking the few living people in a shopping mall. The highbrow do not see that a shopping mall is not merely a way to contain a narrative, it is to them a way to make a statement on American capitalism. To Shaviro, the flesh-eating undead cannot just be ghouls for ghouls' sake. To him and other highbrows,

The zombies are not an exception to, but a positive expression of, consumerist desire. They emerge not from the dark, disavowed underside of suburban life but from its tacky, glittering surfaces. They embody and mimetically reproduce those very aspects of contemporary American life that are openly celebrated by the media... Our society endeavors to transform death into value, but the zombies enact a radical refusal and destruction of value. They come after, and in response to, the capitalist logic of production and transformation; they live off the detritus of industrial society and are perhaps an expression of its ecological waste.⁴⁰

Highbrows aims to represent *Dawn of the Dead* as a filmic *Little Red Book* against capitalism. The undead creatures of Dawn are the "living dead [that] emerge out of the deathly distance of allegory; their fictive presence allows Romero to anatomize and criticize American society, not by portraying it naturalistically, but by evacuating and eviscerating it." In this context, the mannequins stop being set pieces and become a tool for Romero to perpetuate his allegory. The bright colors of stores and advertisements undisturbed are not there to indicate that they are the shopping mall can be the remaining humans' last chance of survival and a connection to the life they once knew, but a way to suggest that post-World War Two middle-class consumerism lives, thrives, and duplicates itself by needing to constantly bombard consumers with leisure commodities. The zombies themselves are not monsters designed to create conflict for the protagonists but become a mimic device for those watching films— addictive consumers are brain-dead capitalists.

But the plots of *Dawn of the Dead* and *It Follows* rebuke the chance of being elevated into highbrow culture. The plots alone should raise eyebrows, or at the very least, cause us to develop a sense of skepticism when we look past these aesthetics and technical achievements.

In *It Follows* (2024), Jay Height has sex with her boyfriend in the back seat of his car. She's chloroformed right after, and when she awakes, she is tied to a chair in a dilapidated building. Confused and frightened, she is informed that through their intercourse, he has passed

on a slow-moving entity that can take the appearance of any person which will kill her until she has sex with someone else; and if that entity kills that person, it will return to kill the person who has passed on the entity. After her obligatory scene of disbelief, Jay acknowledges that the entity is real and proceeds to have intercourse with anyone willing.

However, Jay neglects to inform all the people she has sex with, which prompts the entity to stalk her after killing those she had sex with. With the help of her friend Paul, Jay lured the entity to a swimming pool in order to electrocute it. When the electrocution does not kill the entity, Paul shoots the entity, seemingly killing it. Unsure if the entity is dead, Paul and Jay have sex. In the closing scenes, Jay and Paul pass sex workers, which we are to infer that he has passed on the entity to them.

In Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*, a police force is tasked to raid a low-income housing project (made up of primarily black and Latino residents) who refuse to hand over their dead to government officials. After completing their task of dispatching the dead bodies, officers Roger Demarco and Peter Washington become cynical over the chance of survival and the government's handling of the zombie outbreak. One of their officers informs another that their friends, a local TV station employee, Fran Parker, and her pilot boyfriend, Stephen Andrews, have planned to steal the station's helicopter.

Together, the four seek places to go for survival but find nothing to land on except for a shopping mall. Having entered the mall, they proceed to fortify certain areas and live peacefully for a short time despite a few zombies still walking around the mall. But the helicopter is too big not to be noticed, spotted by a gang of motorcycle bandits. When the bandits break into the mall, a horde of zombies enters with them; feeling defensive, Stephen Andrews fights back, doing enough damage to fend off the bandits' attack but are overwhelmed by the zombies. After Stephen Andrews becomes surrounded, bitten, and commits suicide, Peter and Fran flee to nowhere on their helicopter.

Despite believing that *Dawn of the Dead* is a horror classic, and *It Follows* will earn that moniker in the future, we are not discussing a *King Lear* or *Schindler's List*. Fitting into Deleuze's third characteristic of minor literature, *Dawn of the Dead* or *It Follows*, cannot be worthy of heavy academic discourse. These films are speaking in a minor language, an indecipherable language at that, which provides "no possibilities for an individuated enunciation that would belong to this or that "master" and that could be separated from a collective enunciation." For any work of art to be elevated by the Highbrows, there must be categorization. For film theorists, the academic must decide which director has a body of work that surpasses critical expectations; they are required to study the cinematographer's use of all available techniques; they are obligated to rate actors' performances against all others. But horror films cannot be put into categories. To determine categorization, a subject must be available to be studied. How can a genre be studied when no one knows the language? Any study of horror is a waste of time.

The implication found in film critics' and academics' praises for elevated horror is what disgusts me the most. The inference a Lowbrow must make is that horror films that stick to genre conventions are too Lowbrow to save. If people and culture are one, it stands to reason that the Highbrow, the wealthy, and the educated view that certain people of a social and economic class are too much of a hassle to bring into the middle class or mainstream culture—

Lowbrow deplorables. The inference one must make is that the Lowbrows need to be saved. I think not.

But to be more exact, low-brow culture cannot be saved by anyone, even by its own, for it is too deeply entrenched in the dreadful and abysmal sewers of a capitalist world. In any quest for aesthetic satisfaction and cultural elevation, Winthrop would suggest low-brow culture "exhibits such extreme limitations of taste."

One might suggest that a critique of a film genre or a particular film does not issue

comments on one person, a group of people, or a culture. But to separate the Lowbrow from its culture and language is to remove the realities of the life that the Lowbrow must endure. To Winthrop, it is "not unreasonable, in a broad and suggestive sense, to speak of the existence of a lowbrow consciousness and a lowbrow psyche."⁴⁴ In this sense, I partially agree with Winthrop.

The Lowbrow consciousness and psyche is a singular, collective hivemind that supports itself in spite of the Highbrow. Its most prized possession, horror, is the middle finger to subjugation, elitism, and hierarchical systems. And while horror is a minor language and the new minor literature, the biggest fuck you to the Highbrow, wealthy, and academic is that it is the most entertaining of all film genres. Horror lures all those willing to devote ninety minutes to looking at a screen. It is a genre so fascinating and thrilling that it makes the upper classes look incompetent in their pursuit of stealing it, full of a rich language preventing even those born and bred in it from understanding its complexities. With horror, all one can do is sit back and enjoy. Everything else is a waste of time.

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JUDGE'S COMMENTS

Defense of the Low-Brow

By Steven Abel

First Place
Graduate
Creative Non-Fiction

"Defense of Low-Brow" is a deeply sophisticated, well-researched, and probing meditation on the intersection of economic class and art. The strength of this submission is a combination of thorough reporting and an emotionally resonant and meditative voice—one that is familiar, intimate, and embedded—that ushers in larger questions on culture and entertainment. Of particular note and admiration was the author's exhaustive examination of the effects of a capitalist society—one where leisure is a thing of luxury—on genre and the way horror knowingly, and quite intelligently, explores and engages these dynamics.

- Amy Butcher

SECOND PLACE GRADUATE CREATIVE NON-FICTION

SOLILOQUY

By Madeline Humphreys

his story has been told before.

She sits at an old computer, a laptop, staring at a blank screen, a blank page.

It's a cliché. Repetitive. Boring. No one needs to hear this.

They want a poem. Or a story. Or an essay. Something. Anything, maybe, if they get desperate enough. She taps a few keys just to see what shape the letters can make on the screen. None of it will form a sentence, not right now. She thinks, I have ten essays due but still you want a poem—the pavement outside can burn skin within thirty seconds of contact, the neighbors haven't been outside for days, the kids across the street cry every hour, but still you want a poem—the most narcissistic man in the world just got elected highest office and still you want a poem—women probably won't be able to get birth control soon and rapists won't be held accountable even if the worst happens and the woman won't be able to do anything about it because somehow a little collection of cells counts as a greater life than hers and still you want me to write a poem—the world is burning, we're losing oxygen daily, the plants can't keep up with the industry we tax it with, billionaires are buying more and more land and destroying the minimal greenery that's left on our poor earth but they won't be taxed with anything, won't be asked to give their fair share because they've never been told no before in their lives, and still you want me to write you a poem—the English department is getting gutted, again, and my current program is dying because professors are retiring or leaving for better paying jobs because we don't pay them enough here, because the arts aren't important anymore—don't you get it? the arts aren't important anymore, no one reads books anymore, you're part of a dying sect that

won't exist in twenty, ten, five years, you're getting a degree in a useless subject, the one that people look at you and ask, what are you going to do with that? knowing full well you don't know, that there is nothing, there won't be anything to do with that because no one wants to do anything with that, no one reads anymore, no one wants a story or a poem or a novel or an essay, we want real jobs like doctors and engineers and politicians and researchers, real work, the ones that make society go 'round because without us there would be no life—but still we want a poem. For a contest, you see. You could make money from this. See how important your work is? We'll pay you. (This is the only time you'll get paid for it in your life. So write us a poem. Or a story. Or an essay.)

She snaps her laptop shut and sighs. The other day she had scrolled on her phone, coming across a spoken-word poem, a beautiful short story wrapped up in a couple of lines, a couple of syllables squeezed through the lips. A piece that paralleled a decaying flower to grief, the power of transformation and rebirth, familiarity and change. The speaker bowed their head when they finished and the audience yelped with applause. Even she had wiped a tear from her cheek as she watched from her phone, thinking about being in that room, surrounded by people reveling in the speaker's words. But then she had opened the comment section and sighed.

what a pretentious shitshow

so glad i can scroll away

the audience is braindead – who actually likes this shit?

and the crowd was ...ecstatic? wtf is wrong with the world today lol

so glad the comments didnt disappoint, this was terrible

no one even likes poetry anymore

go back to the kitchen where u belong

bring back bullying

never getting my time back

wait this wasnt supposed to be funny?

u mean to tell me people get degrees to do this shit

this is why people dont read poetry anymore

She thinks about how she had slapped her phone face-down on her thigh, had closed her eyes in anger. She thinks, for just a second—I wish those people could see how empty their lives would be without art, without entertainment to turn to, I wish those people's families would die so they could realize how lost they'd be without a poem to describe how they feel—and then, eyes flying open,

—oh please god I didn't mean that, you know I didn't mean that, I'm so sorry, please keep their families safe, keep my family safe, please don't spite me, I don't mean that, I don't want anything bad to happen to their families, I'm just angry, you see? please—

and she thinks about how no one knows that she prays to god but I guess they do now, don't they? It's a flimsy kind of prayer, she thinks, not real, not good enough, maybe. Only there to ease the worry. (But what if that is all prayer is?)

JUDGE'S COMMENTS

Soliloquy By Madeline Humphreys

Second Place Graduate Creative Non-Fiction

"Soliloquy" is a meta, self-aware exploration of how we spend our time and how futile and fruitless, at times, these endeavors may seem. Cognizant to the larger political and geopolitical landscape all around us, the essay argues that so much of what gives us pleasure—the creation of art, our larger studies—has been flattened in the current political and cultural landscape, and despite its more difficult subject matter, the essayist also demonstrates a remarkable sense of levity and humor that buoys this work.

- Amy Butcher

FIRST PLACE UNDERGRADUATE CREATIVE NON-FICTION

MY HOME KEY

By The Phoenix

"Maps are a polite fiction. They never tell the whole story. They don't mark important things, like graves or genocides" (Osman, 2017).

ome, the sound of clashing sea waves across the land outside my window, the five minutes it takes to go from one place to another, the small bubble that surrounds my city like it's not being called and known to outsiders like an open-air prison, the fishermen that are always smiling at the port, the small library right next door or the mosque at the end of the street. My home is a city that has lost all its landmarks and cannot be described no matter how much I try because it won't give it justice.

Map One

Looking straight at a map hung up in English class in a country that people dream of coming to. Trying to find my country on a piece of paper that people follow as a guide of history. This leads me back to the same question that always lingered at the back of my mind: How can a map be an accurate representation of history when it managed to wipe the history of a country in a swipe of a pen? A name swiped and replaced by another in a stance of power. I started my exchange year by attending my junior year of high school in the United States to share the culture and history of my home country, Palestine. Which some would consider a kind of hypocri-

sy since every single document I had to sign or fill out while being there, would make me fill out my country as Gaza Strip instead of Palestine. Dismissing the existence of my culture and history altogether. It was my choice to leave; I looked at it as a step toward a better future, an opportunity to explore and discover, maybe even educate people about Palestine. During my stay, I got the occasional wandering eyes, the bomb jokes every now and then, and, of course, the ignorant talks that never acknowledged that Palestine was an independent country before 1948, Its own figure on the map with borders, culture, history and the fervent denial that what happened to it and it's people is a form of ethnic cleansing.

Map Two

The trip back home was infused with a mix of emotions. The happiness of finally seeing my family but the attachment I had for my friends and the life I had experienced in the U.S. A bittersweet moment trying to take in how much the city had grown and changed from the smallest flowers blooming to the huge construction buildings that turned into brand new complexes. The small cafes near the sea turned into restaurants, and even the sun grew more defined in a way of its own. In a way, I felt I didn't recognize it, but when June's wind came and wrapped its hands around me like a comforting mother, it betrayed me, not preparing me for what would happen next. The three months I spent back home flew in the blink of an eye, crashed face forward, flipping my life upside down. On a Saturday morning, I found myself being shaken awake by my mother, telling me to pack. She panicked: "This war is not like the others that we have lived through" Her maternal instinct was telling her. My childish 16-year-old mind packed my school papers, pajamas, sweatpants, dismissing the alarm that rang through in my mom's voice. She was overreacting like a typical Arab mom. Two days and we will be back, or so I thought.

That day, I left my home, closed the door, and looked back, not knowing I would never be able

to return. A new life started that moment, the total displacement leaving my neighborhood to evacuate south of the city following a published safe zone, another map, but how can I trust a map made by someone who destroyed the living and the dead. Days turned into weeks, and weeks turned into months of numbness; the sounds of bombs turned into a rhythm that we eventually faded into the background. The casual conversations became defined by vocal discussions about politics. The main question circling in people's minds is, "When will we return?". I got used to this question hearing my grandpa ask it every single day to my mom "العنا متى راجعين" (When will we go back?) with a heavy heart, she always told him "كمان يومين" (Two more days).

While waiting for those two days to come, his heart could not handle it, and he passed away, still waiting to go back. My seventeenth birthday came around, I didn't get a candle to blow, but the night sky gave me more candles than I could ever count that night; looking back at it, I feel childish instead of being grateful for the blessing of living another year that day I spent it crying, while in the same exact moment, people got martyred.

Map Three

Summer became Spring, a silly night in October expecting to return, leaving everything that I used to know behind. April second, I still remember it like the back of my hand, crossing a border to Egypt, another invisible line that defines safety. Just because I crossed a border, I'm now "safe," I'm still breathing the same air walking on the same ground that people eight miles away die on, questioning how this is fair, how we let another map line define who gets to live and who dies? During my six months spent in the war, I didn't have any source of connection to the outside world. To me, life was ending, and the world was collapsing; to others across the globe, it was nothing new, just some war news somewhere in the Middle East. Egypt was a dream to reach for people in Gaza, and I finally reached that. I couldn't enjoy this dream no matter what;

it was more of a nightmare combining the guilt of surviving and the longing for my home, if one could call it that way, being so close to home but so far to reach, away from my friends and family, living a life that is considered privileged compared to how we were struggling to find food, water and most importantly a place inside that "Safe Zone." The survivors' guilt ate me inside out, blaming the world, asking why I got to get here and they didn't. I had to graduate this year; I knew I could not lose a year; I am too stubborn to repeat my senior year and blame it on the war. In the span of a month and a half, I took all my finals and graduated as one of the top students in the program. I felt that I owed this to my friends who are still stuck in Gaza, unable to graduate. Starting a journey to come back to the U.S. to actually share my culture, history, and truth. For me, this wasn't my success. It was ours.

Map Four

Looking across another map inside a house, not a home, the realization hit me one more time. This time, I chose to leave Egypt, to be far away from that border next to my home or what remains of it. I felt like a bubble about to burst watching all those slowly disappearing border lines or the newly built ones on a map that has power over who gets to live or die in Gaza. The loss of home wasn't just my room, garden, or neighbor; it was the loss of feeling content and safe. I have a key for a house that doesn't exist anymore, pictures and objects of places that don't exist anymore, memories of people that don't exist anymore, and I have this longing feeling to be somewhere that doesn't exist anymore. This is how it feels to be a Palestinian from Gaza. Looking at this final map here, thousands of miles across, led me to see that maps are rude fiction; nothing about it is polite; they never marked my suffering or ever will, and I am here to tell the whole world the story of my Homeland, absent may it be on a map, but forever present in my heart and soul.

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JUDGE'S COMMENTS

My Home Key By The Phoenix

First Place
Undergraduate
Creative Non-Fiction

"My Home Key" is a deeply passionate, innovative account of the author's personal narrative told through the lens of four maps—objects the author later comes to consider "rude fictions"—and the countless shifting boundaries, political clashes, and cultural controversies contained therein. To be a Palestinian from Gaza, the author writes, is to own a key "for a house that doesn't exist anymore," and to be in inexorable possession of a longing for a place where one can never truly return. I was so impressed by the immediacy, the intimacy, and the vulnerability of this work; we would do well to make a work like this one assigned reading for every citizen of our shared planet.

- Amy Buutcher

SECOND PLACE UNDERGRADUATE CREATIVE NON-FICTION

IT'S ONLY PRETEND

By Bella Calomarde

our voice, loitering in my head while I try to sleep. I whisper to myself that what you did to me never happened. I was only eight years old, my biggest concern at the time, not being able to go to Abner's birthday party at Big Trees in the three story airbnb. "It's going to be the best party ever!" I remember Abner telling me.

I beg my mom in the kitchen as she is boiling beans. She has rice cooking on the white stove next to the flour tortillas. Her hands are still dusted in flour and she tells me to set the table. I continue to beg my mom to let me go to Abner's birthday party and she finally responds with a sigh and nods her head. I ran to her with a hug and thanked her. After dinner she called Abner's parents to let them know Bella would be going to Abner's two day birthday party trip at Big Trees.

I am sitting between my two best friends, Abner and Garrett. Jacob is sitting behind me with Cassia, Abner's older sister and my older brother Caleb. Abner's other friends are in the black minivan driving ahead of us. I pull up my purple backpack from between my legs and take out my plush dragons that I love bringing to school. Garrett grabs the orange dragon, Abner grabs the green one and I grab the blue one. Jacob leans over from his seat and grabs my dragon. He holds it high while laughing, my brother sticking his tongue at me, Cassia rolling her eyes. I reach to grab it, but he continues to hold it high. Jacob is four years older than me, my eight year old arms cannot reach as high as his. Garrett and Abner begin hitting him with their small fists and he laughs, but drops the dragon when Abner's dad tells him to give it back.

He leans back into his seat and we turn around and stick out our tongue at him as he flips us off.

When we arrive I run inside with my friends running next to me. We immediately run to the third floor and call dibs for the two beds on the balcony. Garrett, Abner, and I put our bags on the two beds and plac the plush dragons under the white sheets, laying the heads over the pillow. After everyone is finished unpacking we play hide and seek outside.

I run inside to grab a jacket from my suitcase where I find Jacob on my bed scrolling on his Ipod. My plush dragons are on the floor along with my suitcase, clothes spilling out. He rolls his eyes at me and tells me I have to sleep with Abner and Garrett on their bed since he's older than me and older kids don't share beds. I pick up my dragons and suitcase, place it on the other bed, stick out my tongue, and flip him off. I felt cool flipping someone off. It felt like I was one of the big kids who get to have Ipods, flip people off, and bully younger kids.

It was 11:47 pm when Abner's mom tells everyone it's time to go to bed. I walk upstairs, Garrett and Abner following from behind. Jacob is already in bed with earbuds in his ears. He rolls his eyes at us and turns his back towards our bed. Garrett sleeps in the middle, Abner, and I, on opposite sides from him. Abner is the first to fall asleep, Garrett and I laugh quietly while we listen to him snore. Soon after Garrett falls asleep and I close my eyes, waiting to fall asleep.

He untucked the white blanket from my body and I felt his breath on my face. I opened my eyes and Jacob was staring down at me. He smiled, and whispered in my ear if I wanted to play with him. I smiled and nodded. I thought to myself, playing with a big kid is cool. He grabbed my arm and lifted me up, pulling me to his bed. I asked what he wanted to play, and he responded, "Let's pretend play."

He instructed me to lay on the bed and stay quiet or else we would get in trouble. I laid silently, excited to see what type of pretend play he wanted to play with me. I thought maybe we were going to pretend I was a mummy rising from the coffin. He touched my chest over my Spongebob pajama top and leaned his face down to mine. His lips pressed on mine and he

grabbed both of my arms over my head. I tried to move my head away, but he told me I had to play by the rules. Lying still was the number one rule he whispered in my ear. I didn't understand this game, but I went along with it because Jacob was older, he was cooler than me. He slid my yellow Spongebob shorts down to my ankles and told me to touch his private part. When he tried to take off my pink Strawberry Shortcake underwear, I told him no.

He slid them off anyway and whispered "Don't worry Bella, it's only pretend."

JUDGE'S COMMENTS

It's Only Pretend
By Bella Calomarde

Second Place Undergraduate Creative Non-Fiction

"It's Only Pretend" is a deeply heartbreaking and intimate personal narrative that puts a face and voice to our nation's epidemic of sexual violence and assault. The writing is fierce and visceral, disturbingly immersive, and knowingly rendered through a youthful, familiar voice that is both earnest and optimistic, reminding the reader—despite great unease—of the troubling prevalence and proximity of sexual violence as domestic horror. I was particularly impressed by the writer's narrative restraint and command over language, which focuses the reader's attention on the childhood—and futures—too often stolen.

- Amy Butcher



Thank you to all who have taken part in the Bazzanella Literary Awards for 2025.