

# Response

a journal for new work

Issue 03, May 2021

## **Response Issue 03**

Published May 2021 by The Work and Response.

Publication copyright 2021 The Work and Response.  
Text copyright belongs to the individual contributors.

Series Editor: Daniel Elfanbaum  
Guest Editors: Caitlin Ghegan, Chelsey Grasso, and Sara Ryan  
Proofreader: Nick Snow

This journal body text is set in Vollkorn, designed by Friedrich Althausen, with titles and other callouts in Work Sans, designed by Wei Huang. The journal is typeset using AsciiDoctor-PDF and compiled with PyPDF4, along with some other scripts and tools, except when InDesign is required (like in much of this issue). Printing is done on-demand by Blurb in San Fransisco, CA.

For questions, concerns, or complaints, please contact us at [info \[at\] theworkandresponse.com](mailto:info@theworkandresponse.com).

You can also find us online at [theworkandresponse.com](http://theworkandresponse.com).

**What is Response?** Response is a journal aimed at engendering and supporting new work, which means that all of the work included in Response was created (or, in some cases, adapted) specifically for the journal. You can think of it like a glorified artistic exercise if you'd like, but we prefer to think of it more like an opportunity.

Our issues work like this:

1. **The call:** two and a half months before publication, solicited writers, poets, and artists will get notified that we want their work, and we ask if they'll do some for us.
2. **The response:** Two months out is the deadline to say whether a contributor is in or not. At this time the work (a quote, painting, text, etc.) which they'll be responding to will be revealed those who've said that they are in.
3. **The work:** Contributors have between two months out and one month out to complete the work. This means that all the initial work done for the journal takes place within a month (~30 days). This constraint is intentional.
4. **The response to the work:** A week after their initial submission, contributors will receive some feedback from that issue's guest editors.
5. **The work continues:** Contributors then have up to two weeks to send us revisions, changes, something completely new, etc. Here's the thing: contributors do not have to make any changes if they don't want to.
6. **The work gets out:** After this process, the usual production steps take place (copyediting, page proofs, etc.), then the journal is put out into the world.

We hope you enjoy this new work.



*Melencolia I*, Albrecht Dürer, Engraving. 1514.

For this issue, contributors were invited to respond to the engraving on the page opposite along with the following:

The strange properties of these [magic] squares were considered magical in medieval days and so the squares served as talismans, protecting the wearer against many evils.

— Øystein Ore, *Invitation to Number Theory*



# Contents

Nicole Arocho Hernández.....	2
Kristin Brown .....	4
Scott Delisle.....	18
Joon Ae Haworth-Kaufka .....	42
Hope Jordan .....	53
Shannon Kafka.....	58
A'Ja Lyons.....	59
Jake Phillips.....	61
Jacqueline Rosenbaum.....	69
April Sopkin .....	85
Christie Towers.....	93
Paul Veracka .....	98
Andria Warren.....	103
About Our Contributors and Guest Editors .....	115
Notes Regarding This Response.....	119

Nicole Arocho Hernández

## On Violence's Precision

But you cannot use words to capture pain, especially collective pain. Our pain is not only a personal but also a historical pain....I try not to express what was painful but to use words to point at something that cannot be put into words.

— from “Narrating the Unnameable” by Eduardo Lalo,  
included in *Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After  
the Storm*



ace — race — trace — praise — grace — craze — braise — raise — reyes — más  
 air

please — país  
 feliz — raíz

hace — así — casi — basic — sick — six — mix

mace — días — maíz  
 midas — dais

ace — face — fácil

pace — peers — pierce — peor — feo  
 pero — price — peo

vice — wise  
 mice — rice  
 spice — rice  
 tce

acción

Kristin Brown

## But for the Grace

My mother – who worried when I moved to Portland, she said there was heroin – is a fangirl about the place now. She’s visited from Lansing; it’s fun for her to go to the pasta counter on the first floor of the Indigo, where they play Boyz II Men awfully loud and you can order something with truffle in it for ten dollars. She likes to say that she can roam Powell’s for hours, although last time she got impatient and tut-tutted at the panhandlers.

If I were a lawyer she’d have scrapbooked my favorable verdicts; I’m a manager in accounts receivable, so she saves clippings about my colorful town. Articles on the Velveteria, the 24-Hour Church of Elvis, the vegan strip club. And she thinks we don’t need anything, so for my birthday she sends me instructions, things she wants me to do. This year (I turned forty-five) she sent me cash. I was supposed to use it at Temperament; she’d seen it on the Food Network.

I could have brought Lincoln, made it a “date night,” let Esmé stay home and stare at her phone. But I was feeling oversaturated with my husband; I was experiencing high levels of Lincoln-toxicity. And then, auspiciously, the solstice was coming. Mars – according to the very woke astrologist I’d just started to follow – was making a gorgeous trine to Venus. I’d been doing some journaling in anticipation. And where it was leading me was: Integrity.

So I invited Deirdre.

~

It hit me on our way up Burnside, that sense of déjà vu and exile I get when I move through the places where my old haunts used to be. Lincoln and I, and our friends in those days – we’d lived in rotting

apartments here. We woke here, walked to the Plaid Pantry for Gatorade and cigs. We worked here, in the rotting bars on this block, and when we weren't working we went in anyway to drink. What probably happened was that those rotten places were drilled out, their lots filled hygienically with the brilliant condominiums – but the sense I have when I come here is that they were smushed, like the Wicked Witch, underneath.

“Duck fat dumplings,” Deirdre was saying. She'd gone out to Argot the day before. “And – oh –” She gave a shimmy in the car seat. “The *honey*. Fermented garlic honey.”

Integrity is when your life hangs together in an aesthetically moral coherence. Two months ago Deirdre's teenaged son had been killed in a grotesque accident, and her grieving process had been unorthodox: she wanted to go out to eat. I hadn't been able to sanction this; when your life is a true horror, I thought, why rebel against the casseroles? But drinks seemed okay, and it would feel aesthetic and moral to take Deirdre out, help her process.

The Uber driver stopped. And when I looked out I felt pierced, shot from the sky.

That building. The sweep of the steps, the classical columns – once it was a governor's mansion. An Argentinian steakhouse on the first floor now, but it used to be a sordid late-night *crêperie*, Kick-It, a sweaty hotbox where the dishwasher left spinach on the forks and the floormats got rinsed and reused after the sewage drain backed up. I know that, about the floormats, because I'd hosed them down myself. I'd worked there; it was where I'd met Lincoln.

It affected me, to see those steps – steps I'd climbed hastily so many times, apron unwashed, change jangling. But Deirdre hadn't known me then; Deirdre had moved here in 2016, long after Kick-It had shuttered. She didn't know I'd been that woman; she knew me as Esmé's mom.

And then: I knew Deirdre as a mother, too – the mother of Ruby and Nicholas. Nick had all those curls, they'd fluffed from under his cap, he'd played shortstop, he'd played trombone. Deirdre, light on her feet now as she stepped over the rush of water in the gutter, spritely as she hurried toward the side of the building, mischievous as she turned at the bottom of the staircase, hand on a doorknob, the sign above reading *Temperament* – Deirdre was in a state of suspension, cocooned. Her insides were writhing, reforming. When she emerged she would no longer be Nick's mom. When she emerged I might not recognize her at all.

~

The only light was candlelight, finicky and ghoulish. It flickered on the plants, which crawled over a bookcase and clung in corners like exotic monsters. From the door you walked over a tiled square, each tile with its own number, and then there was an L-shaped bar with six seats, one guest at the short end. The bartender was young and beautiful, and firelight flamed in his russet hair as he slid leather-bound menus over the bar top.

"I smell something," Deirdre whispered.

"Frankincense," I said, "probably."

The menu had four sections, each with a list of phrases, like *Quick to judgment* or *Zest for life*. *Compassionate soul* was one, and *Difficulty rising from bed*. At the top it said *Elixirs*. 25.

Deirdre gave a little squeal. She was an attractive woman; she could do things like that.

Me, I let out a very audible sigh. *Mom*, I thought. *Such an easy mark*. But Deirdre needed this; I played along. "What's in the *Rude and tactless*?" I asked.

The bartender – Robin – was very good. The situation was perfectly designed to produce this exchange, so he must have had to go through

it every time, but he was cherubic as he explained that wasn't how it worked. You picked flaws you had that you wanted to cure, or traits you wished to cultivate, and he would concoct a tonic for you.

“What if I want to be rude and tactless? You won't cure me, right, if I don't want it?”

“It'll work,” he said, and I thought: *A twenty-five-dollar crock of shit.*

I used to be a connoisseur of bartenders. It sounds cheap, like a man who sleeps with his secretaries, but power's sexy and they were the most powerful people I knew. And oh – the sight of the hair on a chiseled forearm, beneath a rolled white sleeve. Lincoln didn't tend bar at Kick-It, but then he did, and I slept with him.

Lincoln. When I think of him – of him and me at that time – it feels like sticking my hand into a muddy hole, not sure what I'll pull up. He wore lovely belt buckles, heavy things from Wyoming, he had family there. He directed plays at a theater where audiences might be splattered or asked to sing. I was in a band with too many members; I played violin, but there was a fiddle too. The things we pulled off: the costumes, the pranks, the moonlit rescues. It felt as though we were the breath of the world, inhaled in a line of blow, exhaled in a cloud of smoke rising from that rotten corner of Burnside.

Lincoln and I slipped out, together, when Esmé came. I needed insurance, so I learned to do hospital billing; he got an entry-level job selling medical equipment. After the market crashed we bought a little house – too little, but we bought art for the walls. We made new friends, we drank good whiskey, watched *Mad Men*. We became a new version of ourselves, together.

What changed was when Esmé turned out to be – what she is. Lincoln was never a striver; he'd set his standards low enough that they included me, his clever lumpy wife. But Esmé developed that kind of beauty to which people make offerings. Lincoln found that he had something precious, something he could lose. He started to try.

He wishes I would strive too, but Esmé's thirteen now – old enough for me to recognize that I've known girls like her. Shimmering, radiant, but secretive and precise, and from behind that shield they perpetrate delinquencies with impunity. It makes me less keen to pay her tuition.

"Do you have anything for integrity?" I asked the bartender.

He pointed at the square labeled P. There was a phrase: *Steady and faithful*.

"Fine. Add *Confident and poised*. And *Usually right*." Those were labeled C.

The other guest spoke up. "And a flaw," he said. A Black man in an ochre sweater, eyeglass frames the color of claret. "At least a strength and a flaw."

"Who are you?" asked Deirdre.

"He's a critic," said the bartender. "From San Francisco. Be nice."

"Be nice to the critic?"

"I'm Gordon," said the critic.

"Well what was yours?" Deirdre asked.

"My what?"

"Your strength and your flaw?"

"*Content with oneself*," said the critic. "*Exaggerates the truth*."

A crock of shit and I knew it, but Deirdre gripped her menu, she read the thing in earnest, and despite it all I felt something rise up, an anguished vehement petition. For it to be true, just this once. For there

to be a word you could utter, and a mixture you could pour, that could palliate a mother bereaved.

*“Warm-hearted,”* said Deirdre, a hale flush in her face. *“Deeply affected by tragedy.”*

~

The cocktails – or elixirs, or whatever – were served in crystal glassware that made the firelight dance. Deirdre’s was a milky lavender, with umber dust over the foam on top. Mine was yellow-green, over hand-chipped ice and garnished with candied Douglas fir. They took fifteen minutes to make and they cost fifty of my mother’s dollars, and they tasted just like booze. Everything on that block now is so bespoke and expensive; I miss messy irony on a budget.

But – to attempt to say it with integrity – it’s not like I drink PBR anymore. And it cost us, eventually, that life. Buzzy had a good job, a daughter, and he lost it all after he started hanging out with us. We didn’t go to the bars till midnight, and we stayed after hours somewhere till dawn, and he played poker badly; you can’t hold on to a good life that way.

Carter D died – his motorcycle hit a pole. Then took too many pills after Jonas broke her heart; Lincoln was the one who found her. Bird, our maniac drug dealer, stabbed someone at the Jupiter Hotel. We’d always treated him like he was one of us, and so when Bird went to jail we told ourselves we’d write, but we didn’t. And those kind of regrets – those times when you flat-out failed to do the right thing – they follow you.

“What are the letters for?” asked Deirdre. “P, C, M, S?”

The bartender opened his pretty lips, but the critic jumped in. “Phlegmatic,” he said. “Melancholic. Choleric. And Sanguine.”

“Gross,” I said.

Robin was very good, he let the guest have the moment. “The Four Temperaments,” the critic announced, exultantly, of course.

“Deirdre,” I said, “Tell me –”

But then the door to the basement opened.

The guy was homeless, there wasn’t any doubt: clothed in filth, sodden jacket stiff with mud. The shoes didn’t fit. Hair in grassy hanks from under a cap. He took the stool beside me; I leaned toward Deirdre.

“Can I get a water, chief?” asked the homeless man. Superfluous motions with his hands, explanatory gestures.

“I smell something,” Deirdre whispered. The critic wiped his lenses with a delicate cloth.

“Myrrh,” I said. “Probably.” But it wasn’t.

The bartender gave the homeless man a glass of water, and he gulped it down and belched. His vapors entered my nostrils and I could smell sour wine and something else, fetid.

“Jack and coke,” the man said.

“We don’t have Jack, man,” said the bartender. “Try the Kingston.”

“Whiskey, chief,” muttered the man.

“We don’t have it.” Surely they had whiskey, but you couldn’t tell; the spirits were stored in green glass bottles with handmade white labels, marked with words like *Lifting* or *Sustaining*.

“Just give me a drink,” the guy pleaded. My skin crawled.

We’d tossed plenty of people from the Kick-It. The criteria were variable; we’d taken over these rotten blocks, all of us dirtbag cokehead



white kids, and we weren't good role models for each other. If you were somebody's girlfriend you could assault someone and you still might get to stay. But if you were fratty you could get 86'd for the rhinestones on your jeans. Good bums paid their tab; bad bums staged a scene, and you had to find a way to get them out.

I looked up at Robin. He was responsible for us: a food critic who was there to be impressed, and then me and Deirdre, the kind of women who are always a liability.

"All right, bud," Robin said, "On me," and he started to pour.

*Rookie.* Anyone could tell, this guy – he wasn't a good bum.

~

I felt distracted, interrupted. I'd come for Deirdre's sake, but now Deirdre was in a debate with Gordon. And she debates in an appealing way; she gives herself, it's in the curve of her shoulders. She's game. It's irresistible.

Beside her, I was feeling my elixir. Venus – she shone in my twelfth house, of sorrows and hidden life. Rain plashed above, the sound reminding me – poker games in this basement, they'd run into the dawn. Those who played were shrewd; they knew pot odds and gut shots and when to check-raise. Carter D worked at Slabtown, he'd bring the mini rock stars from Austin or Omaha. They'd show up gorgeous in worn boots, long hair, bad-boy grins, figuring the game had been staged for their pleasure. Buzzy would shuffle. Ulla would cut lines on a CD case. The indie darlings lost their money and stumbled home with Dara, she slept with most of them.

Buzzy would blow through the tips he'd pulled as a busboy, and then it would be seven AM and he'd ask to sleep on my sofa. When I woke up for my shift he'd be there, in his dirty jeans, boots covered in fryer oil; I didn't have a spare blanket. Sometimes I see a bum asleep in a doorway – dirty jeans, old boots – and it reminds me of Buzzy. I wonder if it might be him.

But we'd always slept cheaply. There was the night we slept five to a bed. There was the camping trip – madness. Carter D brought hot dogs and a sixpack, and nothing to sleep in – he slept wrapped in a tarp in the trunk of his Oldsmobile. He wrote a song about it.

We used to get so high. I'd ask everyone to tell me about their mothers. It was an excuse to tell them about mine.

Ulla threw that party – a fundraiser – you had to come in panties. There were doughnuts decorated like vaginas. I was still in school, I was studying Adorno – what Adorno would think of the indie darlings, the vagina doughnuts, the belt buckles.

I don't know where they are, those people – Ulla, Dara, Buzzy. They were night creatures, slinking and strutting, and I'm a day creature now. I issue bills for medical services. Sometimes we charge for the Turner 430, a machine that my husband sold to my hospital.

Lincoln. We used to fuck down here, in the basement of the Kick-It, a few shift drinks in and too bored for sidework. For all I know, this was where Esmé was made.

Esmé. My daughter. Only last night she'd tucked her knees against my thigh while we watched *Planet Earth*. She gave out little gasps, astonished by the creatures and all their absurd and antic attempts at life. She looked at me, she wanted me to confirm. *Is it true, mama? Is it true?*

God, and then there was Nick. His antic attempts.

Some creatures fail, their mothers bereaved.

“Hey,” I whispered to Deirdre. She turned. Gordon waited for me to release her back to the debate, it was about kimchi. The homeless man next to me muttered to himself, hoping I would hear.

“We could go,” I said. “We could find a quieter place.”

But she blinked brightly, took a sip of her cocktail. It clung to her upper lip, milkily. "I'm fine," she said, from her cocoon. "I like this place," she said.

So I let it go. I gave in to the elixir. I let myself think of my daughter, a chrysalis herself. There was that play – she played a cloud. You could see her, under the lights, amid the other seven-year-old clouds, and you could see how she was different. Those limpid eyes, that triumph in her collarbone. Afterward the other parents drew toward us to pay a dazed tribute; they wanted to see who had made her. And when she was asleep, I sat with Lincoln – we had beers on the porch, the trees were in leaf. "She's a queen," he said. Then he brought up the Mad-eleine School.

There was a moment, that night, when I pictured Esmé – her dusky cheek, the shake of her pale hair, her crystalline eyes – in the Mad-eleine uniform. I saw how neatly that life would drape on her. How could you not want that – that utter superiority – for your child?

But I looked at Lincoln and I saw the bartender at the Kick-It, knuckles bloodied from a run-in with somebody's drummer. Our apartment before the house, the skin of paint over paint, bottles clinking as the bums dug in the recycling. I saw the rime around the edge of the tub, the earplugs that used to fall into the dust bunnies behind the bed. Our daughter should have been a bruiser with freckles, or a darkheaded shrinking violet. Or pigtailed, bucktoothed, loud. I could have mothered with great consistency – with great integrity. Esmé – it feels like a curse.

Lincoln doesn't understand, but my mother knows. Once, she said: "She *acts* so grateful. I've never seen a child do such an excellent job of pretending."

The look on my mother's face: fear. People like us – we have to fear a child like that.

"Bitches," the bum was growling. He spread his elbows. "Beaverton bitches."

I'm in Lents, Deirdre is in Sabin – still, I knew what he meant.

“Barrel-aged,” the critic was saying. “Like wine.”

“But tinned fish,” said Deirdre. “Really?”

“*Bitches.*”

An icky silence; my pulse raced, my throat was hot.

“That’s it, buddy.” Robin’s voice was shaky. “Time to go.”

The homeless man snarled epithets. Gordon watched Robin as though he were scoring his execution; the score was low. The bum got off his stool and shut himself in the bathroom.

We held our breath. Then Deirdre said, “You know, I always thought I’d end up in jail.”

I’d heard her use the line before, like a party favor. No matter that she’d just scattered her son, in ashes, over the cliff at Cape Meares – Deirdre still had charisma.

“Why didn’t you?” asked Gordon. The light in his eyes was brilliant.

“I should have.” She winked. “I never got caught.”

“Sir,” Gordon said, addressing Robin. “I’d like to buy this woman—” he let his eyes move, possessively, over Deirdre’s hair, her shoulder. “An elixir.”

“What for?” asked the bartender, and the erotic possibilities of the night multiplied.

Appraising Deirdre, the critic let a long, contemptuous smile spread across his mouth. “Innocent,” he said. “Innocent, complicit, and guilty. All three.”

Those traits weren't listed, but Robin poured anyway. The drink he made was smoky, a prune at the bottom of the glass. Deirdre touched her tumbler to Gordon's. I saw lust at her lips.

"I've been to prison," said Gordon.

"I don't believe it," said Deirdre, but we felt it open like a trap door beneath us. "You have such nice eyeglasses."

"Three years," he said. His teeth shone with his saliva. "Armed robbery."

"But," said Deirdre. Lurid images flashed.

"But," said Gordon. "I didn't do it. Three years." His voice roughened. "I didn't do it."

We wanted him to unmake it, the story he'd made up. "I don't believe it," Deirdre said again.

"But my dear," Gordon smiled. "Run the numbers."

~

Lincoln staged a haunted house at the Kick-It. We used sheets of black plastic for a labyrinth; we created tableaux. Lincoln led groups through the maze, he told of the serial killer, Black Edd. In the first room Theen played a hag, beating little Edd with a meat tenderizer. Then, Edd's marriage – I played his young wife, keening, neck bruised, a knife in my chest. On the way to the basement Ulla shrieked at people from under the stairs. Down there was Black Edd's hovel, blankets tangled on the floor, chocolate pudding smeared on the walls (it was supposed to be feces). Finally, the walk-in: from hooks dangled severed limbs, silicone tinted a revolting peach. And strewn about—draped over a keg, sprawled on the floor—were the girls. Lincoln used to DJ at Devil's Point, he'd talked the dancers into it: whitened faces, smeared lipstick, he'd drizzled them with red-tinted corn syrup. They looked delectable and obscene.

Those girls. Eyes glazed from the bottle of Strawberry Stoli they'd passed around, shivering in their underwear between tours. And as the corn syrup dried it made their skin stick to itself, so at the end of the night the drunk strippers stumbled to the dish pit, spraying each other with the dishwashing nozzle, rubbing at the sticky syrup. Limber and long, they were all plush globes and sloping thighs, a pretty arch, a graceful calf, tattoos rippling.

Was I there? Was my body truly in that place, watching the dancers in the dish pit? Am I still that girl, the girl who keened, a knife in her chest?

I can't believe it now: we didn't fake that hovel. Those blankets were Otto's. The owner's friend, the junkie who cleaned the place after hours. He shot up between his toes; I saw an abscess on his foot. Otto lived down there, in the basement of the Kick-It. We smeared pudding on his bed. I don't think anyone offered to clean it up; integrity, it's been elusive.

The bum rolled out of the bathroom, knocking our stools. "Fuck. You," he said. "Fuck you, fancy man." He flipped the bird at the critic. "Fuck you, Beaverton bitches." He swiped a hand through my hair, and I shuddered. In the old days I would have socked him, you couldn't stop me, but tonight – dulled by elixir, Venus in my twelfth house – I let it go. "Prissy pussy!" he shouted at Robin. "Fuck you forever." He hocked, spat on the floor. And he was gone.

"I smell something," Deirdre said. "I really smell it this time."

I did too. A puddle of water spread from the bathroom. I smelled fouled floormats on the grass, water from the hose splattering back at me. Maybe Old Portland wasn't dead after all.

~

We waited outside for the Uber, rain pelting our hoods, the stench lingering in our noses. We stood on the steps I'd climbed to work a thousand times. I'd had to be there at 4:30; I'd be hungover, still too

high for coffee. A cigarette, dry shampoo, Gatorade. We were so resilient, we'd be drinking again by ten. In those days there was nothing I loved enough to break me.

Now – there's Esmé. She has a transistor radio she tunes to the oldies. She's passionate about gray wolves. I thought of how her ear would smell as I bent to kiss her when I got home. I felt helpless, sickening gratitude. I felt doomed.

"Deirdre," I said.

She smiled at me.

I swallowed. "I want to help," I said. "I just don't know what to say."

Deirdre had snickered into her hand at the PTA meeting, I'd loved that. We'd grown close, fast. But she'd never known the woman I'd been, hungover, boozy breath, an inch from disaster. That woman had been rotten. I'd drilled her out; she'd disintegrated.

She had. Unless – unless she was here, somewhere. Underneath.

"I don't need it yet," Deirdre said. "It's coming, though. I know it will come."

Deirdre, whose Nick had been drunk, he'd been high, he'd been partying the night he died – she held her chin high, but she knew she was going to be so broken. Standing before those columns, her skin was luminous, wet with rain, her jacket open, throat bare, bosom replete and bared to the moon – she could have been Dido, Constance, Rhea. She could have been Catlin Stark, Demeter, Mary of Nazareth, Betty Draper.

"I'll be a different woman then," Deirdre said. She folded her arms, she shivered. "Just promise. Promise you'll be there?"

Scott Delisle

# The Canonization of Saint Bartholomew: A Melancholic Odyssey

Let's say, for instance, there is a man. This man's name, though it is unimportant, is Bartholomew. His friends, who are plentiful and varied, call him Bart. He enjoys many things. This means that he can have friendly conversations with almost anyone about almost anything. And he does. His parents, Deirdre and Peter, are extremely supportive of all his endeavors. Deirdre is a slight woman, with a shrinking voice, who taught Bart some of his most valuable lessons. Always write a thank you note. If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all. Et cetera. Peter is a man's man, as they say. He smokes from a pipe, builds things with his hands, speaks like gravel. He has hair like Hemingway, and maybe some of his disposition as well. When Bart told them he wanted to stop pursuing a promising career in criminal law to become a writer of short fiction, Peter gave him a solemn nod. However, Bart saw a twinkle in his eye that belied his subdued response. Deirdre thought this was a wonderful idea, truly splendid, and went upstairs into the attic to produce a cardboard box. Inside were all of Bart's stories that he wrote in the third grade, filed into a red folder. They were derivative, mostly, but the spark was there. Of that there could be no denying.

Around one year after his decision, Bart returns home to his modestly decorated Brooklyn apartment he shared with his long-term partner Ashleigh. He had spent the golden afternoon at the local café, sipping on a latte and watching the people walk by on the sidewalk. Occasionally he would take out his notebook, note an odd feature that he could incorporate in a character later, maybe write down a fragment of a conversation he heard. Today he had written: "deep, deep v-neck, maybe blue?", "what I'm saying is, maybe I don't believe anymore", "he smells like a mall", "a story about light, and maybe the feeling of it". This list was satisfactory. He puts his keys in the bowl



by the apartment door. Ashleigh is sitting on the balcony, listening to the car horns and distant chatter of people gathered on porches.

“Hey Ash?”

“You’re home already, that was quick. Anything useful?”

“Maybe. Some fascinating ideas about lightness... But we’ll see what happens. I’m thinking I could at least get a story out of it. Have you been on the computer recently?”

“No, not for a while.” Bart walks over and navigates to his email. He finds a note from his agent and editor, who had been shopping around the draft of his first novel. The novel was inspired by his childhood experience at various summer camps in the Northeast. Like most fiction, it is mostly drawn from experience, so that he could use the details of his own life to bring color and intrigue to his characters. It was written in the third person after a great deal of agonizing and staring out the window at distant streetlights.

The note says that there is some interest, but that a lot of publishing houses felt that there isn’t enough drama. The novel is “too idyllic almost, like nothing bad is ever going to happen, like there could never be any tension.” This is true, Bart thinks. Nothing bad ever did happen at those summer camps. Little Timothy almost drowned once from a capsized sailboat, but Bart was able to swim over and drag him aboard his before there was too much concern. He thought this anecdote would provide enough tension, he focused on it for nearly two chapters. Bart stares at the screen, rereading the words, before closing the tab and heading out onto the balcony.

“What is it babe?” Ashleigh asks him, putting down her copy of the latest release from her small, independent publishing press. It was an examination of the politics of beekeeping and the metaphors of the hive.

“Nothing, just a note from Andrew.”

“Oh, how’s the novel being taken?”

“Well, I think.” Bart looks across at Ashleigh. “Some thoughts about it being too... idyllic.”

“Really? Well, that’s interesting. I thought that was the most innovative aspect. A novel that deals in happiness. Quite revelatory, I remember feeling.”

“Yes, I remember too.” Bart folds his fingers together and rests his chin on them.

“Well, listen Bart, I wouldn’t get too worked up over something like this. That was only one or two houses, there are countless of them, and I’m sure one of them will pick this up. And then it’s off to the races, as they say.”

“Yes, Ash, I’m not worried at all. At all.” Bart looks back up at her and smiles.

“Oh, I meant to show you, I got this new record today, and I wanted you to listen. Let me go put it on.” Ashleigh gets up and heads into the apartment, picking up a record from on top of the reclaimed beechwood bookcase before approaching the record player. She pulls the album from its sleeve and begins to play it over the speakers. The music starts slow, with delicate finger picking on an acoustic guitar, before a warbly, folk-tinged vocal track kicks in. Bart sits and listens as Ashleigh comes back and joins him, diving back into her book. Gradually, Bart lowers his hands into his lap and looks out over the balcony. The song continues, with the lyrics ringing out from the speakers. It is a break-up song, or a song about a break-up. The song lists relics of the relationship, the terms of the separation, the happiness and tragedy of the first meeting, the significance of the hope that the characters played in each other’s lives. The song ends with a slowly strummed chord, echoing into the fuzz of the blank space between the grooves. Bart, he is startled to discover, is crying.

“My God.”

“What?” Ashleigh asks, not looking up from her book.

“That song. It was...”

“It’s good, right? I mean, pretty sad, but the writing is beautiful.”

“It was the most amazing thing I’ve ever heard.”

“I’m glad you like it, Bart, that’s awesome. You gotta hear the rest then.” Bart and Ashleigh sat in silence as the rest of the record played. Each successive song brought Bart further into himself, closer to authentic feeling than anything ever had. When it was over, he immediately started it again. By the time the second playthrough was over, the sun had fully set. The gentle breeze of the summer evening billows their curtains.

“I’ve been doing it all wrong,” Bart said, looking at his hands.

“Hm?”

“Fiction. That’s not where the true art is. Poetry. Spare words but soaring emotion. Finding the general in the specific. Of course.”

“What would you write poems about?” she asks.

her hand angled gold in porchlight

well, about this

this moment

capture it like amber

like a mosquito just as it sucks

the blood

all of it, out

what are our moments to us anyway

sustenance for later recollection

He holds the key in his hand, cold metal

Turning in the lock, tumblers giving way,

Opening the door to a newer life,  
Alone, her footsteps are one hundred miles  
Away, where he left her and her smiles.  
I can't write about smiling anymore,  
I can't write about laughing anymore,  
I can't write about us, we, together.  
Only me, you, apart, the pain of new  
Beginnings.

And so Bart began,  
Sounding out all the sadness,  
Capturing himself.

The poems were modeled  
After music, chasing time,  
Vaguely specific.

With lines that read like,  
"Where have you gone, you and your  
4 AM phone calls,  
Wondering why I  
Am no longer who I was,  
Why we had to change  
At all. But doesn't  
The change make what came before  
All the more special?"  
"You stole my coffee  
Maker, I just want it back,  
Send it in the mail."  
Okay Ashleigh, that  
I can do.

Bart is sitting on his black couch  
Surrounded by postmodern chic and negative space,  
Enjoying the wall-mounted flatscreen from his poetry book deal  
Advance.  
And for just the second time in his life, he  
Is crying.

The credits scroll over the black background  
And Bart says, out loud,  
This.  
This is the thing.

INT. APARTMENT, NIGHT

*Bart sits, gripping his head in his hands. The camera watches his expression from below, the dim light of the television illuminates the blank wall behind him, the postmodern malaise. He could have decorated the walls if he wanted to, but instead he wanted to leave them as they were, open for possibility. The curtains on the window are closed, and do not move. Bart is wearing a white collared shirt, unbuttoned almost too low, tucked into black dress pants. All of his clothes are unwrinkled. His dark hair is just-ever-so unkempt, as if he had recently awoken from a well-styled slumber. He looks up and scratches his stubble, two days old.*

BART

Why didn't I think of it before? Images and words, together. Think of the impact this could have on an audience. Whole rows of people in the theater, sobbing their eyes out. Red carpets, flashbulbs. Maybe I could direct. Yes. I'll write and direct my first feature. Do I star in it? No, not yet. Maybe for the sophomore effort.

*Bart picks up the remote and changes the channels rapidly. We watch the light flicker on and off, still facing him and the wall.*

BART

But what do I write about? Everyone's already read my break-up poems.

*Bart puts the remote down and we hear the muffled sounds of a sitcom from the television, laugh tracks. He rubs his temples, eyes closed, and hums to himself.*

*He sits up suddenly. A burst of inspiration shines in his eyes. He takes his phone from his pocket and we see him frantically dial a number.*

INT. PARENT'S HOME, NIGHT

*Deirdre and Peter are at home, though we only see Deirdre at first, in the living room. She is sitting in her favorite recliner, knitting. The camera focuses on the needlework, fast, precise. The phone rings on the small table next to the chair. Deirdre picks it up without looking. For the following conversation, we only hear Bart's voice through the receiver, we never cut back to him.*

DEIRDRE

Hello?

BART

Hello? Mother?

DEIRDRE

*(absentmindedly knitting still)* Oh Bart, it's you. I just read about your book in the papers, I hear it's going to do quite well.

BART

Yes, they think so. But listen, I have something else, something new I've been working on.

DEIRDRE

Oh, how exciting. What is it?

BART

A screenplay.

DEIRDRE

Oh Bart, but I thought you were a poet now.

BART

Well it's all poetry if you look at the right way, mother. But that's not the point. The point is, I have a favor to ask you.

DEIRDRE

Of course, dear.

BART

I need you to leave dad.

DEIRDRE

*(pausing her knitting)* What do you mean? Like leave for a trip?

BART

No, I mean like divorce mother.

*Deirdre puts down her needles and brings up her head, staring at the television.*

BART

Hello? Mother?

DEIRDRE

Yes, I'm here. And this is going to help your writing?

BART

Tremendously mother, you have no idea.

DEIRDRE

And... your writing is what makes you happy, right?

BART

Well, this will make me sad, but then that will help the writing, which make me both fabulously wealthy and happy, yes mother. So what do you say?

*Deirdre, a bit shellshocked, puts the phone down on the table, not hanging up, and gets up from the recliner. We follow her through the hallway, the camera tracking her from the front. We stay in medium close up, and watch as she breaks down slowly. She knocks on the study door.*

PETER

*(from within)* Yes dear?

*The camera is now perched behind Peter in his armchair, so that we only see his right hand laying on the armrest, holding a smoking pipe. We see Deirdre open the door and enter through the smoke. We hear no dialogue, just silence, but we can see her mouth move. The tears begin to flow steadily at this point. We see the pipe fall to the ground. Deirdre turns and leaves the room, fleeing. The camera stays. We see Peter lean forward, shaking, sobbing, silently, head in his hands. The camera is back on Deirdre, who walks back in and sits in the armchair, picking the phone back up.*

DEIRDRE

*(through tears)* Okay Bart, it's done.



BART

Thank you mother, you won't regret this. I'll buy you a new house, it'll be grand.

*Deirdre doesn't answer, just hangs up the phone. Montage of Bart working on the script, smoking furiously, crumpling up pages, throwing them in the wastebasket, rearranging notes on a corkboard, planning. Eventually, we stop with him on the phone with his agent.*

BART

Is that true? They said that? (pause) The dialogue sounded like it had been adapted from a play? A play. A live audience. A different experience every night. See it now or it's gone forever. That's brilliant. Listen, Andrew, cancel everything. We're taking this straight to Broadway.

*BART is alone, center stage, a spotlight on him. He spins, holding the phone, looking out into the audience, mouth agape. Enter ANDREW from SR, running, spilling papers into the air as he goes.*

ANDREW: They want it, Bart. They really do. They're gonna go crazy for this one. Where do you come up with this stuff?

BART: I don't know Andrew, it just comes to me.

*ANDREW exits SL, to the frantic ringing of telephones. Enter SL: HANDSOME GENERIC ACTOR (HGA), flipping through script pages, dressed as Bart.*

BART: Hello?

HGA: Hm. (*mocking Bart*) "Hello?" Not how I would deliver it, but it'll do.

BART: What?

HGA: I've been hired to portray you. In the play.

BART: Oh, well that's not me, it's only loosely –

HGA: Listen, I don't want to get in your business, I'm just trying to get into character, okay?

BART: Of course. Do you... do you have any questions?

HGA: *(reading through the script rapidly, finishing it and dropping it to the floor)* No, I don't think I do. The words aren't that hard to understand.

BART: Oh?

HGA: Yeah, anyone can read off a script. Hell, anyone can make their voice sound a certain way. I'm not a ventriloquist, or an impressionist. I'm interested in the visuals. The physicality. The presence, you know what I mean?

BART: I think so. You mean you're more interested in how you look than in what you're saying?

HGA: Something like that. Words are cheap, but looks like this: *(he drops his face, lifting it again with seemingly instant tears formed and a soulful, melancholic sheen to his eyes)* that's what people pay front row price for.

BART: *(wonderstruck)* Of course. I've been looking at this all wrong. Words. They've only been holding me back. Images. They can affect emotions across borders, language barriers, everything. They cut straight to the heart of the matter. That's how I inspire.

## **MELENCOLIA, A SERIES**

4 photographs by Bartholomew (American, b. 1991)

These images capture, in exquisite detail, moments of natural transience and movement. Their composition and use of a grayscale color schema belie a creeping sadness at the edge of the frame. The artist, a relative newcomer, has already tapped into the wisdom of countless artists before him, with an eye for the fortuitous confluence of events that unveil, momentarily, the collapsing of the human and the natural.

*Untitled #1, or: Waves, or: Shifting Sands, 2020*

Photograph, gelatin silver print



*Untitled #2, or: Bridges, or: Branches Reaching, 2020*

Photograph, gelatin silver print



*Untitled #3, or: Flowers, or: The Beauty of Symmetry, 2020*

Photograph, gelatin silver print



*Untitled #4, or: Geometries, or: With Open Palms Outstretched, 2020*

Photograph, gelatin silver print



**Theorem:** Sadness = Understanding

**Proof:** Given that, as proven previously,

$$\text{Sadness} = \text{Artistic Success}$$

and

$$\text{Artistic Success} = \text{Material Wealth}$$

We can assume

$$\text{Sadness} = \text{Material Wealth}$$

We also know

$$\text{Material Wealth} + \text{Time} = \text{Perspective}$$

Hence

$$\text{Sadness} + \text{Time} = \text{Perspective}$$

If and only if

$$\text{Sadness} = \text{Material Wealth first}$$

In all cases

$$\text{Perspective} - \text{Time} = \text{Understanding}$$

As the more Time is spent with Perspective, the less Intuition is allowed to positively influence Understanding. Therefore

$$\text{Sadness} + \text{Time} - \text{Time} = \text{Understanding}$$



Or

Sadness = Understanding

Q.E.D.

## **The Effect of Melancholy on the Transition from Imaginative to Rational Thinking**

By Bartholomew, corresponding author

Abstract: Bartholomew, referred to here as “Bart”, underwent a drastic transformation as a result of exposure to melancholia. The following report describes the effects and results of this metamorphosis while positing potential future directions for study. After the success of his stage play version of his parent’s separation, Bart became increasingly despondent with the state of his creative output. He began to question the very nature of his reality, as demonstrated in the interviews found in Appendix 1. These thoughts, combined with the earlier dissolution of his romantic relationship, contributed to a downward spiral into a depressive state. Roughly three months after this, Bart emerged from his self-imposed exile with thousands of pages of data and research. He had been “enlightened”, as he put it. This paper represents a summary of his findings. Briefly, that the melancholy that defined his career in creative pursuits could serve a greater purpose to society, if applied in a rational, scientific manner. Melancholy was, to Bart, not only the key to exceptional insight into the emotional aspects of the human condition, but the shortest path towards answering science’s most vital and complicated problems. The manner in which Bart proposes answering these questions can be found in the Methods section.

**Standard Operating Procedure:** Extracting Melancholy for Research Purposes

Reviewed and Approved by: Bart

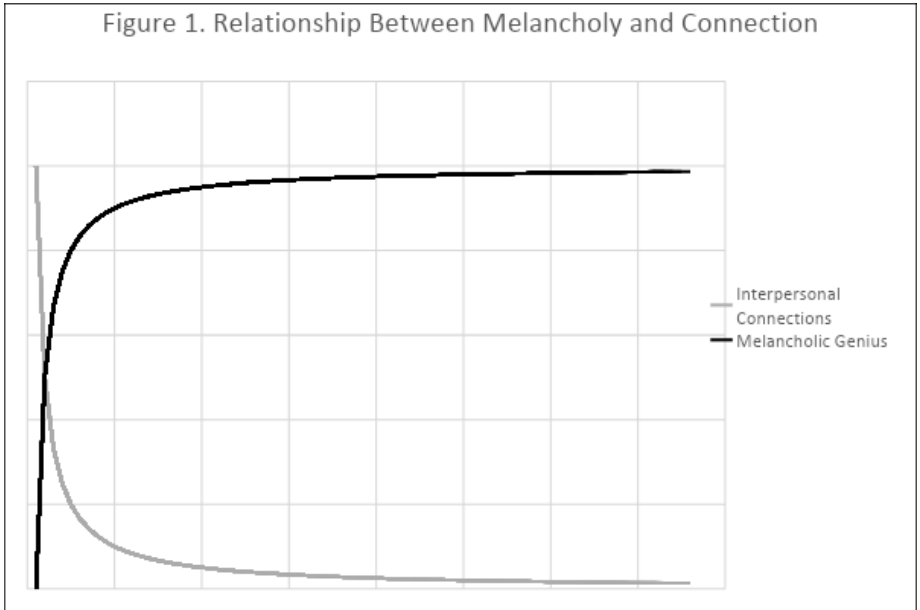
## Materials:

- Scalpel
- Stoppered glass vial
- Sadness

## Methods:

1. First, you must induce a bodily melancholic response. This can come from many sources. Family, relationships, seasonally variable weather patterns, and folk music are common places to begin.
2. Wallow for at least three months. It is important to monitor behavior during this period. You must take great care to spend at least 78% of your time staring out of windows. If rain is running down the window, this percentage can drop to as low as 60%.
3. Once you feel appropriately wallowed, locate your spleen, which is in your upper left abdomen, behind the stomach. This is where the melancholy is stored. You should be able to feel it through the skin.
4. Mark the location to make the incision easier. It is better to go about this alone.
5. With your back facing the mirror, make a small 1-inch incision into the spleen, holding a collection dish or the stoppered glass vial to catch any melancholy that may spill free.
6. Once a suitable amount (between 50 and 100 mL is usually required per use) is collected, close the wound with basic suturing.
7. Melancholy can then be stored indefinitely at room temperature and used for a variety of purposes in a large number of scientific

disciplines, including but not limited to astronomy, chemistry, biology, and cryptozoology.



**Figure 1.** Establishes the relationship between interpersonal connection and melancholic genius. Only by excising those close to you can any sort of engagement with melancholic genius begin to take place.

Q: So, Bart, you believe that by shunning happiness you can find some sort of peace?

A: I do believe this. It has taken me a long while to approach this realization. I've had to live almost several lives. I have had to climb many mountains, so to speak. But it will all be worth it. The pain, the suffering. All of it.

Q: This pain and suffering you mention, where does it stem from? Did you have an unhappy childhood?

A: You know, now that you mention it, I can't quite remember. I have been through so much, with the awards, the publicity, the exile, the path to where I am today that my childhood feels more like a dream than reality. And with my parents being, as you know, apart, I find my memories of living with them difficult to revisit. Except, of course, during my meditative retreats.

Q: Of course. I'm actually just receiving a note from my assistant here... I'm terribly sorry to be the one to break this to you, but your mother, Deirdre, has just passed away.

A: Oh?

Q: That's what the note says. I'm... so sorry. Is there anyone we can call, do you want to talk to your father?

A: No. No that will be quite alright. I'm actually happy to continue with the questions. I think... they will be helpful. Of this I am quite confident.

### **What is the Chief End of Man?**

To be alone. To suffer.

### **But you will guide others?**

I will show them the path, if that is what they require of me.

### **What do you, Bartholomew, know of suffering?**

I know that which I have chosen. I am devoted to the idea of suffering. I have profited from it, I have studied it. It is my life's work.

### **And in death?**

I will find the completion of my task. The ultimate transcendence. I have no doubts about this. I am absolved.

**Will you join the heavenly ranks?**

I will.

**Will you rejoice with them?**

If that is my task.

Melas. Kholé. Melencolia.  
Alone Alone Alone

Melas. Kholé. Melencolia.  
Alone Alone Alone

Melas. Kholé. Melencolia.  
Alone Alone Alone

WE, the Melancholic, establish a new community. One of enlightened MOROSENES.

WE, the Melancholic, declare complete sovereignty from the contented, slaving, mindless HORDES of the CHAINED and BLINDED.

WE, the Melancholic, elect the newly christened SAINT BARTHOLOMEW as our LEADER, the MOTHERLESS, the LONESOME, the TIRED.

WE, the Melancholic, ARE FREE.

I am with the weepers.

I was born among those who cannot see, but we cannot fault them.  
They do not know that they can be born again.

And we, in death, can see farther than ever before!  
So, Unburdened Ones, those who walk through the shadowed valley,  
Lift your hands!

Bartholomew, look down unto us,  
We bow down to the secret master,  
To the spiritual guide we have both always and never known.

To be alive is to be weighted down,  
To sink with the river stones.  
To release these weights and float unfettered,  
This is our sacred rite.

### **Confession of Saint Bartholomew:**

This is to be my final missive. Short and direct, as I do not want my followers to misconstrue. I confess to years of living in happiness. This melancholy, this illusion, was merely a tool. Vanity. All, truly, is vanity. I confess to selfish behavior, using my melancholy to engender profit. And I did profit. And I did not think of those who truly suffer. Who look to me and my art and my rationality and my faith and do not question me. Those who do not understand that I too may be fallible. For you see, I am not cleansed by this. I have not been washed. I remain as I always have. As I always will. I have tried to love all. Or, at least, I now love all. All of these people. Chasing dreams, like running towards the end of a rainbow, a disappearing horizon. My family. So many faces. I cared. I still care. Of this I also confess. And maybe, somewhere, there is someone or something who knows this. And maybe they can forgive me. To them, I dedicate this prayer.

Oh blessed spirit,  
Wherever your domain,  
Look upon us,  
And forgive us.

Shine your everlasting light onto our deepest darkness,  
Fill our unsteady quietude with your gentle voice,  
Give us the strength to forgive as well.

To forgive our own lives,  
Our own misfortune,  
Our own melancholy.

For it, too, has purpose.

## Talisman

The strange properties of these [magic] squares were considered magical in medieval days and so the squares served as talismans, protecting the wearer against many evils.

- Øystein Ore, *Invitation to Number Theory*

Regina stood at her teenage son's bedroom door. "Do your own laundry," she had told him. "Make your own dinner." Yet here she was with a basket of folded clothes in her hands like an offering, grasping at their relationship through household chores. Her boycott had been pointless. It wasn't that Clay had argued to abdicate his responsibilities or that he didn't care about her frustration, because he did. He was a sweet kid. But rather, these days, he wasn't even home enough to notice.

The home that she'd so carefully cultivated for the two of them had transitioned into a mere pit stop between other destinations, a place to change a dirty t-shirt or grab a granola bar for his bus ride to somewhere better. This should've been a good thing. Clay finally had friends. He belonged to an after-school D&D club. He got a part-time job at a game store, which he loved, and she loved that he loved, but it meant he spent more time at his dad's condo in the Pearl District, which was closer to the store. Sometimes, before she went to bed, she could catch him when he came home from work, but more often than not, she'd miss him altogether. One day soon, he'd move out of their little house, and she'd see him even less. How could she ever get used to this?

After the divorce, Clay's dad moved to Seattle for a few years to build his career. He saw Clay every other weekend when he drove down to Portland, keeping Clay with him in fancy downtown hotels as if



luxury were the same as love, as if a kid like Clay cared about luxury in the first place. She had tried to make up for the divorce, for his dad, for the bullies at school, and for the fact that she couldn't figure out a way to make things better. They'd done things together, lots of things she tried to be proud of: built an entire city out of cardboard that sat on their dining table for months, learned how to make a perfect quiche, rich and creamy, but not heavy, with the perfect quotient of ham, bacon, and veggies, watched superhero movies under the covers past bedtime, eating desserts they hand-selected from glass cases at expensive grocery stores. Maybe she should've done more.

With the divorce settlement, Regina had bought a one-bedroom bungalow at the edge of the city, a fixer-upper she never fixed up, with warped vinyl siding and a leaky roof that she patched each fall with tar paper and roofing cement. In what was supposed to be a laundry room, she wedged a full-sized bed and a bedside table, used the front door closet for her clothes. She gave Clay the primary bedroom, but he often slept in her room because of his nightmares.

It had always been just the two of them, two dots in a family constellation that should've been expansive. Regina was an adoptee, who was supposed to have two families but had neither. She was adopted through the South Korean adoption pipeline, a closed system that prohibited the release of any information about who she came from, who she was. She didn't even know her real birthday. Clay was her only family. Lineage was supposed to be important to Koreans. They kept national family registries, buried their dead close and tended to their graves, and honored them multiple times a year with special ancestor rituals. She could give Clay none of this, not grandparents, not aunts or uncles or cousins. It was too late to give him a sibling. When Clay was just a baby, she'd cut all ties with her adoptive family. Generational abuse happened in adoptive family lines, too. At least Clay had his father's side, a sprawling Italian family on the east coast, though they didn't seem to remember he existed.

Now, Clay was living more than half the week with his father. Regina opened her hands and dropped the laundry basket to the floor. The neat piles of clothes toppled over inside. Good, she thought and con-

sidered thrashing her hands around the basket, tousling the clothes into a mess, but she knew after the fleeting satisfaction of her tantrum, she'd only refold the clothes. She slid herself down the wall and slumped onto the floor in front of Clay's bedroom door.

His door was a kind of gallery of his life. When he was just five-years-old, in a gift shop on the Oregon coast, among saltwater taffy and souvenir shot glasses, he'd found a plastic street sign that read Clay Ave. For years, he collected more: Clay St, Clay Dr, Clay Blvd. He found a mini-license plate with his name, put up caution tape, spent his allowance on signs like Adult-free Zone and Enter at Your Own Risk. But when the bullying started in fifth grade, he took it all down. Regina dug the signs out from the trash and stored them in a box in her closet. He said they were too childish. He said they were stupid. He asked, "What if someone saw them?" But no one would've seen them.

Then he replaced his signs with things he thought were cooler: pictures cut out from comic books, stickers of characters she didn't know, drawings of dragons, pointy-eared fairies, long-bearded men in cloaks, and mythological creatures, like an ouroboros eating its own tail. He had glued a fabric patch of a twenty-sided die directly onto the wood. She'd wanted to keep his door like this forever. If she had to, she'd take it off its hinges, store it as it was now, and replace it with a whole new door.

Clay was talking about becoming a comic book illustrator. He was also talking about art school. She'd gone to art school. Once, she was going to be a painter. There had been a time when she lived among tubes of paint, paintbrushes and primer, jars and buckets, easels and canvases in her own art studio in the back half of a tailor's shop. The tailor was a gentle Russian grandpa who had been a painter when he was younger. Sometimes, she invited him to smoke cigarettes, show him her paintings, and let him beam with pride at her work.

She wondered how art school would not crush a kid like Clay? She knew what it was like in those programs. How would they afford it? Would an art program even accept him? They were full of elit-

ist gatekeepers who would laugh at his gruesome cartoons. Even she grimaced at his content—monster, aliens, demons—though she admired his skill with details, his sense of lighting and shading and perspective. Right in front of her was a drawing of a three-headed man like a hydra, each head with its own agonized face, all with their skin melting off to reveal sinew, flesh, and skull beneath. It was the stuff of nightmares, and given what he'd been through, it all made sense, but in art school? Fuck art school. He would find his own way.

On the left side of his door she noticed a print of the German Renaissance engraving called “Melencolia I” by Albrecht Dürer. At second glance, she realized it wasn't a print. It was a drawing. Clay had replicated the original. He'd signed and dated it at the bottom. Maybe he was art school material after all?

Regina knew this engraving well. She'd written a final paper about it in an Art History class her first semester of her MFA. She had chosen to write about this piece because she hated it so much. It was ugly, and it was famous. It inspired and influenced others, who included the same imagery and motifs in their work. She hated its chaotic lines, its lack of a center, its confusing perspective, its overcrowded composition. It was like Dürer wanted to get as many symbolic objects into the image as possible, like he was communicating to his secret illuminati club. It was a still-life on crack, as if Dürer had said, hey, let me put this random big-ass stone in here. Let me stick this bell here, and this orb here, and this hourglass, and this scale, and this compass, and this hammer, and this planer, and this saw, and these nails, and these keys, and this slate, and this ladder, and this bat, and this cup, and this wheel, and this rope, and this urn, and these pinchy things. And also, an enigmatic magic square! Regina wanted to draw Waldo in the background and see if Clay would find him.

Her professor had given her a C on her paper. When she got up enough gumption to go to his office to argue for a higher grade, he didn't know who she was. She stood in the doorway and handed him her essay to show him she was in his class. She told him about her love of strong lines and clear messaging, her disdain for coy sym-

bolism. The trope of the female as the emblem of passive traits, like melancholy, felt exhausting, she told him.

He had leaned back in his office chair, crossed both his arms and legs. He did not invite her to sit down in one of the empty chairs across from him. His thinning white hair sat in a messy tuft on his head like an emu, though she knew he wasn't as old as he looked.

He sighed and spoke slowly like he wanted to convey the ease at which he could humiliate her. "You betray your own ignorance about art history. This piece is conceptually denser than you give it credit for. Art doesn't have to be compositionally pleasing to be important."

He covered a yawn with the back of his hand, then grabbed a red pen from a jar on his desk. He crossed out the C with a big X and wrote an A+ at the top of the page, circling it before handing it back to her. "There," he said. "Anything else I can help you with today?"

"No," she had said. "Thank you." She didn't feel gratitude, but she didn't know what else to say. "Thank you," she said again and hurried out of his office.

When she checked her final grades for the term, he had given her a C. She wondered if he had just forgotten her, or if he hadn't actually planned on changing her grade, or both. She left it alone and accepted the C.

Regina thought of all the men she had surrounded herself with in art school. There were plenty of nice guys, but for some reason, she thought she'd feel better about herself if she found a place with the pretentious ones. It stung that she had married, and now divorced, the worst of them. They'd met in the second week of her MFA, in his last year of his grad program for design. It wasn't long after spring break that first year when she realized she was pregnant. She dropped out of the painting program and never went back.

Seeing the image on Clay's door shook her. Maybe her professor had been right. She didn't know anything. It obviously meant enough to

Clay for him to have spent hours replicating it with such precision, the brilliant detail in the folds of the angel's fabric. Who knew what it actually meant? Maybe it didn't even matter because the meaning of a piece was determined by the viewer. She just wondered what it meant to Clay? Why did he relate to all of this Eurocentric stuff?

In fact, everything on his door was Eurocentric, the world of magic squares and medieval talisman, the romanticization of white European history, the battles and weaponry of violent colonization. He was a walking textbook about the Roman Empire, but what did he know about Korean history?

Clay was mixed race, so, of course, he should explore his European side from his father's lineage. She was glad he had some accessible family history, but Clay's father was Italian, and he hadn't actively taught him Italian culture beyond pronouncements about being a proud Italian American, laying claim to food, and excusing his bombastic behavior. Italy wasn't even important to Clay, but rather broad European history and culture; it was all around him. How could he not feel connected to it? From early childhood, fairy tales were European fairy tales, romantic stories of knights and princesses and castles. Mythology was Greek mythology. The history of science was European, materialism and Latin-based taxonomies, hierarchies. Art was the Louvre. The Mona Lisa. Dürer. The best food was caviar and foie gras.

Clay's European education was a given, and as an adoptee, so was hers. How could Clay have learned about Korean culture when she had so little to offer?

The front door opened and closed. It was Clay. She recognized the way he entered the house, knew the pattern and tone of his footfall. In a moment, he appeared in the hallway, finding her on the floor outside his room.

"You okay?" he said.

She pointed at his door. "There's nothing Korean on here."

He stepped closer, examined it, as if he didn't know what was there.  
"Does it matter?"

"Yes."

"What are you doing down there?" he asked.

"I'm sitting on the floor next to a basket of clean laundry that I folded for you and I'm feeling resentful about it, but I'm also admiring your art."

"Ok." He rumped his eyebrows.

She pointed to the Dürer. "This one is really good."

"Thanks."

"Why are you home?" she said.

"Shouldn't I be?"

She tipped her head back, rested it on the wall behind her. "You're never home anymore."

"Is that why you're sitting here like a weirdo?"

"No," she lied. She didn't want him to feel guilty. "Do you ever feel like you're missing out on a part of your Korean self? Do you wish I introduced you to Korean culture?"

He smirked. "Random much?"

"It's totally relevant. You're Korean, too, y'know."

"Oh my God, what?" he said, patting his face and chest. "I'm Korean?"

"Stop it." She craned her neck to look at him. He seemed so tall now. He was wearing his hair differently, parted in the middle and tucked

behind his ears, instead of hanging over his eyes. She could see his whole face. His skin was clear and bright, smooth and perfect. Maybe it was the lighting, but his hair seemed darker, almost black now, and she felt glad that he looked more Korean, more like her, though his dad had dark hair, too. No one in her family had ever looked like her.

“This is weird,” he said.

“Don’t you think it’s sad that I can’t give you this thing that is rightfully yours? Your heritage. Your history. A sense of family through generations. A connection to your ancestors.”

“No. I mean, I don’t think so. This is so random.”

“Stop saying that. Do you even understand what I’m saying?” Of course, he couldn’t. She didn’t even understand it.

“Why the Dürer?” She pointed to the engraving.

“I saw it in a textbook. I liked it.”

“What do you like about it? What does it mean to you?”

“I don’t know. I just like it.” His jeans were too long. They bunched around his ankles like accordion bellows and dragged on the floor behind his heel. She tugged at some of the threads hanging off the shredded hemline. He pulled his leg away.

“But what about it do you like?”

He shrugged. “It just looks cool.”

“That’s not a good answer.” They would tear him to pieces in art school. Clay could not pontificate. “Well, I hate it.”

“Ok,” he said, like a question. She knew she was being weird. She just wanted to talk to him. What things did he like, and why did he like them? Who was he now, and who was he becoming? “I hate the

creepy little man-child cherub with its hollow eyes, and I hate the strange starving goat-dog thing. What is that anyway? What's it supposed to mean?"

He leaned in to look more closely at the drawing. "I was just copying it."

"But why not any Korean art?" She picked at a splinter standing out from a gap in the wood flooring.

"What Korean art should I try?"

Regina couldn't answer his question, and it made her sad. For years she'd rejected anything Asian, trying to prove she was just as American as the blonde girl next door, as her white family. Being Asian was humiliation. It was shame. Even in her own family, she'd always felt like an outsider, the least favorite grandchild, the reject cousin, the pitiful niece who'd been saved from the poverty of a developing nation. She had no racial mirrors, no one to help her feel beautiful, or seen. She was invisible, until she wasn't. Then, she was a stupid, chinky dog-eater who needed to go back to her country.

But now. Now, she was proud to be Korean. She just didn't know how. "You're Korean, too," she said. "I want you to be proud of that."

"Okay, I'm a proud Korean. Will you get off the floor now?" Clay extended a hand and helped pull her to her feet.

"I'm sorry," she said. But she didn't know what she was sorry for. She just wanted to change the subject.

"Can I go in my room now?" He smiled, almost laughed at her, and she felt a tiny bit of tension release. His wide smile, his full lips, his big, kind eyes and long dark lashes. He really was such a handsome kid. She wondered who else saw that, too.

She watched him pick up his laundry. Did he know that he was growing into his body and out of his awkwardness? Would he ever be able



to expel the cruel voices in his head from his younger years, the ones that told him he was a disgusting freak, that he was ugly and would always be ugly, and that no one would ever like him? The voices from her childhood still haunted her, and she hadn't been bullied nearly half as bad as Clay. She imagined they would never be fully silent.

"Thanks for doing my laundry," he said and disappeared into his room.

She felt like she could stand there, outside of Clay's door, forever. Would it matter? What else did she have to do? She stood there for a moment, listening to Clay shuffling around in his room. His drawing of an ouroboros was attached to the upper corner of his door with tape that had yellowed with age. She picked at the corners and peeled it off, careful not to rip the paper. The drawing rested in both hands like a sacred text.

In middle school, soon after the incident in science class, when that asshole stuffed a fetal pig down the back of Clay's shirt when the teacher left the room, Clay struggled with sleep and often stayed up drawing. One night, she'd been up late, trying to meet a deadline. He had startled her, coming out into the dining room in the darkness. He set his sketchbook on the table next to her laptop.

He'd drawn a picture of a dragon eating its own tail. "This is cool," she had said.

"It's called an ouroboros," he said. "It's usually a serpent, but you know me and dragons." He was in his dragon phase, obsessed.

She took his sketchbook in her hands and studied it. "I like it better as a dragon." She checked the time. It was almost two in the morning.

"An ouroboros is a mythical creature that symbolizes the cycle of life. Eating its own tail is like rebirth, infinity, the regeneration of the self."

"I love it," she had said. She hoped it was a kind of talisman to guard him from so much humiliation. How could her boy endure so much cruelty without losing the sweetness that she so adored in him?

"It's a Chinese dragon. It's good luck. The European dragon is more malevolent. The Chinese dragon is said to be made up of different animals." He guided her through the details of his drawing. "See," he said. "The tail of a fish, the claws of an eagle, the paws of a tiger, the body of a snake, the head of a horse, the beard of a goat, the antlers of a stag." He pointed to each part of the creature's body.

"Why not a Korean dragon?" she had asked.

"Same thing," he'd said.

"Is it?" She wondered if Clay was right, or if he was lumping everything Asian into a big indistinguishable melange. All Asians look the same. As a kid, people called her Chinese, as if all people from Asia were Chinese, as if being Chinese were an insult.

*Me Chinee, Me no see.*

*Me Chinee, me play joke. Me go pee-pee in your Coke.*

Regina loved Clay's picture, but she stared at the creature eating its own tail and wondered how it symbolized regeneration. It seemed like the opposite to her, more like burning the candle at both ends. This poor creature was devouring its own self. It nourished itself with nothing more than its own body, getting nothing from the world around it.

This is how Regina felt now. Regina, the ouroboros. Regina, devouring herself into annihilation.

# The Number Nine

(Salem, MA October 1692)

I sit on the floor in my father's woodshed. It's cold and I don't know where else to go. I can't be in the house at the hearth, my mother and Mary are doing the washing. My father has gone on a trip to Boston to sell some of his cabinetry. I am here alone.

Or not alone. The forest-child is here with me, I can catch sight of him from the corner of my eyes, like birds in church. Their brown feathers flutter down from the beams as we gather for worship all Sunday long. We are sinful if we are idle, and I am being both right now.

I should be helping my mother and Mary but I am afraid. My sin, my idleness is really fear. The forest-child knows. He knows how much I grieve my growing, the rush of blood between my legs and the stained rags which mean it's time for me to spend my days learning the running of the household here in this cold wild land.

The forest-child tells me to make a choice. I can choose to be with the servants and the crones. The way of god is the way of marriage, he tells me, and that is the way I cannot go. There is no man in this village that is not a stinking lout, sotted with beer and grimed with the hard work of the land. My mother talks of nothing else. Mary looks at me with evil in her eyes. I cannot be someone's property, even if it is different from the way Mary is property.

I was out gathering sticks when I found the forest-child. My mother, always trying to ward off the devil by making sure my hands were busy, sent me along the path for kindling. All the other families had done the same thing, so it seemed, so the forest was picked over and I was taken far and away down the path and on a deer-trail deeper into the woods, along the heart-shapes made by their hooves.

I was breaking off dry sticks from the deadfall and bundling them to carry home on my back when I saw the forest-child. Not bird nor beast, but human, like me. Like our Mary's baby boy, before he sickened and died. So plump at her breast, so much curly hair. Like Ephraim. And yet not like that innocent one, because the forest-child had eyes that gleamed with wisdom. It was a he, I could see the little sex beneath the flowing robe – the forest-child was blessed, or cursed with the wings of an angel. He called to me as he flew among the trees, and I became ill and lost my senses.

When they found me I told them what happened, and the church fathers grew afraid. My mother would not send me into the forest again, tasking my father with making sure she always had enough sticks and shavings for the cookstove. My mother forbade me from speaking of books, even the Bible. There were no books to be looked at in the new world, she said. Books were the work of Satan.

How did Satan find us so far from home? Was he on the ship too? Was he in the stinking hold, or the terrifying deck where sailors moved like acrobats among the wind and waves?

We saw the royal acrobats in London one time, before we came here. More sorcery, my mother would say, and yet she couldn't take her eyes away.

England, where we sailed from, brick houses and towns. Here there is wilderness. The only books I know of in this village are all Bibles. Three Bibles in this village and one of them stays in the church, locked in a wooden box. Whenever the reverend holds it, like an affliction, I feel the desire to run my hands over its leather, to smell the musty smell; it came here over the ocean like the rest of us did.

Here there are only my father's tools, his woodworking tools, also carried on the ship and guarded by him so fiercely I would not be surprised to learn that he threw someone overboard for trying to take them. I was so ill on the passage that I would barely have known if my own mother were thrown overboard. The weeks on the Atlantic, nothing but fish and hardtack.

And then here. First Boston, where there were more buildings at first than I had imagined, the harbor, streets as cobbled and turreted as home. But then the long journey to this outpost, the monotony of trees, endless work and woodsmoke.

My father built us one of the better houses. Here I am, sitting on the floor of my father's woodshed. The people in town are looking for me, but they won't find me. Before we left home, I tore a page from a book. The page was magic, just as my mother has said. I saw how she crossed herself when she looked at it. What is a symbol in a square but the leap of chaos bound by the thrum of order? The page is a portal, a glass window with nine panes and each pane has a symbol. They are slender and curved like ankle bones, they are shapes of stones and rings. These things protect me. I stitched the folded page into the hem of my dress and it kept me safe all the way across the ocean.

As I grew, I stitched it into new dresses. I kept it from the prying eyes of my mother and Mary. My father has been waiting for another son and can't be bothered with the workings of women, the workings of me. And I am now a woman. The blood came between my legs when I was in the woods looking for kindling and the forest-child found me. He smelled me and he smelled my symbols. I knew I was in the presence of something, holy or unholy, when I saw the forest-child with wings. As I said, I lost my senses. When they awakened me I didn't want to go home to the village.

When they found me and brought me home my secret paper with the magic symbols was gone. And now, I fear the demons drunk with rage and bloodlust, the stomach pit dread of the future. Ephraim died of a fever when he was only three. There is so much darkness here, on the edge of the wilderness. He feared the darkness and he asked me to protect him. He wanted a stone, a talisman, protection.

And because I was taught needlework by my own mother, I begged from her thread and scraps of silk from a dress she'd not worn in years, useless silks she carried in a trunk from England in her ignorance of this wilderness. I sewed for him a red diamond shape inside

a blue square, pricking my fingers to bleeding only once, and only a drop on the cloth itself. Something soft that Ephraim could hold at night, and he did. I stitched our special number there, the number nine, and it was in his fist when they buried him in the dark earth.

This village has grown since his death. It is full of strangers, and when my mother says this I see Mary looking at the sky as if she is afraid to listen. I hear Mary muttering when she thinks I can't, strange days, strange brew, strange birds, strange bedfellows.

The village is afraid, too, I can hear it and I can feel it. I'm sitting here on the floor of my father's woodshed. It's part of the barn. There's a ladder to the loft and I may climb up there to hide. There is fear, fear of the dark tribes living west of here, fear of the government back home, fear of the strange animals that lurk on all the edges. Bears and wolves. My paper with the magic squares protected me from them. My needlework protected Ephraim. Then I went into the forest and the forest-child took it from me. Now he wants to give it back, but for a price.

I'm in the woodshed making a bargain with the forest-child. My precious scrap of paper will be returned to the hem of my dress, if only, he says, I should find the other girls and return to the forest. I should find the other girls and we will become as if we are the wild animals. This is the only way. It is cold but the forest-child says we will no longer be cold when we have the fur of beasts. We are to become like beasts. We are to shed our clothing and howl at the moon. There will be a great fire.

It has been an entire season since I encountered the forest-child for the first time. Since then he is a comfort and a haunt. Every day he whispers in my ear. I pray and I pray but I can no longer tell the evil from the good. I no longer know Satan. They say he is in the goat owned by our neighbor but the goat gives milk, a blessing. They say he is in the cat that lives on the mice in the barn but the cat is a blessing of eyes and tail and fur and purr and comfort. They say he is in the servants and some of the old women in the village.

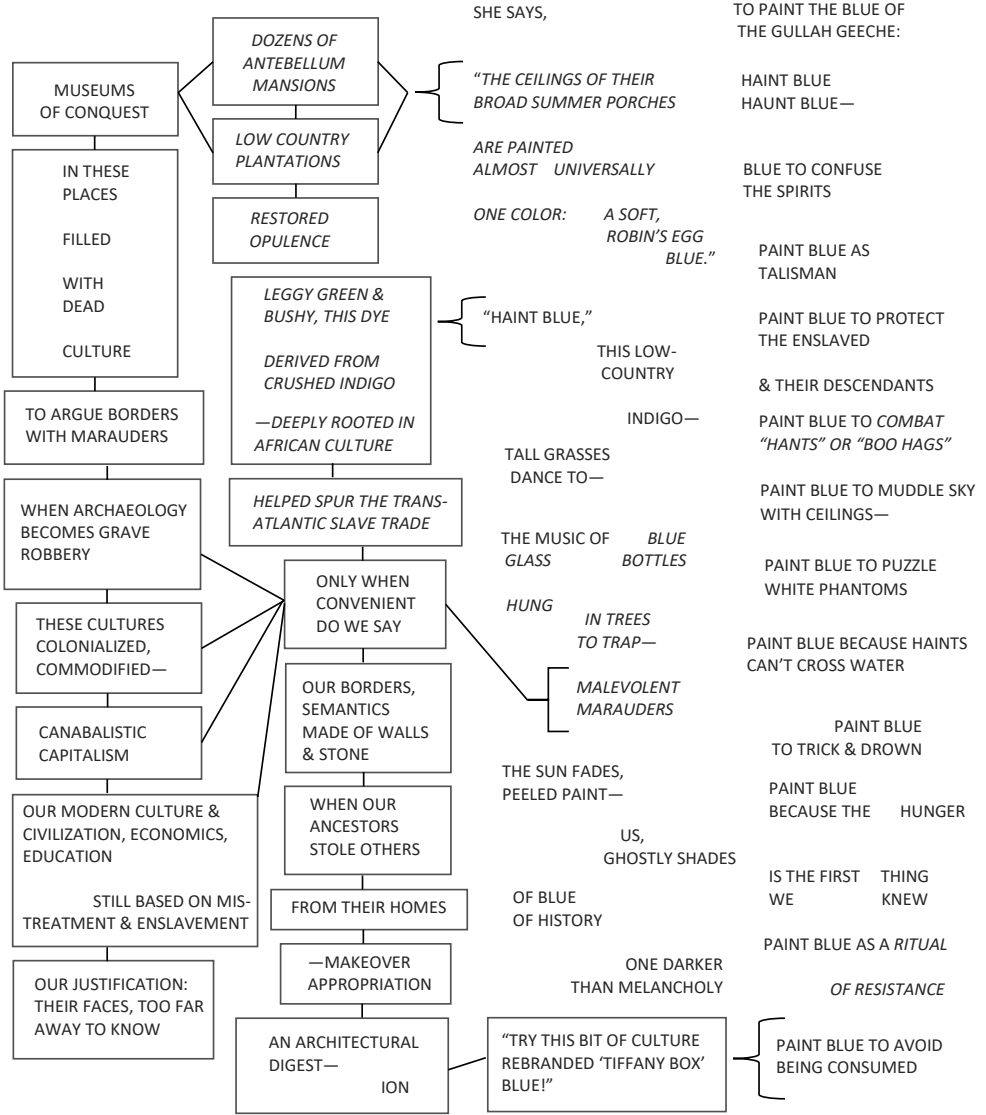
And now I arise. I take with me the page from the forest-child, the paper inscribed with nine portals, each portal housing a symbol, each symbol speaking to the other in a way that keeps me safe. I choose this version of safety over that of some new household, even one in which the house has many hearths and glazed windows instead of oiled paper over holes. A new household wealthy enough to hold my father's cabinetry, which he is even now selling in the markets of Boston. I tuck my magic page into my cloak and walk the path into the forest. The forest-child is with me and the people of the village watch and whisper. I don't know if they can see him but it doesn't matter now. The birds from the church have flown back into the forest and we are following them, following their soft brown feathers as if they are signposts.

Here in the clearing is the fire and the forest child has told me to burn my dress. I do. I rub my body with mud and leaves. I see three of the village crones, their breasts flattened with age, their stomachs slack, the muscles in their arms and legs stringy beneath their skin. We are all here together. The other girls. The bear and the wolf. I take my precious page and add it to the fire. The embers rise like stars then turn to ash above the shadowed treetops.

# HAINT BLUE

After Shoshi Parks' "What the Color 'Haint Blue' Means to the Descendants of Enslaved Africans"

"THE MARSHY WORLD OF LOW-LYING COASTAL ISLANDS IS AWASH IN BLUE."





# What the Water Keeps

The lady lie in waiting,  
melancholy's arbitrary schedule for arrivals and departures

Slow stream of grains of sands through the hourglass,  
A slow drip  
Slipping away like memories, entities that placate and  
ameliorate burning bright lights of truth filtered through windows  
and doors

Silencing battle cries of justice denied,  
stone walls seeking solace in lies, eyes unseeing, and ears obtuse to  
cries  
of drowning skins and spirits miles away from the water and where  
fair cherubs lay their heads

Fair maiden gifted with blessings from heaven and earthly boun-  
ties,  
sucks from the teat of the bovine  
so she lays bare  
there only skin, bone, and marrow

Oh frau, you hold the keys that deny my freedom  
as you sit in your den of dissent  
looking out at the water where ships pass by but do not stop, dock,  
or depart in mass numbers  
for human cargo but in enabling coordination and orchestration  
Bells toll for those develop kingdoms, build borders and walls,  
create gates and keep keys  
Scales tip in favor found in ladders built sky high to the kingdom of  
heaven

Ladders chopped down like spruce trees to keep at bay those  
deemed unholy

Rotations of numbers and sets to protect the constant  
outcome, sum of which is refuge for alabaster carvings in imitation  
of flesh, bone, and soul

## Magic Squares at Christmas Eve

Years ago, my grandmother stopped asking what dessert I wanted at Christmas Eve, sometime after she stopped calling for birthdays/ remembering how old I was. I always asked for the stained glass marshmallows windows, the ones rolled in chocolate / covered in coconut. This year, she makes magic squares instead, seven-layer bars I pull apart in the corner while no one talks to me. When my family doesn't know where I go to school, I shred the coconut from the sweetened condensed milk. When they don't ask about my boyfriend, I pluck the pecans away one by one. When they pretend I didn't come out this year, I weigh butterscotch against chocolate. I stare at the mess, over and over again whispering *Chef, for you, today, I have prepared a deconstructed magic square/ family/ holiday.* When my cousin and I realize we haven't seen each other in a year, we take four shots. Then my drunk fingers crumble away the graham cracker crust. When no one mentions my sister's trips to the hospital or how they never visited her, I suck the butter from my fingertips. When my mother cries at the end of the night and I know we won't see them again, I smush it all back together, trying to remember the square.

# Magic Square Talisman I: Beginnings

Is there anybody out there?  I imagine Dürer	screaming at his engraving hand limp after grasping everything and carrying	away into absurdity all of the scattered pieces the talismans puzzling into perpetual ambiguity	Dürer
doom scrolling after the death of his mother the light and geometry	whole worlds	irreverent and airless a dreamscape of depression	dry and cold prayers under his nails his square his copper plates
leaving imprints inert	in his hands the feeling of being able to fuck them all up in a single stroke	a nine placed backwards so carefully in one reality	rewritten replaced with a second state
like madness ready to fall into the hand of melancholy	ready to fall and fall	to collapse shatter fracture	of being unbalance botched and embedded he stares into speculation this portal calls out.  I answer:

# Magic Square Talisman 2: Air

start  
here:

limits  
of light  
breath  
horizon  
gasp of

black bile  
sputtered  
from pinched lung

your emissions  
trailing towards  
Saturn  
circumvolve  
the stillness of

postmortem  
motherhood  
a new wind

hallucinatory

crying  
into screens  
feeling

dewy  
and dripping

like sadness  
rungless ladder  
a return  
to hysterics

# Magic Square Talisman 3: Fire

your tongue  
might as well  
be

inferno

a sacrifice  
ancient  
ritualistic  
fanning feeding  
a road

forked the way  
it spells sin  
always

burning in  
a deeper part

of my own

igniting flickers

inside core  
churning a body  
alight soaked  
in kerosene

making  
deep guttural  
need

# Magic Square Talisman 4: Water

lament  
ocean pulling  
the way inks

and time  
bleed against will  
almost clinically

the currents

dribble

chisel shoreline  
into figure

glass over  
a flood soaked  
reflection ready  
to shatter

winter into  
brain replicate  
the steadiness  
of ripples

crash  
foam  
form

those senses  
of selves

# Magic Square Talisman 5: Earth

I'm sick  
of being

disjointed  
these squares'  
genius suspended  
between divinity  
and darkness

all summoning

melancholy  
a renunciation

of longing  
for something  
more

something  
material  
in the end  
we're all

so feeble  
so frictioned  
into static  
fragments  
so

inert

so sad:  
but still  
we cling—



# Talismans // Prayers

— for Elaine (Young) Berube —

My other grandmother      taught me only  
prayer      before she died. Young  
but still I knew      she hung our photos above  
                                         her bed  
hid herself      in stacks  
                         piles  
                         of things  
                 hallways      of junk      around  
her home  
                 closed her eyes      each night  
and thanked God for us      and for stuff.  
Her stuffed white tiger was my first      protector  
now I line towers  
                 of tiger eye,  
                 fluorite, selenite,  
                 amethyst, quartz  
around my cards,      each drawing of three  
a hymn of my own.  
                 I press fortune cookie papers  
                 to my forehead      stow their secrets  
in lock boxes      origami      iPhone cases.  
                 In another world      she might've said  
                 wisdom  
                 is keeping  
                 it all      the faded  
ticket  
stubs      old bottle opener keychains      even  
                 cancerous  
paper receipts.      How many mysteries  
scrawled in books?  
                 How many worlds of dust collected  
                 on the rounds of Mardi Gras      beads, in the cracks  
                 of jewel cases,  
                 pyramids of yarn

unused  
stickers  
bottle caps  
every greeting card collected  
carefully. All these things talismans  
tucked hoarded piles  
like her piles prayers  
like her prayers.  
Charm in my blood a summoning  
tradition treasured abundance akin  
to love something like godliness.

## The Dog House

I barged into my very first college class twenty minutes late, through the fire escape, to scrutinous glances and sweaty faces. I took the only available seat, next to a small and smiling girl who gracefully moved her bag for me. The teacher stopped mid-sentence.

“I presume you’re Miranda. Do you go by Miranda, or Mandy?”

“Miranda.” I said quietly, “please.”

“Great—so, you can all purchase your supplies from Three Arts, that little bookstore on Raymond Ave. You’ll need charcoal, a sketch pad, *at least* 11x16, graphite pencils—”

The girl next to me leaned over, put the syllabus between us, and pointed with the end of her sharpie. *Who writes in sharpie?*

We were released from class the moment Prof. Laurent finished reading the syllabus. He had better things to do, his own art to make, and we were useless to him: completely unarmed with both supplies and knowledge. What would we talk about? He would see us next week.

The girl introduced herself as Laleh and told me she liked my shirt: a cheap black and white tee with a drawing of a camera and the words *Don’t be Negative*. She reminded me, immediately, of a childhood friend: the shoulder-length brunette bob, the large, bright-brown eyes. Laleh lived two floors below me in Joss Hall, and somewhere on that walk from the dirty art studio to the old and crumbling dorm, I realized with relief that I was making a friend besides my roommate.

I didn’t like to draw, but it was the mandatory prerequisite to Photography. In high school, I told people I wanted to be Annie Leibovitz,

or a graphic designer. I wanted to shoot for magazines, work with celebrities, and have romantic and erotic flings with artsy men in the dark room. I wanted to take those shots and render them uniquely on a computer screen, work magic with the mouse. In Photography, I excelled, receiving praise for my photos from both my teacher and classmates. In those moments, I filled with pride like a slow-rising pool float. I often brought my DSLR to school, used the Yearbook Club as an excuse to take pictures of people, to pretend I had more friends than I actually had. Later, I could spend an hour hunched over the computer, Adobe zoomed in to the most minute pixel while I airbrushed away chin zits and baby fat, erased sleepiness from beneath their eyes.

~

Vassar Fall, Senior Year, I live in approximately four places: in the retreat, at one of the two rectangular tables with charger access, where I park with my thesis and take breaks for the friends that trickle in and out. In the stark white cubicles deep in the bowels of Thompson Library. An empty classroom in the building across from my old dorm with floor-to-ceiling windows that look out onto the lawn, “Joss Beach,” at night. My car, where I search suburban Poughkeepsie for its highest peaks, watch the weather over the Catskills, miles away from campus. These are places where I can work, but rarely create, and I’ll spend the entire year learning the difference.

Places where I wish I can write but can’t: my own dorm room, in senior housing, complete with air conditioning; the main floor of the library, with friends scattered between rows of bookshelves, joking between problem sets and bio-chem flashcards; the various dorm Parlors, with their fifties-style décor and pianos that I play poorly but like to play anyway; the room above the Art History auditorium, with red velvet benches and triptych-style glass windows, a room that smells like Christmas all times of the year: the scent of burning wood and cloves.

~

After my first Drawing class, I made my way towards the Art History auditorium, infamous for the dense and relentless lectures it housed. I approached the heavy wooden door with hesitation. Was this the right way? My last entrance through the fire escape had made me wary and unsure. I pulled my schedule out of my back pocket as a student rushed past me.

“Are you here for Art 105?” She asked, holding the door open for me.

“Yeah, you?”

“Yeah, I think it’s this way.” I followed her just beyond the entrance into a large, slanted stone lecture hall. “Where do you think we should sit?”

“I think I’m gonna sit near the back,” I said, sizing up the final row.

“Oh, I can’t see that far, so I’ll grab a seat in the front.”

Would it be uncool to follow her? I sat three seats in on the back right side for no particular reason. The wooden seats had not been upgraded since the sixties, and the retractable desk squeaked when I pulled it down onto my lap. I sat in eager anticipation as the auditorium filled, seat by seat, row by row, and marveled at the sudden quiet when the first professor took the stage. He briefly introduced himself and the structure of the course.

“Over the year,” he said, “you will learn about Art and Architecture from its beginnings to its current state. For one hour per week, you will meet with your assigned discussion groups and tour the Lehman Loeb Museum. Lectures will start promptly at twelve o’clock, three days per week, and students will be admitted if late, but we will not wait for them.” And at twelve o’clock exactly, the overhead lights were shut off with a singular, echoing *click*, and an image was projected onto the movie-theater screen behind the podium. “Merymose’s Head, c. 1375 BCE,” he began. And off we went.

~

“Remind me what you’re writing about again?” Tyler asks me, five of us crowding into a small table at the retreat on Chili Wednesday. I love when the table is overflowing, love feeling part of a group, and the idea that I’m an integral part of something ephemeral and vibrant. It doesn’t matter that most conversations with my friends go this way.

“Trauma theory and Poe.”

“So, what’s your angle?”

“I’m still nailing it down—but something about how Freudian theory is actually based on some of Poe’s work.”

“Did Poe write a story about wanting to fuck his mom?” Ross laughs.

“Okay,” Tyler leans over and touches my shoulder in his signature gesture, “but you know Freud has been vastly disproven, right?”

“I’m not writing a psych thesis,” I argue, “it’s an English thesis. I’m writing about literature.”

“What merit does the work of a disproven psychologist have in the English department?”

“Well, obviously enough merit for us to both know who we’re talking about.”

“Okay, okay,” Tyler puts his hands up, as if in surrender, “what do I know.” He turns to a friend and mentions something from the Philosophy class they just came from, and already I know the conversation will soon pivot to porn and a meme I don’t understand. Ross leans over to peer into my notebook. “What is that?” He’s pointing at a doodle in the margins.

“What do you mean? It’s a kite.”

“Why is the bow so big?”

“It’s not a real kite.”

~

Vassar Fall, Freshman Year was defined by unprecedented humidity, a healthy dose of humility, and a stern lesson on how to live away from home. I was enrolled in several classes including Drawing I/II: Visual Language; Art 105/106: Introduction to the History of Art and Architecture; and English 170: Approaches to Literary Studies. Each week seemed to make me feel smaller. In Art History, I grew anxious from the incessant typing during lectures as I struggled to keep up with dates, empires, and rulers. As the semester rolled on, our discussion groups worked clockwise around the museum, *Statuette of Isis and Young Horus*, to Dürer engravings, Millet paintings, *The Kiss*, and *Catskills in the Spring*. We trucked through exhibitions featuring Eirik Johnson, an engraving of *Allegory of Life (The Dream of Raphael)*, and Heineken polaroids, as my back ached from being upright for so long. Often, the chronology bewildered me: like a bad math student, I had trouble keeping track of numbers, and building concepts on top of each other. How did the French Revolution eventually bring us American art? How did the rise of Turkey bring us Buddhist art? I couldn’t make these connections, crisscrossing the Atlantic Ocean or the Mediterranean Sea while also progressing in time.

Similarly, in English, I was bogged down by spelling, desperately searching for words I had jotted down hopelessly into my notebook, hoping to breathe meaning into them later: Foucault and Freud, Barthes and Balzac. I quizzed myself on the definitions of new phrases I would never be brave enough to use, *Marxism*, *Primal Horde Myth*, *Male Homosexual Continuum*, *Phallus*, *Méconnaissance*, and *Castration Anxiety*. I mixed up which philosopher theorized what and got sick reading *Salome* and *Story of an Eye*. But even as I struggled, and yearned for home often, I knew something else was happening: *Is all that we see or seem / But a dream within a dream?*

Meanwhile, Laleh and I sprawled out all over campus with our larger-than-life sketchpads. Our hands smudged with charcoal while we drew the Rose Parlor at night: dark, mauve, and empty but for one

headless student playing the piano. *Should I draw his feet? Easy, over-achiever, I can barely get inanimate objects right.* We drew the seating areas just beyond Noyes Circle: stone and green among trees that provided inadequate shade. We drew recognizable landmarks: the stained-glass window in the library, the oyster sculpture in Main Building, the “longest branch” tree in the quad. In class critiques, we were always part of the bottom three, and we spent a lot of time pretending not to care that we were being criticized, being criticized in front of guys we had crushes on, being criticized for something we never cared to do well. As the year went on, we tried to make it a joke. We called the models names (*Stiff Nips, Big-Balled Jasper*) and chased each other with charcoal hands. Laleh once snuck a song into our studio’s working queue, and as the opening riffs to Jesse McCartney’s “Beautiful Soul” came on, we could barely keep a straight face. Even after Prof. Laurent changed it back, we felt a sense of pride, our giggles harmonized to Ella Fitzgerald and Duke Ellington. *Doo wop, Doo wop, doo wop.*

~

My roommate Anna, a tall red head who put up with my snoring in exchange for my participation in weekend drinking, tried with all her might to teach me to loosen up relax. She poured me shots while I straightened my hair, and I dunked my tongue in the vodka to appease her. We had an open-door policy, and spent our evenings cackling from two garage sale chairs Anna dragged up from Maryland, sipping on smoothies and singing “All by Myself” in an attempt to get the boys from down the hall to hang out with us. Anna figured out when parties were happening and made sure we all went to them. But these parties did little for me compared to the pre-games, friends’ heads stuck through our doorway, all jokes and shitty music and schnapps before the disappointment of losing each other in a crowd—our squad broken by loud music, dark rooms, and the diverging needs to either find someone to drink with, someone to smoke you out, or someone to fuck. I didn’t want any of those things. I wanted to flirt with the guy friends I already had and be one of ten, not get lost or swept away.



Weekend mornings, I churned out work while everyone else slept off a hangover. My friends claimed they never saw me do any work and I wanted to keep that illusion alive, taking it as a compliment. In reality, I think I needed to stumble over my assignments in private. Alone in my room, the soft Sunday sun beaming through the single-paned dorm window, I mixed up Monet and Manet, jumbled my French conjugations, gave up on *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and waited eagerly for Anna to knock, tell me everyone's ready and leaving for brunch.

One morning, Anna shared that she had lost her beloved banana flask the night before, and I was both annoyed that I had missed the joke it had probably been, and embarrassed when she asked me to retrieve it with her. "They're going to think we're *weird*," I complained, thinking about the tall, sallow-eyed men who probably lived in the house. Ross joked that "Shit Happens," and I said, "not when I'm in charge of shit," and suddenly we were barreling towards a conversation about how anal retentive I was. "But what's the worst that could happen," Ross said, "if you didn't get your way?"

"It's not that I always need it my way—"

"Kinda seems like you do." We sat across from each other at the large square table. The plates were stacked, stuck together with syrup swimming with pancake remains, bowls of mostly finished granola and yogurt already soured, the tiny mugs stained on all sides with dreadful coffee and refills and refills. I was losing the thread of my argument. Ross always had me there, in the headlock of an argument he knew I couldn't finish. Often, I found it tantalizing, but that day was different. I hadn't gone out with them the night before, hadn't wanted to leave the room when they did. I had started with bribes to get them to stay behind: *Another shot? One more song*. When that didn't work, I had regressed into whining about the cold, and then a fit about how much less fun the party would be than where we were, followed by a stubborn conclusion to stay behind, *Have fun without me*.

"Whatever, princess," Ross said. There were ooh's from the other boys at the table. Anna began to protest, but I saw my out. I collected

the plates in front of me, suddenly insecure about how many belonged to me, how much I had eaten, how comfortable I had allowed myself to get with this group and stood.

“Really?” Ross called after me, as I walked over to the carousel and dumped my empty plates and rushed out the double doors with adrenaline. Vassar Spring was in full swing, and the cherry blossoms were out. I walked beneath the trees, marveling at the petals raining on my head like popcorn, the transgression already receding with each step. *And all I lov'd, I lov'd alone.*

~

Despite Vassar's status as a liberal arts school, I had trouble finding a place for myself on campus. Each of my high school haunts: school newspaper, yearbook, photography club, failed me. I clung tightly to those freshman year friends, even when our roots began to sprout, everyone joining new clubs and making new connections, I held unwaveringly on. And as they grew closer with more and more people, I considered myself lucky. I had ties with everyone: sports teams, theater kids, philosophy nerds, jazz and punk bands, comedy club. In high school, I had so few friends. My brand was one of isolation mistaken for independence, loneliness mistaken for a poor attitude. *No more, I thought, look at how many people I could get along with.*

~

A few months ago, when I had first approached my thesis advisor with my idea, I was nervous he was going to shoot me down, simply because I was sure he would sense my own trepidation. I had never been good at English in high school, frequently relied on No Fear Shakespeare, or needed a hint about what the “green light” meant. It wasn't until I read Jefferey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides* that I began find literature relatable—was drawn in from his odd way of writing about girlhood, coming of age, and mental health struggles. From then on, I gobbled up anything and everything on the Young Adult bookshelf at Barnes & Noble, but even as I found solace in those novels, that initial insecurity stuck and threatened to linger years later

as I began my thesis.

“I like it—very interesting. And what do you think Poe has to say about trauma?”

“I’m not exactly sure, yet, but I think there’s evidence to suggest that he’s saying something.” My cheeks reddened.

“I would be inclined to agree, yes,” he smiled, “do you know which stories you’d like to focus on?”

“Definitely ‘Ligeia,’ ‘The Black Cat,’ and ‘William Wilson,’” I perked up, “and also some of his poems—definitely ‘Alone,’ even though it’s cheesy, and ‘Annabel Lee,’ and that one from ‘Ligeia...’”

“Ah, ‘The Conqueror Worm.’ Yes, wonderful, amazing.” He straightened in his chair, “So, now you need to write me some kind of introduction, let’s call it five pages. I’m interested in the *meat* of the thesis—solid points, solid sources, and ideas you’re interested in exploring further.”

“Do you know where I might start, with other sources?”

He stands and combs through the overflowing bookshelf. “I know we read this last year, but it’s worth re-reading, I believe.” He took the book out to the hall and made photocopies. I read the top of the packet as he handed it to me, “Mourning and Melancholia,” and recognized her immediately—Melancholia, seated among one thousand things, disappointed and looking out into a distance I couldn’t see—waiting for something to happen.

~

“I’m freezing,” Laleh told me from the carpet across the hall. It was May and unseasonably cold in the Catskills. Per instructions of the assignment, we were not wearing baggy clothing.

“It’s cold as tits in here,” I said, switching the angle on my charcoal to get a sharper line. If the fall had been defined by this need to secure my footing, that spring was about hustling and frolicking. I was racing to finish this assignment, so that we could all hopefully meet up for nighttime cappuccinos at the dining hall. Despite the cold, I had been thinking about the summer and the implications of being far apart for months. Every night this week, I had wanted to go out for cappuccinos, and everyone had been too busy. Didn’t they know how fleeting and precious our time together was?

“You know who we could call, to make it warmer?” Laleh asked, as I scoffed. We were working on our finals, but both hated working in silence.

“Who?” I mock-asked. Laleh rolled her eyes, she was talking about Anthony again. “I don’t get what you see in him.” I thought about the guys from our art class, Tyler with his big smile and boxers that always rose unabashedly from his jeans: purple with spaceships, red with stripes. Another with fuzzy blonde hair and sweet eyes. Laleh and I ranked them and others over and over again, as we sketched.

“I like guys who are more clean cut—classic. Guys who know how to dress.”

“So, you like metro guys?”

“No, like obviously I like muscles and stuff, but I like a guy with style.”

“I like guys with muscles too,” I told Laleh, “I like scruff, hair on their chest, dirt under their fingernails.”

“So, you like lumberjacks?”

“Paul Bunyan sounded hot, dontcha think?”

“You psycho.” I laughed and we continued to sketch. My mind wandered, I wondered what our friends were up to, thought about my other papers with fast-approaching due dates. I was writing about

sado-masochism, taking notes on a comparison piece between Rubens' *Venus and Adonis* and Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. For the final drawing project, we needed to sketch a human body and flex our skills in drawing limbs and muscles.

“What do you think?” Laleh turned over her drawing of me, slumped on the ground of our dorm hallway, my shoulders rigid and domineering over the sketchpad, my knuckles tight against the charcoal. I looked stressed, my face pinched in aggravation. If I could analyze the portrait, I would have said the soft charcoal clashed with the harshness of the facial expression. I would have not-so-aptly called it a modern, feminist interpretation of *The Sower*, and already began composing counterarguments in my head. I took a wider glance at my sketch and saw how much worse my portrait was, yearned to throw it out and wash my hands. It was obvious where I wanted to go, and I ran.

~

For the next two years, I would refine, refine, refine. That first week of art history, the professor had compared the portraits of Merymose and Pharaoh Amenhotep III and asked “So, what are we meant to gather from this comparison?” At the time, I had written the question down and studied it later, but as time went on, the answers came to me with ease. I understood that details in art and architecture were not decoration, they were statements, and the artists used symbolism like a carefully curated index: to borrow was to agree, to reference was to admire. From there, I took classes on Italian art, learning about Roman architecture, countryside villas, and the Renaissance. I took American art with American literature and soared, pitting concepts of “manifest destiny” and “fragile masculinity” against each other in an essay. It turned out that analyzing literature could be done with the same eye I developed in Art History, and suddenly ideas opened up before me like fragrances at a mall, women spraying delicate florals into my path. All I had to do was wade through, take a whiff, pick something I liked.

Slowly, over those four years, I threw traditional art away. I took Photography and got a B because I never printed anything on time for class and was miraculously missing several assignments during the final critique that I later found under my bed. The photography was all digital and I didn't care enough about all the different features on my Nikon D500. Instead, I wrote. I signed up for creative writing classes and wrote shitty poetry and melodramatic stories with tidy endings. I read my writing aloud to myself in my dorm room with my back against the cool concrete, or in unlocked lecture halls with great acoustics, or seated on the bench by Sunset Lake, and checked for mistakes. I showed up to creative writing with butterflies in my stomach and treated each workshop like a first date: eager to prove myself and offer up something delicious and worthy of consumption.

~

Isolated in a dramatic final year of high school, I had discovered something in photography that had made me feel loved and admired, a safety that I couldn't articulate at seventeen-years-old, but a feeling I would nonetheless spend the rest of my life chasing and would eventually find in literature, in my friends, and in writing. I would learn that the essence of good friendship and the pursuit of creating art went hand in hand, *through a circle that ever returneth in / To the self-same spot.*

It was so horribly predictable that I was going to fall in love with Edgar Allan Poe. His dark and twisting stories, poetry on isolation, feelings of abandonment and internal turmoil. His dead or decaying landscapes; places to roam. His work appeared to me like the cased rose from *Beauty and the Beast*. The Beautiful and the Dying, an easy vice for all artists who struggle with depression. Was there any writer more overtly vulnerable? Reading his biography only brought me closer to him (barring the child bride part). Losing his mother at a young age and forever searching for meaning in that. How could it have happened to him? Why did he deserve a life without parents? I wanted to know the answers to those questions, too, and his answers came through to me in his writing as easily as an interview.

I wrote the outline for my thesis on a chalkboard in an unlocked classroom, one October evening. I had learned over the last few years that only empty buildings could grant a silence strong enough to encourage real work. I began by writing about the Grotesque, a literary exploration of the human psyche. I wrote about how Poe's short stories make us feel the way that Poe felt in the world: displaced, distanced, and voyeuristic. I scribbled from one end of the board to the other, propelled by the ASMR noise of the chalk, and never stopped.

My main point became this: trauma existed within the world like a thunder cloud waiting to strike, and when those forces acted upon you, it set off a cycle of internal turmoil that was both unstoppable and reinforced by the external forces pressing down upon you. I would write this all swiftly and with little criticism from my thesis advisor. My version of *The Complete Tales and Poems* will sit open on my lap as I type in the stacks of the library, at the retreat, or in the empty classroom. It will be painless to write, as easy as having a conversation with friends.

~

I lay against the roof of the Dog House, my face tilted up as I searched for stars while Tyler stuck his head through the side door, looking for a plaque of explanation.

The Dog House sat on Joss Beach, closer to the main road and a favorite for smokers hiding from Patrol. The Dog House was an art installation that depicted a "sunken house," where the only visible elements were a dark-slatted roof and chimney, the barest indication of a yellow second floor and painted window beneath. The installation was built before we got there and appeared to be there for the long haul.

"I can't see anything." Tyler said from inside the house, inside the crawl space.

"Some of them don't have plaques," I said.

“Well then how the hell are we supposed to know what it means?”

“I don’t know if any of them care if we know what it means,” I said, thinking of the strewn metal and plaster I passed in the art studio, on my way to Photography. Last spring, someone painted a yellow brick road that started in a fire hydrant, looped like a bee down the road, and disappeared into a gutter.

“The spider has a plaque.”

“I think the spider was commissioned by someone, not a student,” Ross said. I couldn’t see Tyler as he resurfaced from below, but I imagined his hands and knees were covered with dirt.

“Jesus, how could anyone have sex in there?” Tyler asked.

“Doggie-style through the doggie-door, I suppose,” Ross said. I could feel myself getting cut from the conversation. I reached for the joint in Ross’s hands and took it between my middle and forefinger. In the dark, I sensed him raise an eyebrow at me in surprise.

“Did you want some?”

I straightened my hand and admired the glow of the joint against my bright red nails. I pursed my lips, pretended I was Betty Draper.

“No,” I said, “I just like the way it looks.”

“Well—do you mind if I have some, when you’re done admiring?” Tyler asked. I smiled and passed it on. The boys mentioned something about a gaming system that just came out. Other times, they talked about something they learned in class, computers, philosophy, artificial intelligence, fields I wasn’t interested in. Or they talked about drugs they’ve done, or haven’t done but planned to do, or haven’t done and never will, and I felt cradled by the conversation, loved via inclusion or hearsay. Usually, I listened quietly while the boys talked, striving to retain what I could for the next day, but that night, my mind wandered.



I was halfway through my college journey and the time to pick a lane was approaching. There were decisions to be made about what I wanted to do for the next two years and who I wanted to become. I started to panic that I was going to have to make one of these things: a roof in the ground, a doorway in the center of Main, a metallic giraffe that lived by the lake. It had never occurred to me that the project came, first, from something you were trying to say. All those years, I climbed the roof, lay against it, tried to peek inside of it, and never questioned what it meant.

At what point did I begin to question the meaning of art without having explicit permission to do so? *Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there, wondering, fearing, doubting, dreaming dreams no mortals ever dared to dream before.*

~

The third chapter of my thesis begins with the egotistical and harrowing line, *where does that leave me?* In a herculean mental effort, I decide somewhere along the way that Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" and Poe's poetry and prose are somehow about me. What's more, I have the audacity to write about how Poe and Freud are actually wrong, in everything. I refute the first fifty pages of my own work, but not because their theories are inaccurate, merely incomplete. Poe believes individuals who have undergone trauma are doomed either to a life of trauma-reaffirmation in a vicious cycle—or suicide. My argument is that I refuse both, outright. There is another way, and I argue, Poe and Freud are engaging with it: therapy. That writing allowed Poe a safe space to engage in the traumatic cycle without putting himself in danger, and Freud used study as a means to promote self-awareness. I argue that if one could wake up and see their life objectively, they could escape a life defined by one large and looming terrible thing. If I could argue more, I would say that for all their isolation and exclusion, their writings brought us all together, and that togetherness was the opposite of trauma.

~

Despite the pain and suffering, I don't regret those hours spent on the floor, desperately trying to render a lamp while Laleh and I discussed boys we were never going to end up with. *It is a happiness to wonder;—it is a happiness to dream.* Like photography, our crushes were just hobbies. They weren't love—love would find us separately in its own mystical ways: a scruffy guy with glasses, high and running downstairs to say goodbye before a semester abroad. A boy down the hall, making jokes and realizing in his apologies how much of her had gotten into him—the college equivalent of pulling pigtails.

And I would make art, too. The whole time. In the margins of small spiral notebooks, waiting for my friends to find me in the retreat. I would write my shitty poems and a longer story about a girl who loses her mother and doesn't fit in in high school. In those early weekend morning hours, I would comb through a new novel with sticky notes or get lost in the swirl of paintings zoomed in to the smallest detail, analyzing and dissecting and hypothesizing what it all meant. And, eventually, I would learn the cadence of my own artistry: when inspiration hit and where to work, the balance of writing about the sunlight and risking the sunburn to know it. When I was trying too hard and when I needed to take the loss, tear up the page. When it was time to lock myself away in the empty building with the chalkboard, and when it was time to put down my pen, follow my friends into those unknowable spaces defined only by lack of light, the presence of other bodies, and a promise that they'd meet me at brunch the next morning.

# Check for People

I have an interesting story. Claire, I'm speaking. Earth to Claire.

Dad, no.

What are those? Can I—

I'm watching the news, okay? These are *my* pizza pockets, okay?

C'mon, I have an interesting story. Let me tell you while we wait for them to finish with the COVID numbers, which are inflated, by the way, *estimates*. Scoot over.

Ughhh, Dad—can you please leave?

You're a very smart young woman, Claire. You have all these good opinions about politics and the world. What—I'm not being sarcastic. I mean it... Okay, I'm kidding. But I also mean it.

No, Dad, *no*—

Ouch!

These are *my* pizza pockets. My food. My dinner.

I pay for it, young lady.

Isn't it stimulus money? And unemployment?

Claire, *listen*. I have an interesting story.

WHAT THEN!

—

I said what, Dad. What.

Let me ask you a question first: what do you think of your sister? Amanda, not Katelyn, obviously. What do you think of Amanda? Is she necessary? Does she get it?

I...think? She's...my sister? I mean, what kind of—

Just kidding. Just a little misdirection—the real story is that I've been setting fires.

I don't get it.

Around the county. Setting fires. At night. I wouldn't do it in daylight, of course, but, also, it's such a beautiful thing at night. And it's nothing important—old sheds, abandoned out buildings, that wood burns so fast, and in the pitch dark, Claire, it's quite a sight. And you love beautiful things! Beautiful things that *mean* something. And this does. I know you hate me these days, because you're a teenager, and because of the media and *social justice*, but I want you to come with me tonight. Will you come with me?

Dad—

We'll have to park a half mile away and sneak up through the woods, wait for any cars to pass, cross the road, and then the fun part starts. The fun part is the gasoline, pouring it out, and trying to be careful but it splashes a lot, too, so don't wear anything that's important to you. Wear dark clothes. And don't worry, we'll check the barn first, make sure there's no one hiding in there. Or animals. But it's an old barn, half-demolished. You'll understand when you see, there's not much to lose. But kids hide sometimes. Adults, too. People have secret spots and pretend no one knows, because having a secret feels really good, feels like *really* living, so it's important to do a good check

for people before lighting it up.

Dad...

C'mon, don't look at me like that—it's a socially-distanced activity!

Does Mom know?

It's all chaos, Claire. It's the perfect time. We'll hide the secret in the chaos.

Dad, you're scaring me—

No, no... Think of it like, remember when you were little and I'd take you to figure skating lessons?

Yeah?

We even got you the outfits.

So?

Every Saturday, standing around in that freezing rink while you spent half the time scooting around the ice on your duff, but, you know, I just clapped and cheered anyway.

I was seven.

You thought you were good.

I was, kind of.

You weren't. But I didn't care. I clapped and cheered. You wanted to be good. But of course I didn't care if you *were* good, and you didn't let the fact that you weren't good get in the way of the fun of it, so it was like a thing we shared. A belief. This can be like that.

No, Dad, you're talking about arson. It's very different.

It's all participation. What else can we really *do*?

What—we can, just, *not* do that, *not* start fires because it's a totally dangerous thing to do. Why can't you just hoard toilet paper and canned beans? Why does it have to be starting fires?

Do you know how expensive that prepping shit is? We're a little strapped right now, honey.

How bad are things? Are we going to be okay?

A hundred percent. Just come with me. But don't tell your mother, she's got enough on her mind right now. She's our breadwinner and we have to protect her nerves.

I'm scared.

You should be mad, not scared. They've taken everything from us.

Who's they?

That's a good question. Can I have a pizza pocket now?

Just take them.

Thank you. Oh—cheap food is so good. Why? Why do they make it like that?

I—I read that heavily processed foods have an addictive quality.

It's all lies out there, Claire. Lies and worthless good intentions.

Dad... Nothing feels real anymore. And no one cares about what actually *is* real.

Exactly! You were good at ice skating, even though you weren't.

You're being so weird.

All this time, they've been telling us to recycle but it turns out, they've been dumping plastic in landfills.

I read that, too.

Sometimes, Claire, I can't focus. The constant barrage of information, it's like I can't *hear* anymore—but they hear us, hear everything, don't they? Everything has a camera. Everything has a microphone. Why is the browser always trying to save my credit card number? Why are some posts sponsored and who is doing the sponsoring? When I forget my password, does it really make sense that *they've* decided what questions are secure enough for me to answer—about *my* life?

Dad, like, my whole generation already knows this. Our lives are just data being collected. I've known it since before I was, like, born.

That's not possible, honey. To know something *before* you were born.

Okay, yeah, but it's basically the truth. The system doesn't care if we die from this virus, just as long as everyone else keeps shopping, just as long as it doesn't look like they admitted that capitalism is a crime against humanity. Which it is.

Have you noticed, Claire? We're being contained somehow, and it's not just quarantine. It's like we've been confined and we don't even know it, like we're inside some kind of invisible structure—

*The Matrix?*

You don't need to say it like that.

It showed up in the Netflix queue. Recently watched.

Well, it holds up, Claire. It's a good film with tons of valid philosophical discussion, and, historically speaking, art has often been responsible for the evolution of common thought and belief. Do you want the last pizza pocket?

No. And I agree with you about that.

Finally! It's all chaos right now. It's *all* belief. You were good at ice skating, even though you weren't.

I hear you, Dad. And I think I agree with you, or at least understand what you're saying, but it's a dangerous proposition. The notion that belief is stronger than fact. That belief and truth are the same thing, rather than truth and fact—

Who are you quoting? This sounds like you're regurgitating.

These are my thoughts. What—you can reference *The Matrix* but I can't paraphrase some stuff?

Fair enough.

Setting fires is insane.

I check for people. I don't destroy anything that wasn't already lost to time.

It's wrong. Illegal.

Well, you know, there *is* a thing called controlled burn. An essential part of land management used to reset the soil? Burn it down in order to rebuild? What I'm doing is just like that. Or it can be. We can say so. We can agree on that.

Burn it down in order to rebuild?

It can be like that.

Shared belief?

You were good at ice skating, even though you weren't.

No, I *was* good.



It's okay for you to think so.

How are we going to rebuild?

That may not be our place in all of this. We didn't create these circumstances, Claire, but we are forced to live through them. I want to show you that it's not just about what the world does to us—we have consequence, too! We can act. They can't just lay us off and expect submission. Why shouldn't we be able to count on being the people we deserve to be? Why can't we just be who we say we are?

—

I know you're mad, Claire. Smack in the middle of high school, suddenly you've got a desk job, logging onto a damn video conference every day. You're on mute, you have to ask your little questions in the chat box. I know you want to burn something down. How could you not?

It won't help anything, Dad. Fix anything.

You might save the world one day, honey. I know it's a possibility. Future generations are always smarter. But not now. Don't worry about it right now. Just, let me show you how to survive. Just, you and me, out in the world, participating together.

—

Claire.

What.

I'll still go whether or not you come with. But if you come with, I'll never go again after that.

Is that some kind of promise? Or a deal?

Nothing's going back to normal, Claire. We can't be inoculated

against what we've already been through. But I promise.

Dark clothes?

Yes. And we'll check for people. I bet you'll tell a therapist one day that I seemed out of control and seeing me in this way was like seeing me as a real person for the first time. Seeing my face in the light of the flames, the overwhelming inferno right there in front of us, growing toward us, like the sun is going to grow in five billion years and engulf all of us anyway. This is me, helping you to see. The therapist will ask you if I was suicidal, and honey, I'm not. I want you to know that and say that.

I believe you.

Or, you know, maybe long before the sun expands, we just wake up one day, or we're driving home from work—should we be so lucky—and a happy, flaming boulder from a place unknown comes streaking across the sky, and breaks through the atmosphere, bursting it like a balloon, and reality will shrivel backward, retracting over the top of us in a shockwave that sends our preciously advanced consciousness back to the primordial swamp we came from. We'll start again. Either way, the heat will be incredible. I want to show you the way I see it. Maybe I see it wrong, but you'll learn from even that, won't you?

I hope so.

Go get dressed.

## Melencolia 2

O bristling wind  
the street empty almost  
but for those of us  
left out wandering wet  
pavement slick with saliva  
rain O sullen square  
dripping and bare the bald  
pains of labor of living  
there is no geometry  
that can contain you  
us this breathtaking breeze  
that buffets every sharp  
corner rounded every  
shoulder curled and  
uncounted O love  
you lurker come close  
let us have a look at you

# A Wilderness

fussy blanket  
the mathematics  
of space your hand here  
and here reaching  
where did your god go?  
buried in the valley  
by the hands of a ghost  
bone by bone  
and no one will find them  
to this day no one  
will find them  
a blanket of space  
a grave between your hand  
and this place a wilderness  
a home of reaching bone dry  
tongue dry and calling  
I am here I am already here

# Lately

lately blank  
a losing lottery  
a numbers game  
it all adds up to little  
it all adds up  
to a swift of clouds  
dissipating  
a thread of light  
slinking across the wall  
time passes over all creeping  
things do you know  
how it is to call your own name  
and see its shape evaporate  
letter by letter your breath  
blank your mouth  
a catalogue of lost measure

# The Mind I Want

pins it down holds  
the corners pointed  
makes a tidy sum  
of experience  
the moon sitting  
on your shoulder  
from this angle  
a perfect triangle  
of you and me and  
the moon and  
the mind I want  
is satisfied by  
geometry the map  
with its creased  
corners its faded  
valleys of use  
the mind I want lights  
on the edges makes sense  
of shifting space knows  
what it knows needs  
no arrows just the ghost  
of your face the shadow  
you shoulder and  
burn into

# In the Breakages

almost empty train  
7:30am the rickety  
rails we ride some of us  
snoring as we sail  
across the flat river  
its ribbed tides sealed  
by sheets of ice  
little ducks tucked  
in the breakages  
and where else  
would they be?  
bobbing between  
here and there rocking  
and the train throws  
us forward when it goes  
tunneling down again  
to where we are born  
or buried O bustling  
belly of the city

Paul Veracka

## Trying to be Diligent

/Hand me a hammer  
Give me the damn spool of yarn  
I need a measuring device,  
I am to make a house out of this sad/

/Ruler, compass, protractor, you are needed  
We are going to turn this field  
We are to take this thing sitting in me  
And twist it to a mighty structure/

/We knock around some dust  
We climb a ladder and descend it again  
I arrange a metal shard, so it obeys the shadows of the sun  
There are rules we want to follow/

/And it grows as the days round  
Did you know a human being could turn depth of  
Pain to this color green  
It is the first day of spring/

/The day laughing its crow laugh  
Truth sitting high on a perch  
The pure sun rousing  
Looking down on a newly erected home  
The front porch, with warm tea and mittens  
The melancholy and I sitting and looking out  
On the mess we've made and the tools left for forever's chores/



# Have You Heard the Night Sky's Song

With the waving conductor's glove  
The Aquila constellation  
Is fanned out  
All over the stave of night  
And you and I were placed here like planets  
Like numbers  
Looking into your eyes  
There's summer  
Like a jewel of a pomegranate  
10-sided, split by light  
Like that, a galaxy's song in my ear again  
A low-whistle of wind on a grass blade  
This is my will  
To attach with someone

And spread  
Like music and its everywhere-itude  
The tongue of love its woodwind  
It lifts me into your cloudy loft  
Where you cross arms over me  
And I feel like a new year's baby  
Among birds carrying our songs  
Like thunderbolts  
Into heaven's parlor  
There you blanket my heart  
While I scribble out new psalms for you  
The towering lines of 32 silly poems  
Hemmed together like  
God's sky  
So now, you can touch the stars  
They're right beside us  
And each way I look at them,  
Their numbers add to you

# The World On My Shoulders, A Hole in my Jeans

Sitting at my bedroom desk  
Dark approaching like a real creep  
Holding the talisman to my chest  
I'm trying so hard to remember my FedLoan password  
Without actually wanting to know it at all

Rub the gem casing,  
The magic square I bought in college  
With literal federal money  
Adds up to 5 massive digits I cannot escape  
So rub the rubies, the supple opal like baby's tears,  
The obsidian, black as billion year old lava flow  
And enter the flow,  
To find... Yes!  
I've got it! - and I have discovered,  
I am still mummified in old bandages  
Which are further compounded with annual interest  
To protect me  
So protect me, my heaping things,  
Found things and loved things  
My amulets and charms  
Borrowed things  
Protect me, nothing at all

# Sun and Moon

1. When the sun and the moon shook hands  
And agreed to come out one at a time  
They held the human mind in high regard  
Like a thin-shelled yolk,  
They were careful to not disrupt the contents  
With unceasing eternity

And on the off chance both are present in the daylight  
I like to think of it as a trust exercise  
We have earned  
Since we haven't blown them away yet  
Or maybe we are being joyously teased  
With how much mortality we can handle

2. On the morning when I dug my hands in the earth  
I wanted to fuss out some tools  
I reached deep into the percentage of my DNA that is a chimpanzee  
Or is it from my ancestral Muse  
Something inside with the knowledge to help  
Build a grand swinging weight to bring me  
Back to midnight  
When you still cradled me  
Like I'd be gone by daybreak

That paternal touch as we played in dirt  
As you raised me  
It reverberates in my heart  
A symphony as brilliant  
As the invisible grapple  
Between the sun and moon

How am I to save this  
You left me to fend, a child now a man  
How will I again cover my hands in Elmer's glue  
Now that the feeling of peeling it off  
Reminds me of the white of the waning crescent

Which is so beautiful, sweet  
But forces the eye shut in tears  
As I ask, where is the sun  
Which always swings slow with its moon

## The New Luddite

The proofs come in the mail on Wednesday. They are six days late; Hollis has been marking the days off on the calendar on the wall. He pretends not to be annoyed, though no one is there to observe. Late post is the new normal, after all, he reminds himself. He carefully cuts the excessive tape from the cardboard packing box with a utility knife. Inside, seafoam blue crepe tissue paper is bundled around a second box, which has a matching blue ribbon handtied around it. Hollis resists the urge to save the paper and ribbon, tearing into the white box that holds the prints and postcards. He flips through the prints, but it's the postcards he is particularly interested in. They are square, rather than the usual rectangle, and glossy, to best mimic the sheen of a computer screen. They come in a slim box, the pitch printed in a trendy sans-serif:

This set of twenty-four 1:1 ratio postcards features unique abstract art from Hollis Crane's ongoing collection, "The New Luddite," which asks the viewer to reconstruct what it means to exist within the boundaries of social media. Each piece represents one of the seventeen so-called Luddites hanged in January 1812 for the destruction of the machines that would replace them in the textile factories, and is created using various methods of combining paint and textiles. Learn more at [www.holliscrane.com](http://www.holliscrane.com). (C) 2020.

Hollis reads the pitch over and over. He doesn't buy it, never has, but will *they*? The looming, all-powerful *they* that makes a product worth anything? When he had emailed the pitch to the printer, Sarah had been hovering over his shoulder, making suggestions on the language, and after hitting "send," the two of them had held each other by the elbow and jumped around in Sarah's modern, minimalist apartment.

“They’ll believe this,” Sarah had effused. “And in this era? Perfection. So *relevant*, so *inspiring*.” She rolled her eyes and drew her manicured hand to her heart as punctuation, a gesture that Hollis found incredibly attractive. Sarah was the epitome of ruthless, chic, and cold art world debutante in her front-facing life. That was the expectation. And in some early mornings, when her breath smelled like warm yeast and the fresh lipstick smear on her satin pillowcase looked like a trickle of blood coming from her mouth, is when she would teach Hollis about expectations.

“You don’t have to be beautiful, but you do have to be perfect. And unapproachable. If they feel like they can know you, they won’t care about your art. Their way of knowing you has to be through this,” she said, and tapped the image on the screen. “They want to think of you as a vessel, empty until inspiration fills and fills, and then spills over your canvas. Then, they want you to be empty again, so they can fill you up. With validation. You’re nothing without them, and they want you to know that.”

“The patrons? Or the powers that be,” Hollis chuckled.

“Yes, all of them. You are what you make and you are what they make of you, of it, the art. You understand?” At this, she had pushed herself up, supporting herself with her forearm, and aimed her eye at his. Hollis had always found looking Sarah in the eye unnerving somehow. Her eyes were light, too light, the way he imagined an oracle’s might be, and her dark hair framed her face in a way that gave her an extra intensity. Hollis nodded to show he understood. He wanted her to know that he understood.

“But they also want to worship you,” she said, and she then exited the bed so quickly, so seamlessly that to Hollis, it seemed like a movie reel skipping ahead a few negatives. She maneuvered around boxes piled four and five high to get to the en-suite bathroom, leaving Hollis to his thoughts under the down duvet.

Hollis had met Sarah in art school. They had worked on a couple of low-stakes projects together, and one night, Sarah had used the

phone number he had given her to keep in touch about those projects to text and ask him if he would like to come up for a cup of coffee. It was four in the morning and he was on the other side of town. They had seen each other off and on since then, for a little over two years, sometimes with long pauses in between visits. Hollis enjoyed having a moody not-girlfriend. He felt it had given him some kind of legitimacy. After their graduation in May, he had been able to spend more time with her, taking her direction on the Luddite project, and he had expected a greater sense of legitimacy. Of what sort, he didn't know.

Yet, he had an apartment in the “ripe part of the apple,” as his mother put it, a cozy but well-lit one-bedroom in a complex with two hundred and ninety-nine others just like it, all thanks to an art project that dripped with millennial sincerity, and he had the haughty native New Yorker to hang off his arm, had there been any place to hang to, as the majority of museum and gallery operations have been operating primarily online.

Now, looking at the proofs, expecting to feel that he has “made it,” he feels mostly nothing. He likes the way the postcards look, thinks the design of the Luddite pieces are solid, knows the colors are the right choices, but he feels like he is holding someone else's work. There is nothing of himself in it. But the likes on social media are astronomical. There is a Patreon. He has bought a nice camera to film himself producing the art, and people pay to see this—a sped up video of him rubbing paint onto pieces of fabric to press into a canvas or running a paint-saturated piece of yarn over the cotton and linen blend.

The small square of Hollis' smart watch illuminates, gently vibrates against his wrist. “Brunch with Mom, 20 minutes” appears on its face. He throws together a balsamic salad and a mimosa because that is what she will expect he do. When Violet Crane's face appears in a box on the screen, her eyes framed by blue-light glasses, Hollis can already picture the map of their conversation and it makes him tired.

“Have you heard about these?” she says, jiggling the frames with her hand. “They help your eyes—”

“I’ve heard of them, Mom.”

“Well then why don’t you have them? You want to go blind? Here you are staring at a screen more than I am and I’m the one with the goggles.”

She laughs. Hollis doesn’t bother responding; nothing he says will be the correct answer.

“Do you know that Richard proposed to Caroline?”

She knows that he knows, liked his “Congratulations” comment on the social media post announcing his brother’s engagement. This is her creating an avenue for the conversation map.

“When are you going to settle down?” she continues.

“I’m just focusing on my work right now.”

“No woman in your life at all?”

Sometimes Hollis thinks of fucking a man. Just once so that he can tell her he did. That’s what she is really asking: “Are you a fairy?”

It is the question that Hollis imagines keeps her up nights, thinking about the effeminate way he crosses his legs when he sits in a chair or the softness of his voice or that his favorite color is a deep purple. He is not like his brother, the good ol’ boy, champion of muddin’ and fishin’ and huntin’ and all of the games of the redneck Olympics that Hollis never had any interest in, let alone qualified for. He doesn’t talk about Sarah, because Sarah isn’t real. She is ephemeral, and when she is gone, she will be a silk-sheeted ghost hovering around the periphery of Hollis’ mind, worth thinking about, perhaps, but not worth talking about. This, really, is Hollis’ philosophy. Not much is worth talking about. It’s why he is drawn to art, back when he



wanted it to mean something.

“Just you, Mama,” Hollis says, hoping it will needle her, but he cringes at the easy way his accent slips back around his tongue after all these years of trying to eradicate it.

“Mmhmm,” she says. “When’s your thing? Maybe you’ll meet somebody.”

“Well, it’s online, so, not likely. It’s in a few weeks.”

“If it’s online, I can come. Invite me. Is it more of that abstract shit? I’ve never understood abstract. I’ll come anyway. Invite me. What happened to portraits? You were so good at portraits, Hollis.”

“I’ll get back to that,” he says, but he isn’t sure.

“Well, when some more money comes in, remember me,” she says.

When they hang up, the apartment feels empty, or emptier than usual. The majority of Hollis’ things are in North Carolina, in a storage unit since his mother let his brother turn his old room into a gym, like the cliché that Hollis feels that he has to be. The apartment gleams in white with hints of black and silver with the occasional touch of red. Anything that doesn’t match this aesthetic does not come or stay in the apartment, with the exception of his art. Even his kitchen utensils all match, black and red. This isn’t a look he is used to or even particularly happy with, but minimalism is in, and he wants to be in. He wants to appear as he wants to be: sleek, smart, and mysterious. As Sarah says he ought to appear for the consumers of his product. He is nothing without them. He remembers.

“Why don’t we ever go to my place,” Hollis had asked Sarah once.

She laughed. “Then you are real.”

“How so?”

“Then there are tchotchkes and photographs and a particular kind of mess and you become idiosyncratic. Once you become idiosyncratic, you’re real. You lose all your mystery.”

“Is that why you don’t have any photos on the wall? Any knick-knacks?”

“Knick-knacks,” she repeated in an overdone drawl, but didn’t answer the question. Hollis was stung by the mockery, but pretended to be unaffected, deflecting to one of the piled boxes in the bedroom. “Is that what’s in here? Your real life?”

“That reminds me, I need to call that storage unit,” she had said, her eyes brightening. She left the room, phone in hand, and Hollis knew better than to follow her. In the other room, he could hear the hard consonants of her voice, and he considered peeking into a box, imagined what he might find there: a framed graduation photo with a red tassel hot-glued to the corner, a dried prom night corsage, a pink stuffed bear with a candy heart held between its formless paws. That is all he could bring to mind, and he was embarrassed at his own lack of creativity, his inability to conceive of Sarah as anything but the clichéd trinkets of an overly-sentimental teenage girl. The boxes remained closed. He was afraid knowing what is inside them would make her someone worth talking about once it is all over.

She returned from the other room.

“I’d like you to go now. I’m no longer in the mood for you,” she said.

The fabric arrives in the mail on a Tuesday. It is seven days late; Hollis has been marking the days off on the calendar on the wall, X’s through each box. Wasted time. He is annoyed, and shows it to the empty apartment. Inside the box, there are fat quarter bundles of fabric the hobby site described as “50s modern abstract” and “vintage Scandinavian” and “punch geometric.” He chooses a piece with a print vaguely reminiscent of a floral and sets to work laying paint down in thick patches over the design, but not before setting up the camera to film for his Patreon. He does not worry about being careful,

but does worry about being fast. If the paint dries, the print doesn't turn out and it's a bitch to get the paint off of the fabric to start over. He has thrown fat quarters in the trash before. Sarah would say this is the price of art, would say something at once comforting and disgruntling, but in these moments, it is Hollis' mother's voice he hears scolding him for being wasteful. For being wasteful, not for wasting, he thinks, because Violet Crane has that way with her words—to accuse you of a whole-body-and-soul defect from any one action. You are wasteful, selfish, cruel. Hollis chooses what he thinks wasteful, selfish, and cruel would be hued, squirts the oil paint on the rough cotton of the piece he is working with.

This is the thirteenth piece in the series, and by now, he has a feel for how much paint he can get away with slapping on the fabric before he needs to turn it over and press it to the canvas. Sometimes he swirls and sometimes he doesn't; this time he does neither, but vibrates the fabric against the canvas ever-so-slightly. Like shaking a lover by the shoulders.

He needs to finish the project for its presentation in less than a week. Not a problem. He lets the oil dry on this piece as he begins another, rubbing paint into a piece of twine and draping it back and forth and up and down all over the canvas. He lets that begin to dry as he starts another, this time using a piece of loose weave burlap fabric to create cross-hatching as a backdrop for whatever he decides to do. The first twelve pieces, he will admit, he cared about in some sense. Cared about the colors and composition being adequate, if nothing else. He put some thought into them. Now, he is putting his thoughts elsewhere.

Weeks ago, he had asked: “But doesn't pretending it means something make it mean something?”

“Oh, come on. You haven't started buying into your own bullshit, have you?”

“No, of course not.”

“Good. Because that would be a real turn off.”

Hollis fingered a cigarette burn in the sheets. It was not there before and Sarah doesn't smoke. Hollis doesn't smoke.

“Well, but doesn't it? What if it has begun to mean something? Maybe not what we are peddling, but—”

“I'm going to shower,” Sarah said, and she stood just like that. Hollis watched the delicate feathering of her hair sweep the tops of her shoulders as she disappeared into the bathroom.

He has been isolated since before May, with the exception of Sarah. If Sarah, cold and aloof as she is, can be considered an exception to isolation. He would never admit aloud that she hurts his feelings sometimes, and he wonders if it weren't for sheltering in place if he'd have found someone new to feel like shit about. His mother's text appears on his watch face, along with several missed notifications: “Brunch?” It is not a word she ever used before his move and his success.

He picks up his phone, but doesn't answer her back, and instead orders seventy dollars' worth of Chinese food. Seven boxes arrive in two bags. He wonders how much and what and how often he would have to eat to gain enough weight that it would show on the screen for “The New Luddite” presentation, and how much weight he'd have to gain before his mother made a comment.

The presentation is being held via a live stream, moderated by Kathleen Newbury at Emboss, a start-up center for the arts. Sarah had arranged everything.

“So, I'll talk and then you'll talk,” Hollis had asked.

“Me? No, this is all you. I'll be there, but you won't be able to see me.”

“You don't want credit for being the logistics? The creative director?”

“I don’t want to be associated.”

The day of, Sarah sends a good luck text and a kissy-face emoji. It feels strangely intimate and unsettles him more than it calms him. Before time, he arranges the space that will be his background. He moves his sofa to accommodate the dining table so that the computer can be placed upon it, at the right height, and in front of the window with the most light beaming through. He adds a ring light, too. He moves his drafting table behind him, using his webcam to adjust the framing in the monitor. On the top, he arranges some materials used in the Luddite project. On one leg of the table, he leans three portraits on canvas. The visible one is a man, naked and in the fetal position inside a red orb. The two behind are of his mother.

The presentation begins; Kathleen, sitting in front of an abundant bookcase, introduces him and gives a brief overview of the project, makes a good-natured nod to the irony of talking about this particular work on a virtual platform. Hollis gifts her the laugh he thinks she is after before expounding on the work, explaining the history of the Luddites who organized and revolted against the automation during the Industrial Revolution. He is perfectly lighted between the window and the ring light, which shines perfect circles in his pupils. He cannot see the viewers, but the count is decent, and there is a chatbox, and some light chatter bubbles up from time to time. “So interesting” and “wow” and “where can I buy prints?”

Then, a montage of the images appears in full view on the screen, then the Q&A.

Kathleen adds the link to Hollis’ shop and social media accounts in the chatbox. Hollis finds ways to circumvent when Robert K asks him to delve deeper into the meaning behind the pieces or when Beth Wilson probes for more details of the Luddite rebellion. What he knows he knows from a fifteen-minute Google search. It is enough to impress a layman but does not stand up to scrutiny.

One viewer types in the chat box, anonymously: “Would you consider printing these (especially #4!) on fabric face masks?”

Hollis immediately recognizes this as a trick, knows in his gut this is Sarah typing treachery from her MacBook Air on the other side of town. He has no choice but to attempt to stand to the occasion.

“Thank you for your interest and enthusiasm about my work. It certainly means a lot to me. However, the Crane brand seeks to avoid the commodification of this imagery in order to preserve the heart of the project.”

He doesn’t sound like himself, doesn’t sounds like anyone, really, and he feels right about it. He is not only pitching, he is the pitch.

But then, new text appears. “Aren’t postcards and prints commodification?”

Kathleen has been reading and delivering the questions, but she hesitates here, and looks especially uncomfortable. She cannot see Hollis so long as she is on the screen, so there is no social signal to be had. No slight shake of the head instructing her to redirect or a nod to encourage her to go ahead. Hollis feels her distress, says, “I believe there’s another question here, Kathleen.”

Her peach scarf resettles around her relaxed shoulders as her tension is released, and she reads the question aloud for Hollis to answer. Everyone is listening.

“Insofar as prints and postcards being, essentially, a product, I suppose one could argue the art is then commodified, but I would have to disagree given that the point of both are to connect. One connects you to the art itself—the print, and the other to others around the world—the postcards. The project is about bringing people together through art, outside of the confines of social media—”

The message pings and interrupts, “Then wouldn’t masks be a symbol in the same vein?”

Pride and vindication spread through Hollis’ body. He chuckles aloud in a perfect tonal mixture of warmth and condescension: bless your

heart. “Well, no, as masks signify in the current climate quite the opposite: to stay away.”

Kathleen cuts in with a simpering chuckle, and Hollis imagines those participants he cannot see, chuckling, too, all good natured, *atta-boy* chuckles, uniting against this naysayer bringing discomfort to their high-rise apartments.

Then there are goodbyes, thank-you-for-comings, reminders of the Crane social media handles, reminders to buy prints, plug for Em-boss, and then Hollis is looking at himself in the reflection of the black box on the screen. He stays looking for a while, long enough to become dramatic, and to label it as an abyss.

His phone ringing pulls him away, into a new box, and Sarah’s name is flashing across like a label on the screen. He considers not answering. He considers telling her he knows it was her. He answers.

“Perfect. You were firm, but gracious. That’s all it’s about, really, is setting hard boundaries and remaining firm. You were powerful—”

Before Hollis can reply, she says, “Text me your address,” and hangs up. Forty minutes later, she is there, holding a paper bag containing boxes of pad Thai, walking past him into his sparse apartment, slowly turning to take it in.

“So much for *knick-knacks*,” she says in the mock drawl. “Where are all your secret boxes?”

“This is it,” Hollis says, gesturing around, the closest thing to a knick-knack being a singular white vase with dried flowers in it. They eat and drink champagne, tumble into his bed, and he tries not to think about the reasons she might be here for the first time instead of back at her familiar place, imagines cigarette burns like craters all over her silk sheets.

In the morning, his mother calls.

“How could you let me forget your show?”

“I’m sorry, I forgot.”

“You forgot? You’re young. I’m old. I forgot; you just didn’t care.”

“That isn’t —”

“You’re so cruel to me, Hollis James,” she says in a hiss, but he knows she will call tomorrow.

Hollis walks over to his work station. Three finished pieces and two unfinished, but who would know? He stacks them up and throws them in the bin, throws all the fabric he has collected on top, and takes it out to the street trash. Just after closing the lid, he feels guilty, and has a better idea. He is not dressed for the weather, but he rides the train around the city, choosing at random. He takes photos. When he gets home, he uploads them to his feed with the hashtag #freeart and the caption, “Yours if you can find them!”

Then, he cleans the apartment.

Between the sheets, he finds Sarah’s underwear, a lacy black thong—unsurprisingly unimaginative. He stretches the elastic absent-mindedly for a few minutes before heading over to his work station. He pours oil paint over both hands in black, then red, then balls the panties up, rubbing them between his slicked hands. When he is satisfied that they are saturated, he takes them and dabs them onto a sheet of canvas paper, creating little rosettes, and throws the thong in the garbage bin before folding the sheet in half.

He snaps a picture and sends it to Sarah immediately.

“What the fuck is that,” she texts back, “a Rorschach?”

“It’s a portrait,” he returns.



## About Our Contributors and Guest Editors

**Nicole Arocho Hernández** is a poet from Cabo Rojo, Puerto Rico. Her poems have been featured in *Variant Literature Journal* and *The Acentos Review*, among others. Her first chapbook, *I Have No Ocean*, was published in 2021 by Sundress Publications. She has received funding from the 92Y Unterberg Poetry Center, Lighthouse Writers Workshop, and The Hambidge Center. She is an MFA candidate in Poetry at Arizona State University, where she is a 2021 Fellow at the Center of Philosophical Technologies. You can find more at her website, <https://nicolearochohernan.wixsite.com/nimaarhe>.

**Kristin Brown** lives in Portland, Oregon, where she has studied at Corporeal Writing and the Tin House Writing Workshop. She's at work on a series of adventure novels for women.

**Scott Delisle** is an MFA candidate in fiction at the University of Massachusetts Boston. He teaches creative writing there and also works as a biomedical engineer. His writing concerns memory and the art of saying goodbye, and is thus, on occasion, quite sad.

**Caitlin Ghegan** is a writer and editor living in Boston. She received her MFA in Creative Writing, Fiction from the University of Massachusetts, Boston, and her BA in Writing from Ithaca College.

**Chelsey Grasso's** fiction has been published in *The Rumpus*, *Indiana Review*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *Harvard Review Online*, *the minnesota review*, *Carve Magazine*, *Joyland*, *The Florida Review*, and elsewhere.

**Joon Ae Haworth-Kaufka** is a Korean adoptee who was born in Seoul and grew up outside of Detroit. Her work has appeared in *The Portland Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *Poets & Writers*, *Colorado Review*, and *Kartika*, among others. She lives in Portland, OR, where she's

currently working on a novel, a small business, and a wild, little family of five.

**Hope Jordan**'s writing has appeared in such journals as *The Blue Mountain Review*, *Twyckenham Notes*, *Split Rock Review*, *Black Fox Literary Magazine*, and *Angels Flight Literary West*. She grew up in Chittenango, NY, and holds a dual BA from Syracuse University and a creative writing MFA from UMass Boston. She lives in NH, where she was the state's first official poetry slam master. Her chapbook is *The Day She Decided to Feed Crows* (Cervena Barva Press, 2018).

A lover of poetry, fiction, and the visual arts, **Shannon Kafka** received her MFA in poetry from UMass Boston. She's a member of Warrior Writers, a non-profit veteran-focused organization devoted to the arts, stories, and healing of veterans and other survivors of war. Her work was most recently featured in Consequence Magazine's 10-year anniversary anthology, *Women Writing About War*, and is forthcoming in other places.

**A'Ja Lyons** was born and raised in Sunnyside, the oldest African-American community in southern Houston, Texas. She graduated from Iowa State University with a Bachelor of Liberal Studies and is a first year graduate student at Iowa State University in the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing and Environment program. A'Ja was a book reviewer and column contributor for Pennsylvania Diversity Network's *Valley Gay Press*, as well as an article contributor for Gallaudet University's *The Buff and Blue*. Her short stories and poems have been published in *Sinister Wisdom 85's Youth/Humor issue*, *Lucky Jefferson's Digital Zine Awake*, *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, *Decolonial Passage*, and *From the Farther Trees*.

**Jake Phillips** is a second-year poet at UMass Boston's MFA program, a teacher, and a former librarian/karate instructor. His work has been previously published in *Writers Resist*. In between bouts of frantic writing, Jake plays guitar, haunts local thrift stores, and considers himself a breaded chicken connoisseur. You can reach him at [jephillips38@gmail.com](mailto:jephillips38@gmail.com), or online at <https://jephillips37.wixsite.com/jake>.

**Jacqueline Rosenbaum** recently completed her MFA with a concentration in Fiction at UMass-Boston. She is originally from ‘all over’ New York, but is currently working as a Marketing Assistant in Boston. She has been published previously in *Haunted Waters Press* (Fall 2018; granted Runner Up in Fiction contest), *Adelaide Literary Magazine* (April 2019), and *The Merrimack Review* (Spring 2020).

**Sara Ryan** is the author of *I Thought There Would Be More Wolves* (University of Alaska Press), as well as the chapbooks *Never Leave the Foot of an Animal Unskinned* (Porkbelly Press) and *Excellent Evidence of Human Activity* (The Cupboard Pamphlet). Her work has been published in or is forthcoming from *Brevity*, *Kenyon Review*, *Pleiades*, *DIAGRAM*, *Prairie Schooner*, *New Ohio Review*, *Thrush Poetry Journal* and others. She is a managing editor at *Iron Horse Literary Review*, a memoir reader at *Split Lip Magazine*, and is currently pursuing her PhD at Texas Tech University.

**April Sopkin** lives outside of Richmond, Virginia. Her short stories and essays have most recently appeared in *Black Telephone Magazine*, *Carve*, *Southern Indiana Review*, and *Parhelion Literary Magazine*. She was a 2019 Tin House Scholar and her work has won the Raymond Carver Short Story Contest, the Patricia Aakhus Award, and the Frank McCourt Memoir Prize.

**Christie Towers** is queer a poet living in Somerville, MA. She holds an MFA in poetry from the University of Massachusetts, Boston and is currently pursuing her M.Div at Boston University. Her poems and writing can be found online and in print. She works on the pastoral care team with MANNA, a ministry for the unhoused and unstably housed, in downtown Boston.

**Paul Veracka** (he/him) writes poems in Washington, D.C. When he is not running a classroom with very young people, he may be watching old concert footage online. His work is forthcoming in *VERSIFICATION*, *Dwelling Literary*, and more. He tweets @meepmorpfan.

**Andria Warren** is a native East Tennessean living in Boston. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from UMass Boston and volunteers some of her time teaching poetry courses to seniors through the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. In her free time, she obsesses over birds. (Her students would tell you she does it in her not-free time, too.)

### Nicole Arocho Hernández, *Contributor*

Out of the blue I got the invitation to participate in this issue. It was a (pleasant) surprise, but more so was the prompt: magic squares. I had no idea what they were. As I researched, it seemed like a topic that didn't fit what I was working on, what I wanted to write about. Working with prompts can be hard, since they take you in new directions you may not be ready for, or take you away from the work you are currently invested in. Then I stumbled on the Lo Shu square, one of the oldest magic squares with an incredible story from ancient China. Its meaningful design (related to city design at the time, along with divination and energy elements) attracted me right away. I have been recently experimenting with visual elements and multimedia work in my poetry, and the shape of the Lo Shu caught my eye right away. At first I struggled with appropriation and the ethics of using such an old, culturally-relevant material outside of its original meaning... I still do. It's a question that continues to come up as I work with archival work in other projects. But the meaning of well-being, mathematical clarity and specificity, and its mythology seemed related to what I was writing about (the inherent violence in language, something that seems intangible/imprecise unlike math [more like magic, but then created intentionally by humans...]) so I proceeded with it. Writing this poem allowed me to move away from lines and narrative meaning and to break down language to simpler terms. I kept thinking that maybe language in its simplest forms, connected by exacting forms of math, could allow me to see the compassion/kindness in language... But I failed. This poem also puts my obsession with soundscapes at the front and center. I am happy this prompt allowed me to blend my languages and see what meaning sound brings before any logical connections. What happens when a multilingual brain is allowed to "flow" in its meaning-making? I feel

like this poem is not finished, but I'm thankful for the prompt, this experience, and looking forward to where the poem will take me.

### Kristin Brown, *Contributor*

Give me an impending storm, I thought, or an unopened letter—something plotty, give it here. Then I clicked into the prompt email and saw that engraving, that quotation. I deflated. I am so many things—erudite is just not one of them.

There's a record of my thought process, in that first hour of response. It's scribbled in my journal. You can see my brain resisting number theory. *A merciless mountain lion*, I wrote. *A bride receives a sinister gift*. I jotted notes on a deadly whirlpool, a runaway tractor. Then, there on page two, someone shows up: Gordon. A Black man at a bar. He's telling the truth to a white woman, who just wants the truth to be untrue. *Either more of us are innocent*, he's saying, *or more of you are guilty*. A swarm of memories after that: my so-called victimless crimes, my petty offenses. All those times I was stopped by a traffic cop, Strawberry Stoli on my breath, and let go without so much as a warning.

But no one wants to read a story set in a bar. Put them in a float plane, I thought, put them on a grizzly hunt. Although—perhaps—if it was a certain kind of bar. The kind that smells of incense, the kind that lists cocktails in a fancy book. The bar where all the white ladies go. You know the place, it's been hyped. Temperament.

### Scott Delisle, *Contributor*

When I first saw the prompt, I was almost overwhelmed by all the visual information in the engraving. The quote focused on the magic square, which the engineer in me was certainly drawn to, but ultimately I couldn't shake the winged figure's gaze, out to the strange bat creature under the rainbow. This idea of drawing creative inspi-

ration from melancholia is something I've been thinking about for a long time, so I was grateful to Danny for giving me the chance to work it into something properly. I ended up moving from the engraving to Cornelius Agrippa's *De Occulta Philosophia*, which lists three stages of melancholic genius, which basically move from artistic, to scientific, to religious as you get more inspired. I find the whole myth of the suffering artist ridiculous. I think suffering can lead to inspiration, and art can be one of the most valuable coping mechanisms for a wide range of afflictions, but I don't think anyone needs to suffer to make good art. From the magic square I got the number 16, which morphed into 16 forms split into those three stages. I found this experience immensely enjoyable and challenging, and having my ridiculous work among that of all of these talented artists is wonderfully rewarding.

### Caitlin Ghegan, *Guest Editor*

Wish I could buy you a beer and lavish you with praise for this cool AF project. It's certainly inspired me—reading, writing, and now reflecting/guest commenting on it—and this prompt was especially interesting. Whereas the first two prompts were more abstract, this prompt seemed to infer a kind of artifact, and thus a more tangible focuses of emotion, energy, and ire emerged in the fiction. All of the prompts have been interesting springboards but this issue was a study of what Jane Unrue told us in her first day of workshop—I lock you in a room, and every one of you will find a unique way to get out. Except this time, you gave them a saw—I mean square.

### Joon Ae Haworth-Kaufka, *Contributor*

When I received the invitation to participate in this project, I jumped at the chance to do something new. I've been working on a novel for years and hadn't written from a prompt since my MFA. I was thrilled at the opportunity to refresh my process.

However, when I received the prompt, my heart sunk (cue the cringe emoji). I've spent decades avoiding dead white men and canonical art. I didn't want to sit with this Dürer, didn't want to think about magic squares. But also I hate falling short on commitments, and Danny seemed so very sweet, so I rallied. I dove into research, learned about the four humors, about the allegory, about the probable connection to the artist's deceased mother, about the way this piece influenced others. I magnified different parts to examine detail. I watched tutorials on engraving, learned about the process. Ultimately, I learned more about art, about being open-minded, and had a blast.

It has been nearly a decade since I wrote a short story, and the editorial feedback was extremely helpful. I loved having the opportunity to revise. The feedback has also rippled back into my novel revision in very important ways. Overall, I loved participating in the project. The process was challenging and satisfying. I feel honored and so grateful to have been invited.

### Hope Jordan, *Contributor*

I struggled mightily with the prompt at first. I gazed at the image, read the Wikipedia entries, and began writing a poem based on some of the words I found there. That generated some of the language that ended up in this prose piece, but it wasn't even close to working on its own, as a poem. I decided to try a prose piece but I wasn't sure where to start. I grabbed a slip of paper I keep handy with myths and legends, and I randomly chose the Salem witch trials. I realized I could write from the point of view as the *Melancholia* figure as if she were living through that time and place. It was still tricky to fit the magic squares into the narrative, but I had fun figuring it out.



## Shannon Kafka, *Contributor*

The angel with its lethargy, its bent, hand-cradled head surrounded by instruments of creation in Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia I* depicts a state of lost inspiration. In times of a global pandemic, political and social unrest, its perhaps an apt visual metaphor for 2020. On a personal level, I'm sure like many artists, I found creation and inspiration difficult muses. What I appreciate about this prompt is that it literally kickstarted the creative process for me again. As someone who works best under external pressure and expectations, I found myself lost in a rabbit hole of information. Albrecht Dürer, *Melencolia*, Øystein Ore, ring theory, Galois connection, and graph theory—I was excited and exploring all the possibilities!

In the midst of relearning algebra and contemplating the many ways in which I could utilize it in a poetic form that would perhaps complement etymology and explore the evolution of how we linguistically make meaning, my work took an interesting turn. I began researching how the color blue became associated with sadness, with melancholy. This eventually led me to the dark and harrowed history of the color blue and its role in inspiring and sustaining the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the history of Gullah Geechee, and the meanings and history of people of color forgotten or remembered in favor of white American culture.

This poem hopes to be many things, including an interrogation of capitalism, of my own whiteness, and responsibility. Speaking of responsibility, as an ally and educator, I am always acutely aware and try to be vigilante in terms of understanding the right to story and representation, especially engaging in backgrounds that are different than my own. I think writers should be open to and receptive towards criticism of this manner and hold themselves accountable. This poem seeks to do a lot of things and not all of them are maximally successful, including the aforementioned. Maybe this is perhaps best reflected in its intentional and confusing narrative style. This poem uses a variety of narrative perspectives: first person, second person, and third. Each column represents a different

narrative viewpoint. Inspired by graph theory, I was able to create a graph that not only allowed me to create poetic repetitive refrain in a cool and interesting manner, but it also allowed the interruption and interrogation of the other coinciding narratives. Structurally, the hinge poem, specifically columns three and four which can be read separately or together, allowed me to weave two different narrative perspectives. The use of subjunctive mood and demand/directive allowed me to invoke second person narrative in a covert, almost song-like manner to interrogate the speaker of the prior column and more importantly, the reader. This whole project and prompt really inspired out-of-the-“magical square” thinking! Thanks, Danny! Thanks, Ore! Thanks, Dürer!

### A’Ja Lyons, *Contributor*

I loved the prompt! It wasn’t what I expected, but I loved writing a response to an image, doing research on a piece of creative history, and formulating my own piece of art.

### Jake Phillips, *Contributor*

The first and last poems of this sequence, these meditations on family and ritual, came naturally. My initial intention for just to play with the idea of magic square because, before this, I had only ever known it as a incredibly tasty dessert (which everyone should now make and try!). What started as a joke quickly became something more important, for me, as I realized these rituals and legacies, like teachings of the magic squares themselves, have been passed down through generations.

The interior poems, the squares, are taken from research of Ahmad al-Buni’s 13th-century grimoire, the Shams al-Ma’arif. Of incredible importance to this research and to understanding these talismans was Saiyad Nizamuddin Ahmad’s (Department of Arabic and Islam-

ic Civilizations, American University in Cairo) lecture about Magic and the Occult in Islam delivered on 1 May 2013 at at the Warburg Institute, University of London.

These squares are meant to be talismans, poem-spells, in themselves. The number of words in each cell corresponds to the numeric value that would traditionally be in each cell. Additionally, within these squares (which each have an major and encompassing element), every cell represents elements associated with their Arabic numbers. I encourage readers to read these poems in the same way that magic square sums are made: contrapuntally, from left to right, and from top to bottom, and diagonally in either direction.

As I created these, I wondered about Dürer, his own melancholy, how he connected to this ancient ritual of the magic square. In these interior pieces, it is not my intention to fully understand or claim to know Dürer, the Shams al-Ma'arif, or Islamic Occultism. Instead, these poems are a new student's way of creating spell-poems of my own, of creating talismans that respond to an initial query into the natures of themselves, of art, of my own melancholy.

While the theme is melancholy, know that this project has brought my nothing but joy. I am grateful to Danny for the opportunity to learn more fun and thoughtful witchy shit, and for the deadlines that pushed me to write and engage. I hope you all have or create little talisman/rituals of your own to defend yourself against the darkneses of melancholy in these strange times.

### Jacqueline Rosenbaum, *Contributor*

When I opened the prompt from *Response*, I was filled with something like excitement and relief as I recognized the Dürer engraving, specifically the woman in the center. However, I couldn't remember exactly where she and I had met. After some digging through my undergrad notes, I learned that she had been a cross-disciplinary figure for me, appearing anywhere I learned about art or engaged

with art—including writing and literature. I started to reflect on my own journey as a writer and question the timing and context of that process. It mostly happened in college, and I began to think of my inclination to write as the woman from the Dürer engraving, making itself known over and over in a way that felt random until the moment she could not be ignored.

At some point, I had decided that my path to creating art was through writing, but I wasn't sure where I had learned that idea or made that decision. As I wrote this piece, I asked myself questions about what originally drew me to art and literature, what the “understanding” or “getting it” piece of art and literature did for me, and about what other journeys I might have also been on. Some things I discovered were that my journey as a writer happened in tandem with discovery of true friends, which I had never had before, and that writing/creating gave me a sense of self not unlike what I found through good, solid friendships. I also learned that something about the pursuit of creating “good art,” for me, had been wrapped up in this narrative I had in college about being lonely and/or alone, which needed to be figured out.

This feels like a good time to give a shoutout to my college friends, whose love and support carried me whether I was bright and bubbly, or anxious and difficult.

Sara Ryan, *Guest Editor*

I enjoyed giving comments and I think the “big picture” comments were a lot easier to give—I do hope they were more helpful for the contributors rather than line edits, etc.

## April Sopkin, *Contributor*

I started with research, falling down a few shallow internet holes. Mostly, I was intrigued by the life of Albrecht Dürer—the German painter responsible for *Melencolia I* from the prompt—particularly that he may have been bisexual, took a gap year and traveled to begin another apprenticeship, but his apprentice died just before his arrival. I was also interested in how the Magic Square dates back to 190 B.C.E. in China. I sat on this trivia for weeks. My brain, though, could not hook onto the prompt and *go*. Ultimately, I chose to adapt a story that I'd put aside a couple of years ago. It doesn't feel overtly connected to the prompt, though my hope was that the weird, escalating dialogue between father and teenage daughter during the unmoored days of our current global pandemic might gesture toward the absurdity of looking for patterns like the Magic Square. It's a reach but it's where I landed with the prompt.

## Christie Towers, *Contributor*

My first response to this issue's prompt? I don't know the first thing about math, magical or otherwise. I felt defeated, but I remembered: I do know a lot about melancholy. It took me several weeks to find a way to knit these things together in writing. What is math but a map? What if we could make a map of our melancholy moments? I think a lot about God lately, given my work and study, and how our longing for one another, for the world, is also tied up in our longing for the intangible, sometimes called God. These poems attempt to make a map of my mind and its melancholy moments of the past few months working, living, and studying during COVID. The unhoused folks I work with, who are always on my heart, are woven into these poems, as are the many others who I have been missing during this season of separation, anxiety, and loss. But there is also the hope of love, that it will carry us through to the other side when we can find one another waiting.

## Paul Veracka, *Contributor*

Everything was so fun! The prompt was a game changer!

## Andria Warren, *Contributor*

When given the prompt of the “magic square” alongside Albrecht Dürer’s engraving, *Melancholia I*, I thought: what the hell do I do with this? The image, the description, all of it felt beyond my grasp, and this was upsetting, because I was certain I would have understood it a year ago, when I considered myself an academic and was routinely asked to observe, examine, or analyze. I turned this discomfort over in the same way I turned the prompt in my mind. Since the pandemic, I am not alone in having suffered a shift in identity. Yes, okay, we might even call it an identity crisis. And I thought, well, there’s the melancholia. I wanted a character who embodied that, someone who was unsure of themselves and who the reader would be unsure of, too. I chose to write from a male perspective for the first time as a way of keeping myself unsure. I needed him to be a mystery in some ways, even to me, for I felt that would serve this story best.

But what of the square? The square became a box, and I thought, what are the boxes we have in our lives? And then I scoffed at how pretentious that sounded, and that became an integral part of the work. Pretentiousness is a paradox in that it is inflated and yet empty. There is no ring of truth in it. So, I wondered if there are boxes in our lives—Zoom call squares, impulsively bought packages from Amazon, Netflix on the television set, Chinese takeout ordered from GrubHub, endless scrolling on Instagram—what happens when those boxes become empty, too, void of the “talismans of protection” that a magic square is meant to provide? Empty of the comfort we are seeking in our own boxes?

From there, these immediately available and recognizable branded companies led me to think about commodification and how social media plays a role in advertising not only brands, but a lifestyle. So, the rest of the story bloomed up from adding a final box, of art on a canvas, and finding a way to make that inflated and empty in those same ways. I hope that what I have ended up with is a story that nevertheless unfolds as truth.

## Daniel Elfanbaum, *Series Editor*

I'm biased, but I feel like *Response* is really starting to hit its stride. This is our third issue, which feels significant (I suppose they all feel significant), and this issue not only breaks a lot of ground in terms of the format and prompt—i.e., an image(!), as suggested by Charling Chen (Issue 01 contributor), and (nearly) math! I love math!—but the contributors for this issue also broke literally broke the templates mold and formatting of the journal in interesting and deeply exciting ways. Sure, this meant that I had to relearn InDesign and the issue took a little longer to get out than usual, but I think you'll agree: *totally worth it*.

The whole thing is a learning process always—and this issue was no different—but one thing in particular that excites me as *Response* marches on into the future is that our network does seem to be growing in exciting ways: while I knew literally everyone who agreed to contribute to Issue 01, and still most folks in Issue 02, this issue is much more balanced between folks I've met before and others who agreed to hop on this crazy train without much forewarning other than, “Hey, [Issue 02 Contributor] said you might find this fun—want to give it a go?” And I'm so pleased that so many folks did! It's quite an issue.

This issue is also our longest to date; I anticipate that they'll continue to get bigger and bigger until we find some sort of happy medium, but this does mean that our original printing plans may not be suited to our future growth. We'll figure that out later. “Growth” sounds

icky and like business. This is, after all, supposed to be about *art*. But we do want to get this in as many hands as possible, and we want to promote as much *work* as possible, and so we'll continue to grow and change to accommodate those goals. But a journey of a thousand steps starts with one, and all of that.

I sincerely hope you've enjoyed this issue (I know I did!), and that you'll join us for the next one, whenever that may be (likely four-five months from now). Until then—





