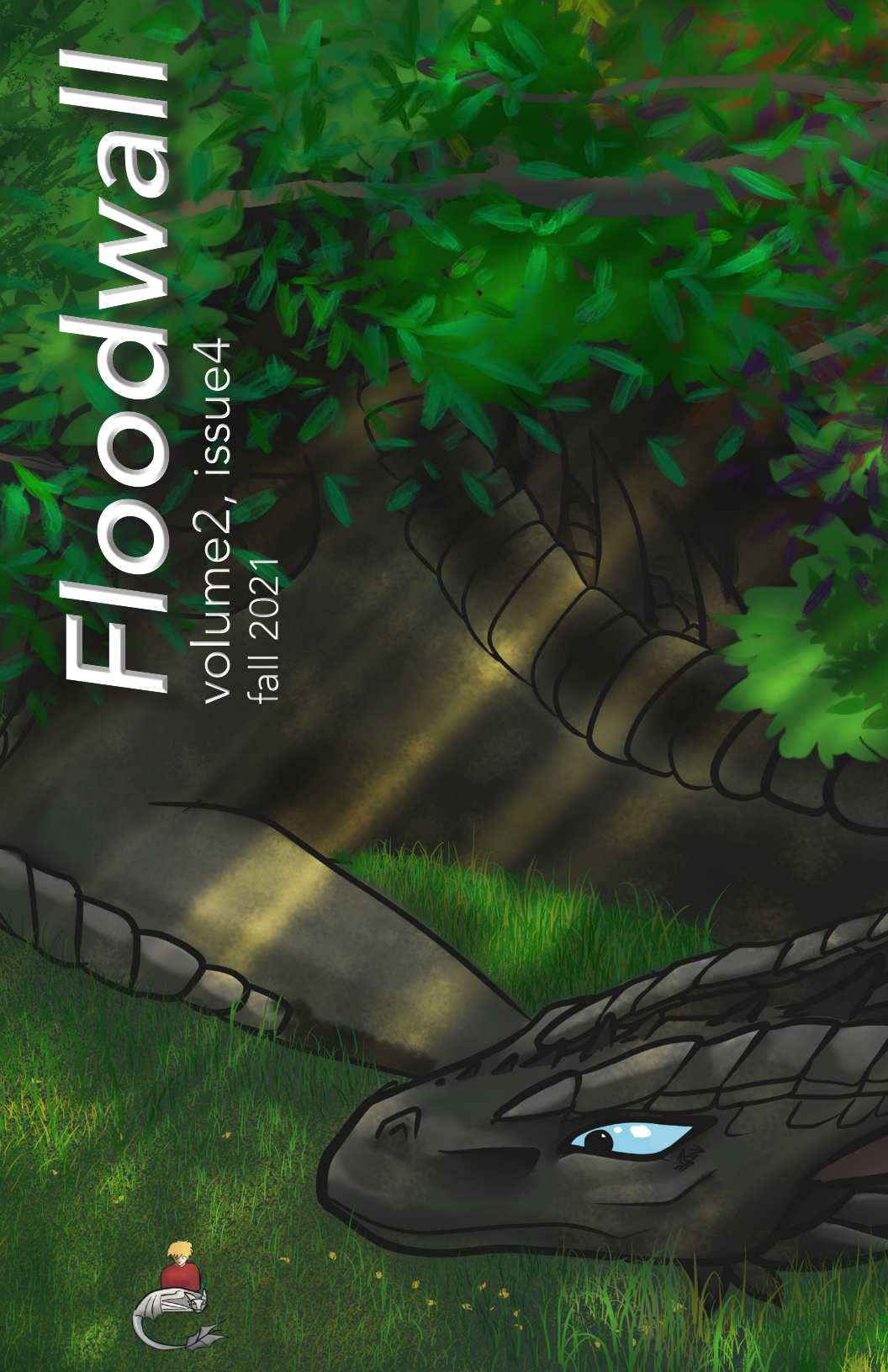


Floodwall

volume2, issue4
fall 2021



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Front and back covers: details from *Hel*, digital art by Hailey Narloch

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From the Editors

We're excited to bring you the fourth issue in volume two of *Floodwall*, the student-run, campus literary magazine at the University of North Dakota. This issue continues our revived run, which began in the spring 2020 semester, when we opened to submissions just weeks before campus (and much of the country) shut down in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This issue marks the first time that many of our contributors, editors, and readers have been able to take part in the magazine on campus, and we're thrilled to be able to share these stories with our literary community.

This issue of *Floodwall* continues our obsession with writing that smudges the charcoal, blurring the imaginary with the real. A how-to guide devolves into a cycle of regeneration—and a cyclical return of vultures. The absence of sound generates so much noise that a mechanic fears for his sanity (and reality). A fable holds cautions about what we value, and what we should prioritize instead. Coffee shops become sites of snark and gossip, and coffee makers percolate a morning brew against a backdrop of writer's block. A sparrow watches a farmer and contemplates its migration routes. And the environmental hazards of the California forest fires make us reckon with the memories of home.

These are only some of the powerful stories, poems, and essays gathered in this issue of *Floodwall*, and they represent only a few of the vibrant voices in our campus's literary community. So step up to the 'wall, and take a look at the voices that are gathered here.

Floodwall is shelter and art; *Floodwall* is a haven for the writers and artists of our brilliant, talented UND community. It's an honor for us to support the voices of our fellow writers and artists, and we're overjoyed to share their work with you.

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fiction

A Guide to Everlasting

Jona L. Pedersen

Step 1. To make something last forever, you must first kill a vulture. The best way to do it is with a rifle, but if you're out of bullets, work with what you have—a pocketknife, your nails, your old baby teeth. They're still in the old music box your parents put them in, when you still believed in the tooth fairy. Just make sure that, once you've killed the vulture, its carcass is still intact.

Step 2. Find the highest point over the graveyard. Usually this is the church bell tower. But if there is no church, the nearest water tower will do. If you resort to the latter, remember that you can't climb the threshold of water, air, and earth, without bringing fire. Always keep a matchstick box with you, in case the vultures snuff your flame. They're watching you now. Circling you. Waiting.

Step 3. Hang the carcass by its talons from your chosen apex. Be gentle, so that the ankles don't break. Be gentle, because it's a dead thing, and you were the one who killed it. Be gentle, because you never know what comes back to haunt you. But, oh, hungry heart, hush, what is another ghost anyway? Wire its wings as if it still soars the sweltering skies. Leave it hanging overnight.

Step 4. All the other vultures will leave. They love death and dance with death and live with death, but they can't stand to see the death of their own. But you must. You can't have a vulture heart. You can't circle the graveyard. You can't linger forever, cowering on the perimeters. No one will invite you.

Step 5. You are not a vulture. You do not have a vulture heart. You have a kitchen. A kitchen with memories of scents. You think it could be tortilla flour, or sometimes, rhubarb soup. Sometimes you think it's vulture. The rot still follows you. But you are not a vulture. Scraps and memories won't nourish you.

Step 6. You are not a vulture. You are not a vulture. There are other meals to cook. There are other ways to fly. There are other ways to last. You are not a vulture.

Step 7. The vultures are gone. Once you're ready, you will know where to go. She won't be there. They will tell you that she's watching. They say she watches all of us. But when that feels too much like another vulture, you avoid thinking about it. That's okay. You just have to be. It's only after you leave the graveyard that you will find her. She will be in the kitchen, sifting through all the blueberries you picked together. When you stand next to her, you're barely tall enough to reach over the counter. But you do. And you start picking the leaves from the berries, staining your fingertips purple. This is how you make it last.

Jona L. Pedersen grew up in Norway, but has since relocated to the US where they are pursuing English and biology at the University of North Dakota. Weaving contemporary culture with old myths, Jona's fiction and poetry unveil the spaces in between reality and dreaming. Passions such as wildlife biology, entomology, and environmental justice also inspire their writing. For more about their work, check out their Twitter (@JonaLPedersen) or website (www.jonalpedersen.com).

Hemingway, the Sky Is Really Beautiful

Aubrey Roemmich

He sits next to me and he is everything and nothing all at once. He has a cigarette in his hand that he is pretending to enjoy. He takes a deep breath and speaks again, "Hemingway was a fraud, and his work is insignificant. I'm not sure why you are so infatuated with him."

He stubs out his cigarette and leans in to kiss me. The acidic smoke burns my lungs and the smell overwhelms me. All of a sudden, I feel really sick and he looks really ugly. I don't want him to smoke and I don't want him to kiss me and I don't want him to talk to me the way he does. His lips meet mine and I hold really still. I used to enjoy this. I used to sit here with him on this rooftop, and he used to listen to me and not pretend he knew more. We used to be in love.

He finally moves away and smiles at me, but it doesn't reach his eyes. I see his eyes. His eyes don't see me. Yesterday he told me I was stupid. That my work was worthless. That I was nothing. I should have cried. That should have broken me, but I am used to his words. I'm not use to this look in his eyes though. His face is really close to mine and all of a sudden, I'm scared. Scared of him, of myself, of wasting away while he takes. Our legs are dangling over the edge of the roof and twenty stories is a long way to fall. Something whispers to me that he would push me without cause (willing and uncoerced). In that moment, I decide I don't want to be afraid. I don't want to fall from this rooftop.

Something must have changed in my own eyes, because he squints at me like he's questioning me. I open my mouth to speak and then close it. I look down to the copy of *The Sun Also Rises* clutched in my hands. I look back into the eyes of the only man I have ever loved.

"I don't love you anymore." I say this calmly, coldly, like I'm not drastically changing both our lives. And maybe I'm not. I turn to get

up from the roof and with my back to him I slowly walk to the door that leads to the stairs that will take me away from this. As my hand reaches for the doorknob, he viciously grabs my elbow and pulls me to his chest. He's breathing heavy and the fear is creeping back up my spine.

"If you do this, I will make you regret everything that has happened between us." He spits these words in my face as his grip continues to tighten on my arm.

"I already do."

He examines me closely and then his face goes blank. He drops my arm and takes two steps back.

"You were always an entitled insufferable bitch." He fumbles with a new cigarette and the lighter he could never truly figure out.

I turn once again to the door, open it, and walk away from him forever.

The sun is slowly rising and I am still walking. I am walking along the river, a path I never shared with him. I know that I should be packing my things, finding a cheap motel till I can lease a new apartment. I wouldn't be surprised if he has already burned my things, or at the very least thrown them into garbage bags on the curb. Yet I can't bring myself to care. My actions have yet to sink in and I still feel sheltered from the consequences.

I stop next to a bench that sits low on the riverbank. I swing my backpack onto it and look for the granola bar that is always hiding at the bottom. Instead, I bring out a pristine copy of George Orwell's *1984*. My breathing becomes ragged as the single eye on the cover holds my gaze. It's his book and now, suddenly, the realization that I'm free comes crashing down. Gently I flip through the pages. It's his favorite novel and one I despise. He was going to make me reread it because I obviously missed the ingenious message. He lent me his copy with the warning that if I even bend a page wrong, I will have to buy him a new one. He was always like that with his books. I thought it made them feel lonely and sterile. He refused to even try to understand my love for treasuring a really beat-up book, one that has obviously been well used.

I open the book to the middle and grip both sides with my hands. With a sudden burst of violence, I snap the spine. It gives a satisfying crack, and a smile breaks across my face for the first time in months. Next, I hold the book at the top and use all my strength to rip it in two. Holding the two pieces in my hand, a loud maniacal laugh explodes from my chest. I sit on the bench by the river hysterically laughing with a mutilated book clutched to my chest. As my laughter dies, the sound of the river catches my attention. I look at the book in my hands, and in the last step of my awakening I chuck the book into the rapids swirling in front of me.

Flustered and slightly out of breath, I lean back against the cold wooden bench. A small yellow bird lands next to me. I smile at her, and she looks at me like she understands. In that moment, I feel grateful that this little bird has witnessed my honesty. Sitting on that bench with that beautiful yellow bird under a beautiful blue sky I feel whole for the first time since I met him.

A month after I leave him, I move to a new city. I've also transferred universities. I've adopted a cat and named him Bilbo. But most importantly I've started to write again. My journal no longer feels like a hollow reminder of my own wasted potential. Instead, it holds all the ink that has been bottled up in my veins, waiting to be released. I like my classes. My professors are kind. I've made some good friends. Months and months have passed, and he is nothing but a bad memory.

Every once in a while I get hit with a sense of despair so heavy I can feel it crushing my chest. His words ring in my head, reminding me of all my faults. In these quiet moments of melancholy, I am overwhelmed with the need to destroy myself. My fingers itch for a cigarette. I feel a thirst that can only be satisfied by cheap, burning alcohol. In one particularly violent episode, I burnt the story I was working on. I really liked that story, too. It held truth.

I sobbed for days after that, disgusted with my own weakness and vanity. Weakness over giving into the doubt that will forever sound like him and vanity for believing that it was a tragedy that my story was lost.

I eventually tried to rewrite it, but I could never remember what words I used to make the original so special. I'm working on a new story now.

"We have been working hard on serious poetry this entire semester. Now I think we should have some fun." Professor Wilde is exactly as her name suggests: wild. "While I have a deep love for sonnets and limericks and all forms of poetry, I think this class needs to really feel and stop thinking so much. Your final assignment will be a slam poetry piece. In two weeks, you will all perform your piece in front of the class, and those that do well will not have to take the final. I don't want to offer any instruction on this work, because I don't want you to be preoccupied with rules and rubrics. Have fun and really feel the words. Remember you will be performing this piece in front of the class out loud. Don't worry about what it looks like on paper, worry about what it sounds like in your unique voice."

She's my favorite professor. While I think I write better fiction than poetry, she has been the most encouraging person I have ever encountered. She sees me and my work, but she doesn't coddle me. I feel like I can be a real writer when she reads my work and smiles (or cries or laughs or gets angry). She's a very real person, who feels deeply. Her love and passion bleeds into everything she does, but especially in the way she teaches. She has the great ability to make a class feel infinite. I've discovered I want to feel the way I feel in her class every day.

"I'm ending class early today so you guys can get a head start on your work. You're welcome to stay here and work. I will be in my office till three if you guys find yourselves stuck." Professor Wilde leaves the room and eventually all the students follow after her. But I'm stuck in my chair staring down at a blank piece of paper that for the first time in months feels foreign. My stomach clenches and suddenly that nauseous feeling that usually accompanied his appearance is back.

Before I realize what I'm doing, my feet are dragging me to Wilde's office. She's the only one I've talked to about him. She's the only one who will understand the panicked thrumming of my heart like a little bird

trying to escape.

"I'm not brave enough for this. I'm not honest enough. I can't write this." I begin speaking before I'm even fully in her office. Throwing myself into the only armchair in her office not buried under stacks of books, I feel like a pouting child telling a parent they refuse to eat their vegetables. My arms wrap around my torso as I try to keep myself from falling apart.

She looks up at me and her eyes remind me of the sky. They are a startling blue but tinged with yellow around the pupil. Her eyes see me, and I feel safe. She removes her glasses, closes the anthology she was reading, and slowly leans back in her chair.

"Who's your favorite author?"

"I hardly see how that matters. I'm telling you I don't know how to write." My eyes are filling with tears that are close to falling as I rock myself back and forth, arms still clinging to my person.

"I think it matters a great deal. Our favorite authors become our friends, our confidants. The people we go to with all our troubles and somehow, they make it better by simply existing. Usually, they have a great deal of influence over how we see and experience the world." Her voice is soft.

"Hemingway. Ernest Hemingway."

"Don't write for yourself. Write for him. Tell him all your secrets and he'll write it for you."

"I don't understand why you have to be so cryptic all the time," I huff with a laugh.

"It's my right as an old poetry professor." She laughed along with me before taking a deep breath. "I meant what I said when I told the class I didn't want you to overthink this. Don't get caught up in the logistics. For once, just let yourself feel uninhibited in your writing. Get everything out. Even if it doesn't become a masterpiece, I have a feeling you need to be vulnerable. Even if it's only for a few minutes."

"I don't like this feeling in my chest."

"It's the feeling you and Hemingway need to get out."

Something in the back of my mind tells me I won't survive this, but if I don't, I think this is a good way to burn. I stand on shaky legs as I approach the front of the class. Professor Wilde's classroom has always been welcoming, but with the lights dimmed, it feels especially intimate. I look around at my classmates and realize there is an unspoken understanding between us all. They won't crucify me for my short comings. I catch Wilde's eye and suddenly I am filled with a gust of bravery. I can be courageous long enough to get this over with. The little bird is fluttering in my chest again.

"I got the words, 'Isn't it pretty to think so?' tattooed on my ribs under my left breast when the sky was really beautiful. Afterwards, I cried not because I was sad, but because I was lonely. As I cried under the beautiful and gentle sky, she embraced me and wiped my tears away. She whispered in my ear that I was loved. In that moment I believed her. I went home and picked up a pen.

"Hemingway told me to, 'Write hard and clear about what hurts' but I cried, 'What if you do not know what hurts? What if I do not have the words to describe the slow, ebbing pain my heart feels every day?' Hemingway rebuked me, 'All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed.' Then I asked Hemingway, 'What if I do not have a typewriter?' He smiled at me and in that moment, I hated him for the ease with which he produces words, because I think Hemingway forgot that blood is not pretty unless you make it pretty.

"A boy once told me he loved me, but then he turned around and made me bleed. He said Hemingway was a fraud, but Hemingway is my favorite. Now I am standing in front of a mirror bleeding. I love you. I do. I really, really do. But I cannot share my words because they are mine. I cannot share my words because they hurt.

"But my words cannot hurt me when they are on pages. They hurt when I say them out loud. They hurt when he said them out loud. And I do not think this really counts as poetry because honestly, where is the beauty in my blood. I don't know how to write pretty. Hemingway, I'm sorry, but I can't bleed words I just make a mess.

"Because the sky is really beautiful right now, but I have so much

to say, and it's all been said before. I've learned that love is a luxury not a necessity. I can survive alone. I can thrive alone. But my own words scare me. The gentle sky surrounds me in blue and yellow, and whispers love into my skin. And all of a sudden, I'm not scared anymore." I take a deep shaky breath as I look into the crowd of my classmates.

There are tears openly running down my face, but I cannot find it in me to care. My eye catches Professor Wilde and I see her openly crying as well. She slowly stands and gives me a slight nod.

Aubrey Roemmich is a sophomore double majoring in English and Political Science. She plans on going to law school after graduating from UND. She hopes to work with intellectual property and copyright law. Her hobbies include reading, writing, and listening to music.

Nodak 97

James North

"Software Glitch Leaves US Navy Ship Dead in the Water! On 21 September 1997, a division by zero error on board the USS Yorktown... Most Flood Victims did not Have Flood Insurance... Being Homeless is Nothing New, Red Drives Mission Residents to Another Shelter..."

K. Knutson stopped on this one article and began to read.

How homeless can you get? Those who lived at the Grand Forks Mission doubled their homeless status when the Red River drove them out the door nearly three weeks ago. On Wednesday, some of them arrived at their third "home" since: a de-iced hockey rink. "In a way, we're sort of used to it," said Bob, a nine-year resident of the Mission who asked that his actual name not be published. "I mean, every day is a flood day to us."

K. Knutson skipped past the article. Flood news was a daily occurrence, but there wasn't much he could do to help. Grand Forks was over a two-hour drive east. Besides, he had bills to pay.

The news was mundane. No "Bat Boy Captured!" unfortunately.

K. Knutson perused the newspaper in boredom, glancing at the headlines. His eyes skimmed, not really reading the words but not really *not* reading them either, while sipping his coffee occasionally. Black, no cream, no sugar. After you've had Army coffee, anything else tasted so good by comparison there was no point in diluting it.

"Top off?" Greta asked.

"Sure thing," K. replied, smiling at the waitress.

"So, what's the news?" Greta asked, smiling back and glancing down at the spread of newspapers.

"Oh, you know. Disaster relief out in Grand Forks is going on. Homeless don't have anywhere to sleep."

"Uffda," Greta said. "That's just awful. Me and some of the ladies down at Saint Mary's Lutheran have been packing care packages after the Sunday service."

"Well, that's kind of you."

"Thank you, Kerry, it's the least I can do. I wish I could do more really, but I gotta work here all the time I got."

"Amen."

"Hey Kerry, tell me something." Greta was lingering by his booth; other than the two of them and the cook in the back, the diner was empty.

"Sure," K. answered.

"How come you're always in here so late? Auto-shop opens up at 8 a.m."

"I don't sleep so good," K. said. He glanced at the clock on the wall. Just after midnight.

Greta eyed the tattoo on his forearm. It was a faded unit insignia, but the symbol was still discernible: a U-shaped, Siamese cruciform.

"Yeah, but you don't stay in here till 8. Where do you go after you leave this place? There isn't much to do around here." She looked at him inquiringly, good naturedly. "Night fishing? Muskie? Walleye?"

"No, not quite fishing." K looked somewhat embarrassed before reaching over to the small bag sat next to him. He unfastened the top and removed a battery-powered tape deck and a strange-looking device.

"You ever seen one of these before?"

"Yeah, it's a tape recorder," Greta remarked, puzzled but interested. "What you got that for?"

"It's a Marantz PMD-201 tape recorder," K. stated. "I use that, along with this." He tapped the strange device, a sort of small microphone apparatus.

"What's that?"

"It's a field recorder."

"It looks like an electric razor."

K. laughed. "It does, doesn't it? It doesn't shave beards, though. No, it's for recording audio."

"What sort of audio?" Greta asked. She sat across from him in the booth, no longer pretending to be fulfilling the duties of her job.

"Field recordings. It's like nature audio. Nature, without outside influence."

"What for?"

K. hesitated. "Something to do, I guess. I like it. It's peaceful, you know? Nobody else out there, wide open fields. You can see forever."

"Sounds nice. You look at the stars while you do it?" Greta asked.

"Sometimes. Sometimes I just listen. I listen to them with headphones, then I take the tapes home, play them around the house."

"That's an interesting hobby, Kerry," Greta said, smiling.

"It's nothing really," said K. He put away the equipment.

"No really, I mean it. Very dedicated. Reminds me of the fishermen out here, in a way. Only what you're fishing for isn't so much a fish as a state of mind." She stood up. "Let me know if I can get you more coffee, Kerry."

With that she was off, waiting on a red-eyed long-haul trucker who'd just arrived. Kerry stood up, tucked the newspaper under his arm, and collected his things and grabbed his beat-up Carhartt. He left four dollars on the table. "See you, Greta," he said, and then stepped out into the brisk early-morning September air.

He sat behind the wheel of his great big old Buick, counting the Indian heads of the road signs as he cruised up State Route 3, in the direction of Bottineau. He couldn't make out much in the barren corn fields; the crop had already been harvested this season. Occasionally, he saw the reflected eyes of deer staring back at him from the darkness, and he drove carefully. Eventually, as he drove, even the cornfields ended, yielding to natural fields of wild grass.

He turned off, on a nondescript dirt road, and headed off into the dark expanse of fields. He drove on and on in the serene sea of

emptiness before pulling down a remote farm road. Halfway down, he parked his car, shut off the engine, and stepped out into the early morning air.

He made his way out into the tall grasses. He couldn't quite see his breath yet, not this early in the year, but soon the nights would dip below freezing, then the days, then the ruthless North Dakota winter would grip the state once more.

But not yet.

He walked for a couple miles and stood under the expanse of the firmament. He often came out to this particular field; there was something special about it. He readied his equipment, donned his headphones, slowed his breathing rate, and began recording.

He stood there, taking it all in. He breathed rhythmically, and he closed his eyes. He listened to the wind. The rustling of the tall grasses. The tentative steps of deer in the distance. Of prairie dogs. Distant birdsong. He remained this way for an instantaneous eternity.

When the tape ran out, he pulled the headphones down about his neck and began walking further. As he did so, he labeled the tape and tucked it into his bag, retrieving a fresh one. Some mornings he'd burn through two or three tapes this way, while wandering through the fields, traipsing about a stream, or sitting beside a lake or pond. Sometimes he even drove further, into the Turtle Mountains, but this, this was his favorite spot.

He had finished his second tape and begun walking around, looking for where to start the third. He found himself drifting further out into the field than he had gone before. The stars overhead were brilliant and the wind was still. He could hear the muffled sound of his own heartbeat in his ears beneath the bulky headphones. He stumbled slightly, then caught himself. He felt somewhat disoriented but couldn't place it. He popped in the third tape and began the recording.

A nonexistent moment.

Stuck in timelessness, in spacelessness.

The rivers of the cosmos funneling into a gaping lacuna. Stars bled their lifeblood unceasingly for an immeasurable fraction, then blinked out. Nebulae were reduced to meagerness, then gone. Depersonalization. Derealization. His perception bled away from the fringes into an engulf. Annihilated. The world was gone, had never even been.

Emptiness beyond emptiness: the lack of emptiness. Contradictory quiet. Void of void. Like this for timeless eons. Nihilistic proto-pre-birth. He was gone.

The tape clicked; it had finished recording. He could hear his heartbeat again, pounding faintly beneath his bulky headset. This was just enough impetus to refocus an inkling of his attention, and he was aware once again of his body. He struggled against the mesmerizing *thing* which held him in its sway, desperately fought to regain sensation. He stumbled backward tentatively, like a fawn getting its legs, before inelegantly beginning to topple. He transferred this momentum into a few clumsy, bounding steps before he faceplanted in the dirt. He lay there for a long time, trying to parse what he had just experienced. His feeble human mind couldn't begin to make sense of it.

Unbeknownst to him, this was to his benefit—if he could have, he would have been driven mad.

His head spun, attempted to reorient itself to the comparative sensory overload that was the normal human experience. His sensorium shook with a rumbling sound like industrial machinery. His vision was slowly beginning to return, first from the center, spreading outward to the edges.

He scrambled to his hands and knees and took deep, controlled breaths to keep from hyperventilating. Gradually, his breathing slowed and his focus returned. How long had he been under the spell of that thing? And what the hell was it? Was it even a thing?

By now, he had mustered enough strength to roll himself over to a seated position, and he examined the field. There was nothing there. Nothing but the tall grass. Overhead, the stars coruscated. In

the distance, he heard the rustling footsteps of a deer. Closer, he heard the much noisier rummaging sounds of a prairie dog. What had he just experienced?

One moment he was here. The next, there was nothing. True nothingness, total absence of life, of existence, of reality. It was sickening. He sat there for a long time.

"Look what the cat dragged in," quipped Big Al. "Tie one too many on at Lee's last night?"

It was 8:25. K. was 25 minutes late to work.

"Lost track of time," K. said.

"Not like we're busy," said Big Al, who thumbed his way idly through last month's issue of *Field and Stream*. At eight in the morning it was hardly hot out yet, but Big Al's thick neck already had a thin veneer of perspiration, and the man even sat next to an ancient box fan dialed up to max.

K. walked back into the large open bay. He had far too much energy and couldn't sit still. He settled with organizing tools to occupy the time. They didn't have any actual business until after 9, when an old Ford rolled into the shop. K. leapt at the opportunity, needing something to get his mind off The Nothing.

"I got this one," he called out to Big Al, then walked to the truck.

Big Al had scarcely begun to heft his immense girth off his stool before he was sitting back down again, wiping the rapidly accumulating sweat from his forehead with his crumpled old trucker's cap.

A routine oil change was all that was needed, and soon K. was left once again with his thoughts. What the hell was that, out in the field? He must be misremembering things; what he had experienced was impossible. He must have fallen asleep, dozed off only to slip into macabre dreams out in the expanse of wild grass. He'd get off work, go home, and pop the tape in. He'd hear his usual tranquility. Blades of grass in the wind.

Distant chirping of birds. The mating calls of insects. Graceful, nearly inaudible brushing sounds of deer. The tape would prove

everything. With that realization, he was even more invigorated, and the rest of his shift dragged on impossibly long. At five minutes till five he made his way out one of the big bay doors and waved to Big Al as he went.

"See ya, K.," hollered Al. The man was still firmly rooted at the stool, which he had spent the better part of the day perched atop like a rotund golf ball on a tee.

The Buick growled to life, and K pulled out of the lot, then down 4th Street.

There weren't any stop lights in town, and he caught his speed nervously creeping up more than once.

K. arrived home, pulled the tape from his bag, and dropped the bag by the door.

He walked quickly into the living room. It was the living room of an older bachelor. A green recliner occupied one end of the room, and a massive stereo system the other. With trembling hands, K. inserted the tape into the tape deck, a top-of-the-line Nakamichi machine, gingerly closing the door mechanism after.

His finger hovered over the play button.

After a moment, he instead decided to fast forward through the tape. If what he remembered of the incident in the field was real, he didn't want it to last all that long the second time through. He stopped the tape with only a minute or so left on the reel.

Again, his finger hovered over the play button. He felt a nervousness that he hadn't felt in a long, long time. Painstakingly, he pressed the button.

Awareness died. The light of distant stars wept for a moment and was obliterated. Distance collapsed. Singularity for a moment. Then beyond singularity, annihilistic decay into void beyond void.

The tape stopped and sensation crawled its way back to K, fighting tooth and nail back into his mind. He felt nauseous and his senses buzzed and vibrated sickeningly. It felt antithetical, to return to the world

of the living. It wasn't even the world of the living. It was the world of life. Of existence, of sensation. He had experienced true nothingness, for a second time.

He labeled the tape, *The Nothing*, and set it down in a shoebox among some of his other recordings.

"What happened next?" asked Billy.

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing," replied K.

"Isn't that the point? You don't hear nothing out there in the fields."

"Yeah but this was different. This was *nothing* nothing. No sound at all, no possibility of sound."

Billy seemed to think about this for a moment, taking a long, slow pull from a bottle of Grain Belt.

"You think I'm full of shit," stated K.

"What I think," started Billy, "is that you fell asleep out there in a field. Had a nightmare. Or a flashback. Or something."

"This wasn't a nightmare," K. said, defensively.

"Okay, maybe not a nightmare. Maybe you got abducted by an alien? Been listening to too much Coast to Coast AM." Billy smirked, then continued more seriously. "Maybe you just found what you were lookin' for? You went searching for silence and you found it."

"Not silence. *Nothing*. There's a difference."

"Okay okay. Let's say I believe you. Relax. What's the big deal? So, you can't hear nothin' out in the fields. Leave it be."

"The big deal is, that without sound, there's nothing else either. It all disappears. It's all gone. Everything. Everything we know, everything we see. Gone." K. had gotten progressively more animated as he spoke. "What happens if it grows? Or moves? Hell, I only got out of there because the tape stopped. I could hear my own heartbeat with the headphones against my ears. Otherwise, I'd still be out there. Or gone entirely."

Billy grasped K's shoulder. "Look. I've never seen you this wound up before. You say you've got a tape. Let me listen to it."

"I don't know. Not until I figure out how bad it is."

"Okay, well if not the tape, take me out there. Let me get a look at it."

"You can't look at it. There's nothing to look at. You see right through the spot."

Billy laughed at that. "Fair enough. Well, all the same, take me out there. I want to believe you K., but your story is crazy."

"So were the Nixon years."

"Amen to that." Billy raised his bottle.

The tall grasses beckoned to K. from under the glow of his headlights as he parked the big Buick along the road. He stepped out, slinging a large backpack over his shoulder. It was a larger bag than his usual field recording bag, and it sagged with the weight of what was inside. K. pulled out a set of foam earplugs. He donned the earplugs and set out into the field, in search of *The Nothing*. That's what he had taken to calling it. It was the only thing he could think to call it.

It took him a while to find the spot again. He knew this area like the back of his hand and his years in the Army had been spent navigating more difficult terrain than this, but finding *The Nothing* in a field full of nothing was a unique needle in a haystack scenario.

He knew it when he found it. A sense of dread, of foreboding. He stepped back immediately. The earplugs kept him focused enough to do so. Then, he set down the backpack, and removed from it a large boombox.

K. was here to test a theory.

If *The Nothing* was an absence of sound, maybe a surplus of sound, extreme sound, could negate it. K. had brought the loudest tape he had, a godawful racket which his nephew had left at his house: *Obituary, Cause of Death*.

The more he had thought about *The Nothing*, the more it worried him. This thing was dangerous, and if he had a way to get rid of it, it was his duty to do so.

K. inserted the tape into the boombox and pressed the play

button. The familiar sounds of heavy metal, muffled by the molded foam filling his ears, washed over him.

Then nothing. Or almost nothing. He could hear his heartbeat, through the thick foam. He stumbled madly, blindly. Near total sensory blindness. He was lost, deep in the ocean. Pressure, immense pressure. His sensations were a slurry of fog.

With each step, clarity gradually, begrudgingly showed itself. As his senses sharpened, he threw his legs forward more vigorously, and soon he was running as fast as he could.

The boombox. The tape. The music, the sound. It didn't hurt *The Nothing*, it grew it. He hurled the machine down, as hard as he could, before stomping on it, heavy boot falls on Japanese plastic. The music ceased.

"What's the matter Kerry?" Greta asked. "You haven't eaten a bite."

K. had been staring out the window of the diner; Greta had snapped him out of a fog.

"Just not hungry I guess," K. said.

"Well, I wouldn't feel right charging you for food you didn't eat. This one's on the house. You sure you're feeling okay, Kerry?"

"I'm fine. Just tired, is all."

"You, tired? You're a regular night owl." Greta had seated herself in the booth across from K; other than the two of them and the cook in the back, the diner was empty.

"Sleeping worse than normal," replied K.

"That's too bad. Maybe try chamomile. It worked for my aunt."

K laughed.

"I'm serious!" said Greta. "I think I have some at home. You can have it."

"I'll give it a try," replied K. He gathered his things.

"Sorry about the food."

"Like I said, just not hungry. See you later, Greta."

K. was halfway through the door when Greta spoke. "What are you doing this weekend, Kerry?"

K. stopped at the threshold, one arm grasping the doorframe and spoke. "Don't have much planned, why?"

"Me and some of the ladies from church are hosting a bake sale. You should swing by!"

"I'd like that," said K.

"Look what the cat dragged in," said Big Al. At 8:20, his forehead already glistened with a buttery sheen.

"Don't you have another line?" K. shot back.

Big Al chuckled at that and went back to his *Guns and Ammo* magazine. K. walked over to the garage bay doors and hoisted them open, one at a time. As he did so, he saw the sleek, angular form of a newer black Lincoln parked outside. The engine idled, and K. squinted in the headlights. He could just make out the silhouettes of the two men in the front seats. The passenger door opened, and the man made his way over to K.

"Mornin'," K. said, sidestepping as the man approached and oriented himself parallel to the headlights.

"Like hell it is. Power steering cut out 30 miles out of town. Had to manhandle her in. Like steering a fucking sailing ship." The man talked fast, with a barely perceptible east-coast bend. "How soon can you have it fixed?"

K. thought for a moment. "It'll depend on what's causing the issue. Few hours if we can get the replacement parts from the salvage yard in town."

"Good, we've got important business." Without consulting K, the man gestured to his compatriot to move the car into the maintenance bay. K. eyed the man up and down. He had fed written all over him. Black suit, close-cropped hair, fancy out-of-place car. The man in the driver's seat was undoubtedly his partner. K. had worked with feds once in the war; he knew they were bad news. Best fix up their wagon and get them on their way.

"Bum-fuck Egypt," said the other agent, stepping out of the vehicle. He spoke quietly, but K read it clear as day off his lips.

"Hey, you. Is there anything to eat in this town?" The agent's words were stated pointedly, impatiently.

"The diner is a few blocks down," K. said. He felt bad for Greta, sending the feds her way.

K. was halfway through installing a new power steering pump when it dawned on him. The feds were here about *The Nothing*. They probably had picked up some sort of signal at the base out near Langdon. Maybe it was further out than that. Could've been a satellite. Either way, these two men spelled out trouble.

The feds returned around 4. The two men waited around impatiently, chain smoking Marlboros and grinding the butts into the concrete of the shop floor. The closer K. got to finishing the repair, the more he wondered if he was doing the right thing, repairing their car. Either way, they'd get out there eventually. If not tonight, then tomorrow night. Or a week from now. Knowing the feds, they'd only be interested in it if they thought it was useful, or dangerous, and typically one meant the other. K. wondered if they knew how dangerous it really was.

K. sat in the driver's seat of his great old Buick, parked back in the salvage yard. He had the lights off but kept the engine idling. From the car, he could see State Route 3. This time, it wasn't so much a state of mind that he was fishing for. He had stopped by his house after work, grabbed a few things. Things he hadn't used in years. He waited for headlights. They'd appear down the road, unobstructed by buildings or trees or topography or much of anything, the eyes of a buzzard fat on carrion.

He watched as the grease smear of the black Lincoln slithered by in the dark.

Above, the stars of the firmament lit up the celestial sphere into a not-quite twilight. He counted to 60, using his shallow, measured breaths to keep the count, and then pulled out of the salvage yard and onto State Route 3, as if toward Bottineau.

He turned off on the familiar dirt road but stopped short of the old

farm road. Here, he docked the old Buick on the roadside, shutting off the engine before popping the trunk and exiting the vehicle. From the trunk, he withdrew his small field recording bag and a large-caliber rifle, which had been willed to him by his father. He had loaded the rifle with two .30-30 Winchester cartridges back at home. The rifle he slung over his shoulder, and he strapped the field recording bag about his waist. He took off his bulky Carhartt and tossed it in the backseat. He tucked the legs of his pants into his boots and tucked the length of his shirt into his pants. He held his elbow stiff at his side to keep the rifle from swaying. He focused on the rhythm of his breathing, and then disappeared into the long grass, not into tranquility, but into the maelstrom.

He stalked through the long grasses like a lithe beast of prey, slinking through the brush with catlike grace. He slipped soundlessly along, a specter beneath the mocking glow of the firmament. His quarry was quite the opposite. He could hear them from a mile away. Before he heard them, he smelled their cheap cologne and cheaper cigarettes. He crept closer, patiently flanking them, concealed by the weeds. They stood next to the Lincoln; their silhouettes burned into his retinas by the framing backlight of the hi-beams. When he was close enough to see the flames of their Marlboros, the pinprick eyes of a field mouse compared to the buzzard-eyes of the Lincoln, he unshouldered the rifle, gripping it with the firm but gentle grip of a father guiding a child out of church. When he was close enough to make out what they were saying, he paused a moment, focusing on the rhythm of his breathing.

"Ready for the fireworks?" asked one agent.

"I'm ready to get the fuck out of this field. These mosquitoes are ridiculous. At least the mosquitos down south are polite, these are fierce," said the other. "How much longer we gonna be out here anyway?"

The other agent spoke around the cigarette pinched between his canines. "Not long now. The bombers are on their way from Grand Forks Air Force Base. Short flight."

Bombers. The bombers were on the way. It reverberated through K's mind. They had no idea what they were up against. Acting reflexively,

he shot up from his position in the ditch, training the sight of the rifle on the closest agent. From this angle, he could draw down on the other with ease for a follow up shot.

"Easy," said K.

The two men were taken by surprise, and their hands hovered briefly over their holstered weapons before begrudgingly raising into the air.

"Do you know how royally you just fucked up?" spat one of the agents.

"I could ask you the same thing," said K. "Drop your weapons."

"What's your endgame here?" stated one of the agents. They were stalling, and K. knew it. Time wasn't exactly on his side; right now, their hourglass was simmering.

"Now," stated K.

The men complied.

"Walk twenty paces down the road. The direction you came from. Leave the car," K said.

"You realize you're not walking away from this, don't you?" said one of the agents, looking over his shoulder as he shuffled down the road.

K. didn't dignify this with a response. He planned on driving.

K. gunned the Lincoln down the farm road, opening her up and letting her eat up the gravel and dirt. He strained against the pedal, attempting to press it just the slightest bit further into the floorboard. The hourglass was beginning to boil at this point, and he knew it. He shot furtive glances toward the sky, looking with his peripheral vision for any sign of motion. As he drove, he squished a pair of foam earplugs as deep and as tight into his ear canals as possible.

They didn't realize the magnitude of what they had ushered in. If *The Nothing* had grown from a scant few decibels of tape playing off a boombox, what would 210 decibels of high explosives do? It was pure chance that *The Nothing* hadn't already absorbed enough sound to engulf the whole world at this point; if it had emerged anywhere else,

everyone would have been long gone.

K. reached the point where he'd normally park; he quickly pressed the brake and cut the steering wheel to the right, hurling the Lincoln over the ditch and into the uneven terrain of the field. The suspension jolted him about, slamming him violently. He cut a line through the darkness, making a beeline for where he roughly remembered *The Nothing* being.

He felt the familiar disorienting nausea. The tingling sensation of reality giving way to nonexistence. Then it was over. He had driven through it. He slammed on the brakes and flung the wheel over, spinning the Lincoln around and digging the tires into the dirt. He sat on the precipice of something unknowable, unthinkable, and antithetical.

K. shut off the engine but left the battery on. He opened the driver's side door, then reached across the center console and flung open the passenger door as well. He could hear the sound of a plane approaching. The hourglass was more than boiling at this point.

He spun the volume knob to its maximum, not knowing if it mattered, before violently feeding the tape labeled *The Nothing* into the Lincoln's cassette player.

He pressed play.

"You feel that awful earthquake last night? It shook one of my decorative plates off the wall! Who ever heard of an earthquake in North Dakota?"

Greta nodded patiently as Mrs. Walczik rambled on about the previous evening's excitement. She stood behind a large folding table covered in an assortment of cookies, pies, lefsa, and other various baked goods. The sun was bright and the day was beautiful. She shielded her eyes with a hand, gazing down 4th Street and watching for a familiar old Buick.

James North is a student veteran majoring in Commercial Aviation with a minor in Leadership and Philosophy. James currently works as a flight instructor for the university. In his spare time, he enjoys writing science fiction, cooking, and walking his wiener dog Ollie. James is currently editing a science fiction novel which he has written with hopes of getting it published.

Three Flash Fictions

Delaney Otto

A Strange Cure for Procrastination

Ghoul startled, the fifth alarm on their phone blaring an annoying alarm clock screech into their ears. They shut it off, tossed the phone onto their bed, and resumed staring at their desk, the light of the laptop providing an irritating glare. Their lamp was on, but it did little to help them without outside assistance from the sun. They looked at the clock in the bottom of the laptop screen and saw 3:33 AM glaring back at them. They clenched their eyelids shut, hissing at the pain of dried eyes against dry lids. *Screw this*, they thought. *Absolutely screw this. Screw this class, screw this school, and screw the idiot high school senior who signed away the money they didn't even have to go here.*

Their stare hardened at the open Word document in front of them, bare like fresh snow except for the dark text of their name, the class, and the name of the assignment. The letters bled and fused together with Ghoul's vision as they spaced out. (Their mom used to call it "becoming a temporary astronaut," but Ghoul didn't think it was funny anymore after the accident; now their mom seemed to be a permanent astronaut.) Ghoul wanted to reach into the computer, yank out the blank page before them and bite it, tear it to shreds, ball up the little wad of scraps and set it on fire. But they couldn't, and they damn well couldn't afford to take their anger out on the laptop.

Instead, they got up from their desk, let out a bit of anger by swinging their desk chair hard enough to slam into and ricochet off the bed frame, and marched into the bathroom. They flicked the light on,

cursed at the zap of static meeting electricity as their finger met the switch, and got on their knees in front of the toilet.

Feels like praying, they thought, remembering the old ache in their knees from years back, kneeling in the hospital's mini chapel beside their weeping father. They snorted at the idea of a picture of Jesus on the bottom of the toilet lid, all doe-eyed and smoothed down brown hair.

Half-continuing the joke, half-not, they put their palms together and bowed their head so their forehead touched their fingertips. "Dear God, take this procrastination from me. Rip it, uh, rip it from me like an exorcist rips a demon from a . . . possessed child. Cauterize the wound and clean it with Holy Water, then send me back to my desk so I can start this paper . . . um, free me from the sin of sloth . . . please. Amen."

Then, they used one hand to pull at their lips to fit the other one through, dug their fingers into the back of their throat, and with the thought of exorcisms now on their mind, hurled.

They yanked their fingers out of their mouth, feeling their throat seize and their stomach heave, pushing sweat out of their skin, flesh going clammy. They could feel something pushing out of their throat, some large mass that the muscles in their neck shoved and struggled against. Ghoul's lungs raised their worry immediately, and the aching need for air erupted in their chest. They gagged and cried, reaching their hand back into their mouth to grasp the lodged thing. Their fingers found it, slippery and smooth, and they found enough purchase to grab it and yanked.

Their throat finally gained traction, and with a shove the long obstruction flew out of their esophagus. There was a splash as the blackened mass finally exited their mouth and sloshed in the toilet bowl. Ghoul shuddered, gasping for air, staring down at the gelatinous blob, dark as tar, sitting in the toilet water. It rode on the water, dense and viscous and wobbling like gelatin. Before it could move, before it could hint at moving, before it could give any slight, even accidental indication of consciousness, Ghoul tugged on the lever and flushed the toilet. They sat there, throat burning, eyes watering, body shivering, until the toilet was done refilling the bowl, and they flushed again. Again they stayed,

staring, waiting, until it refilled again with clear water.

Then, they got up, washed their hands, brushed their teeth and tongue until the taste of asphalt and oil and stomach acid was scrubbed off, went back to their desk, and started writing.

Do You Think Aliens Find Humans Strange?

Log entry 4019:

Today, Agent Stevenson—one of our human attendants on board—showed us something that I find truly, disgustingly fascinating about the human race.

He showed us videos of humans eating “peppers,” and food items seasoned with them or sauce created from them. I watched their faces turn red, watched perspiration leak from their foreheads and create a shine upon their brows. I watched tears run down their faces. They lurched and coughed, hiccupped and groaned, their faces scrunched up into expressions of agony.

And all the while, Agent Stevenson was *laughing*.

I was mortified, and I asked what he found so funny about the suffering of his fellow species. I had never found him particularly threatening; I had treated him with the same respectful caution as the other attendants on board that weren’t of my kind, taking note of differences between our species. So I was quite put off by this sudden sadistic behavior.

Agent Stevenson explained that these videos weren’t recordings of torture or punishment, but rather a “challenge” that humans *enjoy* participating in. They challenge themselves to see how much heat they can tolerate, how long they can go before they need to quench the pain with milk or “ice cream.” They record themselves, sweating and hiccupping, pouring milk over their faces, for *entertainment*.

This isn’t the first time the human attendants have . . . unnerved me. First, it was Agent Garcia’s piercings. Apparently, in human culture, it is *fashionable* to impale one’s ears, nose, or other small patches of skin and put a decoration or jewel in place. We Heurians are a delicate species, I have to admit, and the idea of breaking our skin just for fashion is *abhorrent*. Garcia had multiple piercings, and took them out and showed them to me, explaining the proper way to “do” a piercing and take care of it. These wounds can get infected, apparently. Infected!

And there are humans who try to do it on their own with no proper training!

Then there was Agent Langley, who I have not spoken to in two weeks following our most recent conversation. Apparently, there is a term on Earth called . . . "thrill-seeking." He showed me videos of humans on bicycles racing up ramps and over long drops, of humans jumping across buildings and scaling up walls, of humans *throwing themselves out of airplanes*, all in the name of this "thrill-seeking." It nearly scared me to the point of sickness. I asked Agent Stevenson if these pepper challenges were a part of this strange genre of human activities, and he said it could be, albeit more "tame." I don't think damaging the body part responsible for my sense of taste is very "tame," though I suppose it would put me in less mortal danger than flinging my body out of an aircraft and hurtling myself towards the ground.

Each time I learn something about these humans, the more thankful I am that they're on *our* side.

End log

Time as an Animal

Father Time doesn't exist.

No man would look upon the role of Time and all that it entails and accept it, unless it was forced upon him, shackled to him. It would have to be a punishment or a prison, inescapable.

Time is an animal, driven by instinct. Its mind is incapable of understanding just what its role is in the natural order of things. It just fulfills it.

It runs and runs, driven by fear of its own extinction. That's what its instincts urge it to fight against. So it keeps moving, a steady pace fueled by that ache in its bones to survive. If it stops it will cease to exist, its animal brain tells it. And so it runs.

Time does what it must to live, thus condemning us all to Death. Like a bee makes honey, Time makes Death. Time doesn't know this, too driven by the avoidance of its own end. It has created the circle of life, the concept of age, the existence of decay and rot, all in its effort to keep its heart beating. I wonder if its heartbeat sounds like the tick of a clock.

I don't blame Time for Death's existence. I can't blame a mosquito for its bite—it's hungry. I can't blame a bee for its sting—it's afraid. I find it too cruel to hate a creature for its nature, for what it does to survive; it doesn't know any better. Thus, I cannot hate Time, no matter how much I fear Death.

Besides, without Time what would we be? We wouldn't be here at all. There would be no evolution, no adaptation from the water to land. There would be no matter, for without the time to move around, atoms would be frozen still, which would cause their extinction. Without Time, there would be nothing.

So, I accept Time and I accept the Death it brings with it. I only wonder if Time, like a lot of animals, would like to be a pet.

Delaney Otto is a Junior with a major in Communications and minor in English. She enjoys a variety of stories, though she has a preference for fantasy, magical realism, horror, and happy endings. She has a habit of starting stories and projects without finishing them and buying books but forgetting to read them. She's also a big fan of the moon.

The Man Comes Around

Parker Stenseth

The town was small and getting smaller. The census kept track of these things, but Raymond didn't know about that. He couldn't cite figures, but he knew that there used to be a bowling alley, and a theater, and several Catholic churches, and now there were empty lots with bits of rock and broken bottles. There used to be three diners where men who had once worked the railroads and oil fields would gather every morning for cups of coffee. It wasn't about the coffee.

Raymond had belonged to the White House Café, but the White House Café closed. Their early bird and senior specials had been practically free. For twenty years, Raymond had ordered raisin oatmeal with toast which cost him \$2.75. The men he sat with had their own personal orders, orders they hadn't had to speak aloud for years. Darrell once left town unexpectedly for a reunion with his army regiment, and his over-easy eggs sat on the counter until noon. There was no more counter. The windows were boarded up in early winter. Raymond couldn't stop himself from driving to the White House Café early in the morning, sitting alone in the parking lot for hours, watching the snow fall or flipping through a book on rare coins. Sometimes another one of the regulars would arrive in their worn pickups, and they'd flash their headlights at each other for a few minutes before growing bored.

In the middle of January, Raymond tried to force his way in through the locked doors. He struck at the glass with a tire iron. Someone called the police, and they led Raymond away with gentle voices and firm hands. They brought him to the general practitioner who ran a series of tests and decided that Raymond hadn't been confused. He'd been upset. The police brought him home without needing to ask his address.

Once he was alone, Raymond sat in his green armchair and cried. He listened to Johnny Cash and looked at his coins, portfolios of wheat pennies and buffalo nickels, the same ones as the day before and the day before that. Most of them weren't worth anything. He had a few from 1943 and 1944 that were, but they were kept in a safe under the floorboards of his bedroom. It hadn't been opened in years. The Johnny Cash record finished, and Raymond was asleep.

In the midafternoon, he was woken by a knock on the screen door. His mailman, Josh, was peering through.

"You breathing in there, Ray?" Raymond coughed in his chair. "Because if you're not, I can quit dropping off the mail."

Josh was in his fifties, walked from house to house with a hobble, and Raymond approved of him.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"It'd make my route shorter."

"Lazy bastard. Come in for a minute?" Raymond asked, something he offered most days. Josh accepted periodically.

"Only for a minute."

Josh came in through the door. Raymond wheezed and pushed out of his deep chair as Josh told him to stay where he was. Raymond got two bottles from the fridge and set them on the counter, waiting for Josh to open them.

"I'm starting to think you only invite me in because your hands can't work the bottle opener anymore." Raymond shrugged, and Josh cracked the tops off. "You know what I've been hearing today?" Josh asked. Raymond shrugged again, taking a sip. "You got picked up this morning, trying to break into the White House."

"Bullshit."

"Really?"

"It's true, but it's bullshit."

"Why'd you do something like that?" Raymond wasn't sure but didn't know how to say that, so he shrugged again. "There are other places, you know. Darrell, Scott, Fred, all those guys are at Sue's place now."

"Sue's place is downtown."

"So?"

"Too much traffic."

"If the entire town was there, it'd be half full."

"I'm getting old."

"I'm getting old. You were old twenty years ago."

"Right. Too much traffic."

"This is fatalism."

"Me driving there would be fatal, for someone."

Josh set his beer down, half finished, and dug through his mailbag, putting three letters on the table.

"Your daughter wrote," he said.

"Which one?"

"The only one who writes you."

"Stay out of my family business."

Josh laughed. "You want me to open any more before I go?"

Raymond got two more bottles from the fridge. Josh opened them and then the house was silent. Raymond restarted the Cash record. He shuffled to his chair with his bottles and the letter from his daughter. Her note was handwritten on a pharmacy greeting card, one that she found amusing. She and her husband were getting a divorce, the letter said. Raymond couldn't remember if this was the first time she had told him this. It didn't feel like the first time. There were spots where tears had caused the ink to bleed. Her eldest daughter was going to college out-of-state. More tears and more bleeding. She said that she was going to come visit at the end of the month. Raymond would have to think of something to do with her. She didn't want to sit around and look at coins; she had said as much. He thought they might be able to clean out the garage together.

He wandered out to the garage to see what kind of shape it was in. The door opened slowly and shuddered with every inch. Brown leaves matted the edges of the floor, and little flurries of snow drifted over them. Tools lined the north wall. Ten hammers were grouped together. His arthritic hands no longer formed around any of them. He had saws

and oil pans and tools of such specialized purpose that they'd been purchased, used once, and forgotten in rusty drawers and cardboard boxes. The south wall was strung with antlers and skulls and the feathers of regional birds, things he had found or purchased or been given. They were temporary and eternal and had watched over him for some time. Raymond didn't think about them much anymore and often couldn't remember why he had gathered them in the first place. There was also a rusty grill, broken lawn chairs, and steel signs advertising oil. A few boxes in the back were piled full of coins and couldn't be moved without being emptied first.

Raymond stood in the middle of it all, turning and taking in the lifetime of acquisitions. He wanted to rid himself of it all. He stood in the driveway to smoke a cigarette and figured that it would be fifteen days before his daughter arrived. She would help him take these things to the thrift store or the dump and then he'd be free of them. He walked back into the garage. The air was cool. It was damp and smelled like gasoline. Raymond threw down his cigarette and stepped to smother it. He slipped on a patch of leaves before the wall of skulls. His right arm hit the concrete. He closed his eyes but didn't cry from the pain. He lay there for quite some time, suspecting that he was going to die.

Cold light washed over him from outside. Tendrils of snow reached in and fell over his face. He tried his best not to move, as if motion was what invited the pain. For a long time, he didn't think. He was crooked and angry on the ground, angry at himself for having done something as stupid as falling. The day sunk, and it became dark around Raymond. He was stiff and cold and had only just begun to think about rising to his feet, a task that seemed far away, like the beams in the ceiling. Raymond had put them there, the beams, fifty years earlier. It didn't seem so long ago. He'd built the garage when they'd bought their second car after having their third child. It had been filled with bicycles and basketballs and sewing machines that no longer worked. These things were gone now and had been replaced by something else. His daughter would be back soon, Raymond thought, but he needed to get up first.

He tried pushing against the ground, but his wrist seemed to be

broken. He pushed with his feet, scooting on his back to the wall where he was able to prop himself up. He was chilled and sweating through his jacket, which was stained and torn. There was a tightness to his chest as he rose, leveraging himself against the wall. It was a sturdy wall and Raymond knew that he would live. His movements were careful. The moonlight was blue, and every surface could have been ice. Raymond's eyes weren't sure, so each step was methodical, a meditation or offering to whoever might care that he made it back inside. He felt like Dante's inverse, taking a frozen pilgrimage through his own suffering. It wasn't as serious as that, and the comparison did not occur to him until later. In the moment he was only concerned that both feet continued to follow each other.

The night was singing to him, and he listened despite himself to words that he'd heard before, words that repeated again and again: *Beneath the stains of time, the feelings disappear.* It wasn't the night singing to him because the night doesn't sing; it whispers. His record was skipping and had been crying the entire time. Raymond felt he needed to save Cash from this state and climbed the stairs like a man ten years younger. The door banged shut. Raymond entered a warmth he hadn't realized he was missing, and the needle came unstuck as his hand reached out for it. *You are someone else. I am still right here.* He unplugged the turntable and noticed that he was shaking. It was the cold, he thought, and so he lost himself in his green chair.

His wrist woke him in the morning. It was purple, edging on crimson, and he couldn't feel it much. He hid it under his blanket, but the pulsing was incessant. The blanket was moist; so was Raymond and the chair. He felt like he was dissolving rather quickly. His daughter would come soon, he thought, and everything would be okay as long as she didn't see him like this. He needed to put himself together. He needed to shower and dress and do the things that a man does. Coffee. The White House was closed. Raymond cried once from the back of his throat and hit his wrist against the arm of the chair. He was silenced. His daughter was coming soon. They were going to clean the garage, he hoped. It was any day now or several weeks from now. He'd have to

clean for her, wash sheets and take out the garbage. She'd make some concessions—he was a bachelor after all—but he wanted his daughter to be proud. More than anything she had to be proud. He always told the men at the White House about her and about whatever she told him about her siblings. The White House was closed. He would tell Josh though, of course. Josh would hear it and smile, knowing that it began with a letter he delivered or was intermediated by a letter he delivered, that he had played a hand in it all by handing over the letter. Josh would be coming by soon. Maybe he could help a little bit, at least with getting up from the chair. Raymond was pretty sure he could do the rest. A little help to get started though, that was the thing. He'd be around any minute. Raymond sat waiting, planning what he was going to say, hosting entire conversations. He was shivering rather violently but didn't notice. Under his blanket, the purple was deepening and spreading. Josh would come soon, and Raymond would be there waiting for him to come around.

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The Street Dog's Dowry

Karissa Wehri

There was a man who lived as a date farmer and goat herder on the coast of the Euphrates, and his name was Omkar. He lived in a small village where the people were neither rich nor poor, but lived comfortably by their modest earnings. The only needful creature was a starving, wretched street dog, but no one really cared for that. No, all the people were happy with their standings, and this was all that mattered to them. Omkar himself had little worries about anything, but spent his days tending the date palms and caring for the goats alongside his father.

Every morning the two would rise early to ensure that their goats were well, and Omkar would bring them down to the Euphrates for their morning drink. When they returned for their breakfast, his grandmother would be waiting with coffee and *khubz*, a traditional flatbread, served with dateberry jam on a large plate. There Omkar and his father would eat quietly, listening to Grandmother as she waved her arms and told another tale of her run-ins with the local street dog. It often made excursions into the open doors of people's homes and had stolen many a *khubz* from unassuming grannies. Each of her stories would end with a dramatic kick to the poor dog and her happily stroking her silver bracelet; it had been given to her by Grandfather, many years before.

"But at least the *djinn* shall never steal my bracelet!" Grandmother would always say with contentment; "His love shall be kept here forever, *Inshallah*, if that dog never gets an eye for worthwhile things!"

Omkar's day would continue with his inspecting the date palms and herding the goats this way and that and various little tasks in between. He was often sent to fetch water, a task usually reserved for the women, but his grandmother had grown too old for travel and he

did not feel ashamed at the responsibility. He only needed to fetch two pails of water for his family: one for drink, and the other for boiling and cleaning.

One day Omkar was fetching water at the well in the middle of town, and when he arrived, he encountered the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She was hefting four water pails with a pole slung across her shoulders, and he was so smitten that he at once took and lifted the pole himself. She thanked him profusely, and as soon as Omkar had brought the water to her home, he promised her that every day he would meet her at the well, if only to share a walk with her. Indeed, he was faithful with his promise: even on the hottest and windiest of days, he would be waiting at the well for Aasma, and on his shoulders he would heft the forbidding load of four water pails. Yet he hardly noticed the weight; all he could think of during these walks was the beauty of the woman and the many lovely things she said. After many weeks of this, Omkar finally asked if he could be shown to Aasma's father. She was elated to oblige and could not help but to laugh with joy when he asked her for her hand.

Her father thanked him for helping his daughter fetch the water, then asked if he could speak with her in private. Her father, a Mullah, was a progressive man for his time; he asked his daughter if she would like to marry the man, whereas most fathers would immediately ask about the suitor's trade and wealth. She said yes, she would very much like to marry him, and she looked so happy that the Mullah's heart glowed. He called Omkar in and told him the good news. Omkar could have danced for joy, but he restrained himself and asked in earnest, "How much shall the dowry be?"

The father took his daughter's hand and looked at her with a smile, and answered, "No dowry at all is needed. I only wish to see you make my Aasma happy, and you have already accomplished this!"

Omkar thanked the old man for such generosity but insisted that a dowry be made. The Mullah persisted in refusing a price until, after such dramatic offers as a hundred silver dinars, Omkar finally sputtered, "I shall give you a dowry of a thousand gold dinars, for a woman so lovely

deserves nothing less!"

Aasma gasped and looked at her father, who merely gazed at Omkar while stroking his long beard, as all wise men are supposed to do. After a thoughtful pause, he answered, "If this is what shall make you feel deserved, then I accept the dowry-arrangement. You shall not have my daughter's hand until it is paid."

Omkar thanked him many times and ran back home. He was breathless when he ran into the room where his father and grandmother sat cross-legged, discussing a recent occurrence.

"Father, Grandmother," Omkar happily cried, "I have been arranged to marry the beautiful daughter of a village Mullah!"

"Hah!" Grandmother cried and fell backward.

"What is to be the dowry, then?" asked Father, who always made up for Grandma's drama with unwavering calm. Omkar paused, folded his arms, and began to blush.

"I," he began, but then found he couldn't say it, he felt so foolish. Only at the insistent urging of Grandmother did he finally state the price of a thousand gold dinars. The poor woman shrieked and gripped a protective hand over her silver bracelet, and even his father looked dumbfounded.

"You foolish, foolish boy!" Grandmother scolded. "All this, and after my finest chop of lamb-meat has been stolen by that *dog*! Your poor father has to deal with that dog, and now with *this*, also. And where is the water? You have left your pails behind? Ah, Merciful Allah, have *mercy*! I shall never make my soup."

Omkar received quite the scolding, and his father and grandmother were angry for a time; but when he brought Aasma along for a family visit, they took well to the kind woman and became forgiving of the high dowry-cost. Without much more than a sigh, Grandmother decided that the dates were ripe for drying and took to the daunting task of the dozens of date palms. Omkar and his father harvested while Grandmother dried and canned them. It took several months for the dates to be prepared for the market, and there was such a large supply that Omkar decided to sell at the neighboring villages as well. While he

traveled about the country, Father remained home with Grandmother to sell his own stock. He was gone for over a month, and they both worried for him all the while.

When Omkar returned with five hundred gold dinars, his family was ecstatic and had a large dinner prepared of one of their finest goats. They celebrated and enjoyed one another's company for the rest of the night, not thinking of the dowry at all for the first time in many days. It was only when the morning came that Omkar finally asked Father as to how many dinars he had earned. It was with a sigh that he answered four-hundred. He knew that this would fall them yet short of their goal. Omkar could not help but feel depressed at this gap as well, but he only had it in his heart to thank his father for all the help he had been. That day he chose to be left alone and wandered about the date palms, gazing forlornly at their barrenness. He did not know what he was to do to achieve the final one hundred dinars. He could not sell the goats, he knew, for they were his father's most coveted possession and were only kept to sustain the family. He also missed Aasma very dearly, but could not stand to face her, knowing he would have to tell her that he had failed to earn the dowry money. How foolish he had been, to name such an impossible price! But Aasma was such a wonderful woman, and her father was so wise and generous. How could he have named anything less?

Father and Grandmother watched as he sulked amongst the barren date palms, and they felt terrible for him. Perhaps he had been foolish, but he had certainly tried his hardest and worked the most of them both. He deserved more, they decided together. And so, while Omkar pondered his situation with a sad heart, his father and grandmother plotted a way to earn the last of the dowry.

At nightfall Omkar returned to his home, and he was surprised to find both his father and grandmother missing. He searched the sitting-room, the two sleeping-rooms, and the cooking area, but they were nowhere to be seen. In a panic he ran on the beaten road toward the village and was much relieved to find the missing persons on the return journey. He hugged his grandmother and breathlessly scolded, "Now,

what are you doing so far from home? You know that you are too old for these long walks."

"I was collecting the last of the dowry," Grandmother answered, and with the biggest smile she presented the satchel of a hundred dinars.

"What?" Omkar lost his balance, but his father steadied him with a strong hand and explained how Grandmother had sold her silver bracelet for fifty dinars, and how he had sold two of their finest billy goats for twenty-five dinars each. Omkar was speechless, overcome with both happiness and dismay.

"The finest goats?" he managed to stammer, and, "But, Grandfather gave you that bracelet!"

"His love is still with me, even without the bracelet," Grandmother smiled ruefully. "And now that we have the dowry, you may have your life-partner yourself. That is all your grandfather would have wanted."

Omkar was so excited that he nearly left right then for Aasma's, but his father laughed and restrained him, saying that such a thing was best left for the morning. So the three of them returned home, content but especially relieved that the whole ordeal was done with. 'Tomorrow, I shall be married to Aasma!' Omkar could not stop thinking, and he gathered all the thousand dinars into a single satchel and placed it in a basket in the kitchen. Grandmother usually stored meat in the basket, but it was empty and seemed an adequate hiding spot for the night. And so Omkar hid away the dowry, informed Father and Grandmother of its location, and fell to a peaceful rest for the first time in months.

In the morning Omkar set immediately to Aasma's home, and he put his father and grandmother to the task of preparing a great meal of cooked goat, sauced with the last of the remaining dates, as a tribute to how they succeeded the dowry payment. When he set into the village for the first time in many weeks, he found Aasma as he had first seen her: She was at the well in the middle of town, attempting to heft the formidable load of four water pails.

"Aasma!" he cried, and she nearly tumbled the pole from her shoulders when she saw him. She ran to him with a shout of glee and

they embraced in a fit of laughter and joy. 'This is my wife!' Omkar realized, and he was filled with that much more happiness. He explained to her the months of labor that he and his family had gone through, and Aasma's face lit up when she learned that the dowry was prepared.

"I shall bring you and your father home with me," he grinned; "I have a meal awaiting your arrival, and then we shall have our wedding!"

Once again he carried the water pails himself to Aasma's home, and he relayed the news to her father. The Mullah merely nodded at this, and consented to go to Omkar's home for dinner and for the collection of the dowry. Omkar had a happy heart as he brought Aasma and the Mullah to his home for the very first time, though they were not yet arrived when his poor grandmother appeared on the road, struggling towards them at a most hurried pace.

"Grandmother!" Omkar scolded. "Why are you moving at such a pace, and all by yourself? Where is Father?"

But she could hardly breathe, and he had to support her for several minutes before she managed to stutter, "The... the *street dog* got the dowry! Your father has left in search of it. Oh, Omkar!" and she broke down in tears.

Omkar knew that he was insensitive to question her further, but his heart began to race and his face flushed up with anger.

"How did that wretched thing find it?!" he cried.

"It could smell the cooking goat," Grandmother sniffled; "It ran into the kitchen and took what was in the basket, and it was the dowry-satchel!"

All the while the Mullah listened to the story with a stoic face, though Aasma searched wildly for a solution, she wanted so much to marry the man.

"The dog! I know where it often lingers!" she gasped, and the Mullah gave her a grim look but said nothing.

"Take me to the place, once I have brought my grandmother safely home," Omkar demanded, and sometime later they were back in the village.

Aasma led Omkar and the Mullah into a narrow passageway

between a slaughterhouse and a small mosque, which ended at the back-entrance of somebody's home. Just outside the entrance lay the street dog, its head resting solemnly on its paws. Omkar couldn't help but flinch at the sight of it; the ridges of its spine were plainly visible, and its ribs looked as if they would heave through the skin. It was horribly skinny, but he managed to adjust to the sight when he thought of the dowry it had taken.

"You, pathetic mongrel!" Omkar cried at the creature, wielding a baton used to discipline his goats. "What have you done with my dowry?"

Aasma gasped and tried to reach out to him, but the Mullah laid a restraining hand on her shoulder. They watched as Omkar cornered the shivering dog.

"Hah!" he shouted with impatience; "It is not here! What have you done with the dinars, wretched thing!" and he began swiping the baton toward the starving animal with a terrible shout.

The frightened dog took past the man, disappearing around the corner of the mosque. Omkar began to pursue it but stopped at the sight of the Mullah. Fury shone from the old man's face, and Omkar begged forgiveness for losing the long-sought dowry. However, the Mullah turned his back and walked stiffly down the alley before he could speak. Aasma wordlessly followed her father, and they both disappeared into the back-entrance door. It was then that Omkar realized that this passageway led to their home. He thought of following but decided against it, the anger of the Mullah had seemed so great. Omkar felt terribly ashamed at having lost so much hard work and so much gold to a loathsome *street dog*, but suffered himself to return home. He would return the next day to Aasma's father, he decided, and would do his best to create another arrangement to earn his daughter's hand.

Omkar rose very early the next morning, he was so eager to speak with the Mullah. He washed his face and wore his best frocks and headed straight away to the village before his father or grandmother had awakened. When he walked into the Mullah's home, the Mullah was just finishing his morning prayer on a rug facing the far-off Mecca.

Omkar waited impatiently for him to finish, then proceeded to beg the Mullah to be merciful, and allow another arrangement to be made. The Mullah silently listened as Omkar explained that he had nothing with which to earn more dinars, and that he would perform any service as to take the lovely Aasma in marriage. For a long while the Mullah did not speak. Omkar began to lose hope for any future, and wished that he had dealt with the street dog long before he had fallen in love. But just as he sighed to himself and began to leave, the Mullah spoke, "Help my daughter to fetch water, and I shall consider your proposal."

Though surprised at being assigned with such a simple task, Omkar was thrilled at the renewed possibility of marrying Aasma. That morning he accompanied Aasma to the well, for she much enjoyed the walk, and he easily carried the four pales on his strong shoulders. On returning he asked the Mullah for his daughter's hand, but the Mullah waved him off and stated, "Help her fetch water this afternoon, and I shall consider your proposal."

And so Omkar returned again in the afternoon and carried the four pales to the well and back. His proposal, however, received the same answer: he should fetch water for the Mullah's daughter the next morning, and his proposal would be considered. This continued on for many days, with Omkar fetching pails and pails of water only for his proposal to be reconsidered and reconsidered. Several weeks had passed before he finally had enough of the nonsense. He was walking alongside Aasma with the four pails of water slung across his shoulders, and they felt heavier than they ever had to his dreary heart. Aasma often gave him looks of pity but never said anything. When the Mullah's home came in sight, Omkar thought of how many times he had repeated this process to no avail, and he knew with certainty that he would only be turned away once more. With such thoughts in his head, Omkar gave a morose cry and fell to his knees. The pole fell from his shoulders and the water spilled forth onto the pathway. Aasma shouted with fright and ran to fetch her father, and the Mullah came onto the scene with an unhurried step. Omkar laid collapsed on the ground, and could not find it in himself to stand. He was defeated.

The Mullah gazed calmly at the water soaking into the dirt and kneeled himself down. He slid the buckets to their proper places on the carrying-pole and lifted it onto his own feeble shoulders. He stood tall and stared down on Omkar.

"Stand up," the Mullah commanded.

There was such power in the old man's voice, Omkar forced himself to his feet despite his heavy heart. He looked sheepishly into the Mullah's eyes, feeling quite pathetic. He tried to take the heavy buckets from the man's shoulders, but the Mullah refused his reach.

"No," he said, "You shall only follow me." And the old man started back toward the well, with Aasma and poor Omkar following behind.

He filled the four buckets to the brim with water, and Omkar insisted earnestly that he be allowed to carry such a load, but the Mullah swiped away his hand. He turned to Omkar with a surprising rigour, and scolded him with religious passion, "You foolish, foolish boy! Repeatedly I have sent you to fetch four pails of water, and you have never once felt compelled to question as to *why* I send you to fetch such an amount! Look at me and look at my daughter-- tell me *why*, exactly, we would need more than two pails; why would we need more than drinking water, more than water for boiling and cleaning!"

Omkar stared helplessly at the man, for the question had indeed never struck him, and he had no answer at all for it. After a pause, the angry Mullah continued, "No wonder you have given up like this; after all that extraordinary work to earn a thousand gold dinars, and it has taken but four pails of water to defeat you! It is because you do not understand the deeper purpose, the truer meaning of it all. Come with me, and I shall show you the great balancing-act of the world."

The Mullah hefted the pole across his little shoulders, two pails of water on each side, and began his way home. Omkar followed, perplexed. The Mullah walked all the way to his sitting-room before placing his heavy load to the floor. He commanded Omkar to seat himself. Omkar did so without hesitation. The old man then took the carrying-pole and slid it from the bucket handles, placing it against a nearby wall. He stood so that two buckets flanked each of his feet

and spread his hands above them. Omkar watched the Mullah with fascination and listened to his words with awe. And what he said was this:

"There are four pails here: All hold water, though each of their purposes differs completely from the others. These," and he waved his left palm over a pair, "are meant for the matters of this Earth. One is for drinking, and the other is for cleaning the house and boiling the eggs. But these," and he gestured with his right palm, "are collected for matters of the Spiritual Realm. One is meant for my daily ablutions in worship of Allah. And may you guess, now, what the other is for?"

Again Omkar could find no answer, but said, "I do not know. You have water for drinking, water for cleaning and boiling, and water for worship. What is the fourth pail for?"

"I shall show you," the Mullah replied. He took and set the three pails on a table, leaving the last alone on the floor. He left to the back-entrance of his home, opened the door, and gave a shrill whistle into the empty passageway between the mosque and slaughterhouse. Omkar was stumped. What was this about?

And then the street dog appeared from around the corner, its scrawny tail waving happily as it answered the Mullah's call. It ran past the man into the home. Omkar was angered at this and began to rise, to chase off the troublesome creature. Aasma, who sat next to him, laid a firm hand on his shoulder and gave a meaningful look, and so he forced himself to sit. But what was a lowly mongrel doing in the house of a Mullah?

The dog cantered into the sitting-room and froze when it saw Omkar. Its body went stiff, and it tensed to flee when the Mullah gently stroked its cowering head. Thus comforted, the creature slunk slowly toward the pail, eyeing Omkar all the while. He merely watched the dog, willing himself not to move at all. After a tense minute, the dog finally began its morning drink. It happily lapped up the water, wagging its tail as the Mullah stroked it.

"The fourth pail," gently whispered the Mullah, "is for charity."

When the dog finished its drink, it licked the Mullah's hand and

cantered out the backdoor, its tail wagging behind an emaciated body. Omkar closely watched the old man and the sadness that came over his face. He shook his head and whistled a solemn tune.

"I wish there was more that I could do. We have such little meat for ourselves."

Omkar pondered this while the downcast Mullah took the remaining water of the pail and dumped it outside. Without waiting for another proposal, the old man spoke, "Help my daughter fetch water this afternoon, and I shall consider your proposal." With that, the man disappeared into an adjacent room, and Aasma showed Omkar to the door.

For hours Omkar pondered what the Mullah had said, and he thought regretfully of the poor dog he had nearly abused. When afternoon came, Omkar arrived as faithfully as ever to Aasma's assistance. He took the four pails and slung their weight across his shoulders and fetched the water with more efficiency than ever before. Aasma's father looked surprised by the speed with which he returned with the water, and stroked his beard thoughtfully, as the first time they had met.

"And I assume, now, you shall ask for my daughter's hand?" the Mullah spoke, his voice slow and contemplating. Omkar set the pails before the man's feet, stood tall, and shook his head. For the first time, he had not come to make the marriage proposal.

"I come for the dog," he stated, and met the man's gaze with a stern look. The Mullah regarded him carefully, then walked to his backdoor. He whistled, and the skinny dog came running.

Again the animal was frightened to see Omkar. Omkar smiled softly at the creature and knelt himself to his knees.

"Come," he whispered softly, "I have a gift for you," and from his cloak he pulled a leg of goat meat. Aasma glanced at her father with joy, and a smile lifted the old man's beard.

The street dog studied the meat for a minute, then looked at Omkar. He waited patiently, and finally the dog accepted the gift of goat meat and loped happily from the house. A strange sense of

contentment filled the young man's heart, and he smiled as he watched the creature leave. A profound moment of silence filled the household.

"And when you go home tonight," the Mullah finally spoke, "what shall you find there?"

Omkar thought for a moment, then looked at the Mullah with a smile. "I shall find my father, who has lost the best of his goats for such a fool as I, and who nonetheless teaches me important lessons with his constant companionship. I shall find my grandmother, who lost her dearest silver bracelet that was given to her by her husband, just that I may have a love of my own. These things are what I shall find."

The Mullah nodded, and said, "You see, every day you are given charities and until now you have failed to realize them. That is what happens when one hefts four pails of water every day, without ever considering what they *mean*. They mean religion and charity outside of one's own desires."

"I now know what they mean," Omkar smiled, "and I shall continue to fetch the water for you, if just that the dog may have sustenance!"

And with a shout of joy, the Mullah embraced the surprised Omkar and clapped him on the back. "You have done it," he cried with glee; "You have finally done it!"

"What?" asked Omkar, quite shaken. "What have I done?"

"You have finally given the proper dowry, the goat meat to the street dog, and you shall marry my daughter! For that single act of compassion is worth more than a thousand gold dinars."

And so Omkar was married to Aasma, and for many years they lived together in peace and prosperity. But, one year, their fortune would change: A drought gripped the land, and it was so great that all the date palms shriveled and refused to bear fruit, and every single one of the goats died of thirst. The Euphrates itself began to dry up. Water became so rare that the cruel representatives of the village began to charge for every pail of water that was taken from the well, though Omkar and his family now had little at all to give. They were forced to move to town, and with their date palms shriveled and their goats all dead, they had nothing with which to purchase much water. Omkar

had to sell many of his finest clothes for just a few dinars-- enough to purchase a single pail of water. And this was the last of their money. Omkar, his father, his grandmother, Aasma, and the Mullah decided that they would all share the last of the drinking water and pray for divine mercy.

Omkar, as the young man, was the last to receive the pail. There was not much water left, and a feeling of self-pity took hold of him. Then he remembered the street dog, who lived just as hungry and thirsty day-to-day as Omkar himself now lived. 'And to think that I had been so cruel as to resent it, poor creature!' he thought scornfully. His self-pity became sadness for the dog, which he had not seen since the drought began. For several months they had been unable to give any water to the creature, they were so thirsty themselves. Now, as Omkar stared at the remaining pool of water that was meant for himself, he came to a decision. While everyone else was busy, he crept out the backdoor of his father-in-law's house and set the pail outside. Though his lips were dry and his throat was sore, Omkar gave his longest, shrillest whistle. He awaited the appearance of the dog for a long while, but it never came. His heart became heavy, and a horrible feeling overtook him. 'The dog has died of thirst, for I have only quenched my own throat!' Omkar thought to himself, and he would have cried had he not been the man of his household. He went back inside and spent the rest of the day comforting his poor grandmother, who was convinced that they would die of thirst. Omkar said his best words, yet even the Mullah looked forlorn. The night came, and Omkar forced himself to fall asleep while holding Aasma in his arms. She cried to herself, though no tears ever left her eyes.

The next morning, Omkar remembered that he had left the water pail outside. Though it was of little use anymore, he went to retrieve it anyway. When he stepped out the backdoor, however, he found the pail had disappeared: and, in its place, a satchel of a thousand gold dinars was left.

Karissa Wehri was born and raised in Grand Forks, North Dakota. She has always been interested in other cultures and moral viewpoints, and she uses her writing to explore these themes. She plans to use UND's Study Abroad program to expand her knowledge for even more stories!

digital art

Digital Art: *Hel* and Nyxn

Hailey Narloch

Hel
(digital art)



Nyxn
(digital art)



Hailey Narloch is a tired student here at the University of North Dakota who loves science fiction and fantasy in all of its forms.

poetry

Aura Aloud

Julia Tietz

Just as the cloud-covered sun begins to rise,
rolling fog the color of your cigarette smoke
coats the lake below.

My feet dangle over the dock—
with just a simple touch, the water
ripples. The smell of morning dew overwhelms the air
the way the smell of old denim does—
when being held by you.
Time slows, the water is glass,
And I—am floating to you, to all of you.

The autumn breeze wisps the golden leaves away,
every step, a purpose.
The cup of apple cider burns
but I bring it to my lips anyway.
A bell chimes—
the leaves follow.
From the old man in the corner
sifting through the classics,
to the naïve boy searching for *THE* record,
the one that will introduce him to the power—
of rock and roll.
The old record store holds it all now
The love that matters
in the lyrics of songs long forgotten.
Records of the greats line the shelves,

stopping time in its tracks.
And the smell,
God, the smell—
nostalgia and ancient rice paper.

Street lights fly past in a streak of lightning.
The windows are rolled down,
letting in the unforgiving wind and—
the smell of gas with a hint of cinnamon.
The urge to fly,
the urge to be free, overwhelms the heart,
the soul—
The temptation to hang out the window takes over.
Half of me is safe in the passenger seat,
the other half can feel that wind—
leaving tangles in my hair.
It's dangerous—
I know—
With cars passing near inches from my split ends,
without a care in the world,
time—somehow—slows down
at 80 miles per hour
so close to falling
but I've never felt more safe.

These specks of moments—
these memories, pass us by.

Without a second glance,
they seem irrelevant.

Just another day but—
they are you.

The calm, the blast back in time,
the freedom, and most importantly—

time stopping altogether.
They are the unspoken emotions.

One day—I will tell,
I will be brave enough—

to tell about all of the moments,
the emotions your presence gives.

But not today,
nor tomorrow.
For I am not brave enough to tell your aura aloud.

Julia “Jay” Tietz is a third-year English major with a Spanish minor. She aspires to one day be an English professor and publish a book of poetry. The majority of Jay’s poems are inspired by nature, spirituality, mental health, and last (but not least) the feeling of love. In addition to poetry, Jay is an avid animal lover and is intrigued by the understanding of auras and energy. She loves to spend time with her friends and family, oftentimes singing, playing, or listening to music.

The Golden Hour
After Robert Frost

Leah Hanley

Soaring over field of yarrow,
Feeling wistful in my marrow,
Sing to make the farmer whistle,
He does not see me, the sparrow.

From the heavens, clear as crystal,
Comes autumn wind, chilly bristle,
When it beats upon feathered breast,
I take shelter in the thistle.

'Time, when thoughts of summer arrest,
I get the feeling that it's best,
When farmers harvest row by row,
To soon depart my twiggy nest.

The fields are golden down below,
The farmer seems to take it slow,
But I have warmer skies to know,
But I have warmer skies to know.

Leah Noel Hanley is currently in pursuit of a Master of Arts degree in English at the University of North Dakota. Her writing focuses on the exploration of deeply human experiences, through which she hopes to inspire empathy across cultural boundaries. She also hopes to inspire conservation and preservation of our Earth through her use of natural subjects and landscapes. When Leah is not writing (or grading papers), she is likely cross stitching, cooking, or spending quality time with her loved ones.

Two Poems

Olivia Kost

Cynicisms at the Coffee Shop

Who designated coffee shops as the obligatory destination for first dates? Condensation on coffee cups combining with the slick dew of their sweaty palms. What's your favorite color? How many siblings do you have? Any pets?

Another day, another overheard conversation. So many pyramid schemes to fall into, so little time. Over coffee, with skim milk and sugar free syrup, is also my favorite way to be fat-shamed by a blonde with a blowout. But it's okay. Her supplements will work wonders on my pitiful life.

False niceties exchanged between PTA parents. Yes, of course store-bought cookies are fine. I personally just prefer to not put such harmful chemicals in my babies' bodies, but it's absolutely up to you. I know how hard it is being a single mom. How are John and the receptionist doing, by the way?

Bitter words dunked in bitter drinks, taking away the bite. Like spite-filled scones. Knowing looks shared between barista and customer, as if to say, you heard that, too? She's heard it all before, like the rotating roasts of the week. Music to the girl who does not actually have any music playing in her headphoned ears.

Monsters under the Bed

I have taken the necessary precautions.

I sleep in the middle of my bed to prevent
toes stuck out of bedsheets, hanging
over the edge of the mattress.

Everybody knows that they are banished to stay in the realms of darkness under the bed.

Long ebony talons inching out of their inky prison,
creeping out of bed skirts,
only to be expelled once again with the flicking on of a bedside lamp.

One may hypothesize that leaving candles lit would dispel the creatures to their dark
recesses,
but it is in fact,
the opposite.

Instead, they thrive. Dancing between shadows
patiently waiting for the light to be snuffed out by passing minutes.
A wick burnt down to a stub until it is immersed in the fallen molten wax.

Darkness rising as the light falls,
only chased away by oncoming
rays of day.

Olivia Kost is currently a senior at the University of North Dakota, graduating this spring with a Bachelor's in both English and Secondary Education. She is originally from Bismarck, North Dakota and grew up with two loving parents and twin sisters, Abby and Amelia. She enjoys writing of the world around her, but with her own particular twist on things. Her time spent at UND has consisted of many Archives runs and taking naps in the Merrifield library.

Two Ghost Poems

After Poems by W.S. Merwin

Casey Fuller

Ghost of "Beyond Question"

what was it
that kent said
when lear woke
wondering where he was
the world felt old
soft clouded
unedged as heaven

as the authority
fanned back
filling in
the royal body
he saw they saw him
for what he was

he looked up
at all that morality
the pupil of dead animals
filled all his daughters' eyes
as he foresaw
his last breath
the word never never never

his fool would be hanged
gloucester was blind
edgar was too late
everyone he ever loved
was above him now
his lost daughter beside him

kent said in your kingdom sir

Ghost of "Youth"

all through this
already old life

without knowing
what words

or how to look
or how to call out

you appeared
in a way i somehow

imagined
it's impossible i know

impossible but
i knew you

were the arrow
of new life

and only when
i began to think

of losing you
did i recognize

your memory and mine
could hold off

the distance
for a while

i already miss you
you taught me to look up

you showed me
stars

Casey Fuller is an English PhD student at the University of North Dakota.

Two Poems

Maria Matsakis

8/01/2000

i miss the stars.
twinkling balls of gas,
a map in the sky,
pointing to you,
to home.

i miss the moon.
she listens to us confess—
love,
sorrows,
fears,
and does not judge as we hold each other closer.

i miss the sun.
even though his gaze
could never be as brutal,
as scorching,
as warm,
as yours.

Shel Silverstein

in the beginning,
it's all green.
everything is potent—
from the smells,
to the light.
it feels like this age of youth
will never fade.

as time passes,
i grow quickly.
everyone around me grows too,
so quick, that i feel i'm behind.
my roots have spread
and i feel solid,
sturdy,
permanent.

before long,
i am tired.
i begin to shed;
and while people tell me
i am more beautiful than before,
i have never felt so weak.

the cold has entered my bones.
i am falling—
into people,
into homes,
into pieces.
i have no color anymore,
and my life is done.

Maria Matsakis is a UND grad student and teacher who writes poems in the notes app on her phone in her spare time. Constantly romanticizing life, she fully believes that life is about love and beauty and feelings, and she tries to capture that in her writing and live that in her daily life.

A Letter for Wayne Miller (again); or, How You Started Writing Poems

Grant McMillan

A letter for *The Book of Props*, now—again,
sung from your fingertips
of the years passed between
forgetting childhood books and quitting grownup jobs and writing
that first email to Wayne:

*Hi! Just wanted to say that your poems are
amazing and moving and powerful. That is all,
thank you!*

And this new letter, now—
from that liminality that is a graduate
teaching assistant to sing that taking up literature again—then,
or taking up poetry, again—now,
is familiar and new and never—ever the same.

Because it was Hemingway who taught you,
in odd hours snuck from the office of your grownup job,
to love the keystrokes that sang
letters into language, like a life you could want,
something familiar and new and still free.

But it was Wayne you emailed
at his U of Colorado Denver address,
an email with too many 'ands,' years
ago when you first read his *Book of Props*,
and the fact that he wrote back.

*Thanks so much, Grant—and—
all the best!*

Because that book, those 'props' first sang
to you of the sublime without a single critic
or class or theory to tell you how
it felt when you read
those opening lines from "Sleep Suite,"

*'light striking the faces of passersby'
... light ringing them into existence,*

these lines of light-striking-faces, striking
your face too, ringings that became
a prop to pick up then—
for the first time, to ring you into me,
singing now, for the first time—again.

Grant McMillan is a former accountant who quit his job as an auditor to return to school for an MA in English Literature at Western Carolina University. He is now a second-year English PhD student here at UND and is constantly discovering new things to love about language and writing.

Coffee Machine

Charles Henry

I haven't a coffee shop where I can become a poet. No barista to misspell my name.
I don't know if a poet needs those things. But they'd be nice to have, all the same.

No... my coffee goes

drip, drip, drip

instead,

as my poetry leans over my shoulder,

out of reach,

in the computer,

on that table,

way back there,

while the coffee machine puffs out some air.

I try not to pace, try not to sigh,

and I try to hold on, so hard, to that line in my head

which needs written down

way back there,

on that table,

in my computer,

out of reach.

I have bigger things to do then to wait for the brew.

So many things to write

that are clever, and well-crafted, and true,

but

drip, drip, drip

is all that it'll do.

The coffee comes slowly; I think slower because of my watching.

My impatience comes out from my shoe

tap, tap, tap

(I'm waiting on you).

But, it just grumbles at me losing my grip,

and pfts on...

drip, drip, drip

...I'll never get a sip.

Time isn't meant to be wasted, I think!

My poetic thoughts, wasted on this!

All day long I've waited on this drink!

Drip, drip, drip.

I won't stay here any longer! Dripping machine!

My time matters!

And so do my thoughts,

which I need to write down

on that out of reach computer on that table way back there!

drip, drip, drip

Please! Oh god! Just give me the drink.

Rage and hatred is all that I can think.

Drink, why aren't you done?

Please, why won't you respond!

But

rip, drip, drip

...the coffee machine, goes on.

Charles Henry is a second semester English M.A. student at UND, with interests in composition theory, sociolinguistics, and the early modern and medieval British periods. He received his undergraduate in English and Education at West Liberty University, where he also began his creative writing journey. His writings often deal with exploring the underside of the expected experience of language and examining the shifting forms and conventions of writing. Charles has lived all over the eastern U.S., originally growing up on a farm in the Ohio valley, and he enjoys bringing those experiences into his writing.

Loon

Karissa Wehri

There is the strangest empathy
Found in the eerie cry
That traveled on the lonely wake
One happens to preside

A forlorn satisfaction
Only known when you're alone
To hear a foreign sadness
Of the likes oneself has known

The Loon will give one company
As though a grim ally
And ride with you along the bay
Beneath the darkening skies

At times, in but a fraction,
He will dive and appear gone
But with downcast allegiance
Shall return to you, ere long

Karissa Wehri was born and raised in Grand Forks, North Dakota. She has always been interested in other cultures and moral viewpoints, and she uses her writing to explore these themes. She plans to use UND's Study Abroad program to expand her knowledge for even more stories!

painting

Three Paintings

Kylee Danks

Giraffe in a Jar

8x10 in.

Oil on hardboard



Summertime

12x16 in.

Acrylic on canvas



Waiting

16x24 in.

Acrylic on canvas



Kylee Danks is a senior at UND, graduating in December 2021. She is majoring in Communications and Visual Arts with an emphasis on Painting. She has interned and worked at the UND Art Collections and has been involved in local art events and exhibits. When not working with the arts, she spends time with her dog, Casper, and enjoys the outdoors.

nonfiction

A Lament for Plumas County

Becca May

It was the perfect house on the perfect property. It had a large, open kitchen with white cabinets and granite countertops suited for a woman who loved baking as much as my aunt Alicia. It also accommodated my uncle Brad's inherited disease—cerebral ataxia. It was a three-bedroom house. One of the bedrooms was utterly untouched since my childhood. Two twin-sized beds on mahogany bed frames, the bedsheets unchanged. Under one of the beds were all the notebooks I wrote in, pictures I painted, scrapbooks I made. Although I stopped sleeping in the twin beds when I moved to college, it was always my room.

Brad and Alicia never had children of their own. While Brad had a niece and a nephew on his side of the family, they infrequently visited and detached from Brad as his disease progressed. Brad and Alicia were my second set of parents. Their home was my home. Greenville is just forty-five minutes away from my dad's house, so I spent countless weekends, summer days, Thanksgivings, Christmases, and birthdays in their home in Greenville. On the weekends, Alicia and I would play house and sometimes we could get Uncle Brad to play school. Occasionally, if I was lucky enough, I got to decorate the Christmas tree with Alicia. The best parts were in the morning, though. Alicia would make coffee for Brad and hot chocolate for me. She would put a SpongeBob straw in my cup and a Patrick straw in Uncle Brad's cup. Together, we would drink our morning brews out of SpongeBob and Patrick straws while watching the morning news.

My dad built the house with his bare hands during my senior year of high school. He's the best contractor in both Lassen and Plumas Counties, and he knew that no one could build his sister's home better

than himself. The new house was still in Greenville, just a few miles from the old house where my most precious childhood memories were made. Often, I would visit my dad as he was building. To get there, I had to drive along drive Highway 147—a long, meandering road that follows the eastern shore of Lake Almanor. Both the lake and road sit just southeast of the 10,500-foot volcano, Mt. Lassen. Every time I drive this road, my childhood memories ambush me. Memories of learning how to swim, learning how to drive, eating deli sandwiches along the lake shore, fishing with my best friend, boating with my dad, summiting Mt. Lassen, hiking my first 20 miles of the Pacific Crest Trail consume my thoughts so intensely during this drive, I struggle forcing my conscious back to the present. When I reached my father following these long drives, he was always so excited to show me the progress of the house. At first it was the framing—giant wood blocks that were the skeleton of the home. Then, when the plywood was up, he showed me each room, pointing out where the laundry room and the living room were going to be. Even while incomplete, the unpainted plywood and 2x4 frames felt like home. By the end of 2017, the house was complete, Brad and Alicia had moved in, and the house was a forever home, until it wasn't.

It started on July 13, 2021. It burned for 103 days straight. It burned 963,309 acres of my life. Nine hundred sixty-three thousand three hundred nine acres of everything that I called home. It took more than half of the acreage of county that I was born and raised in. It took the lake, it took the town, it took the vegetation that surrounded the volcano. It took every little piece of bark, pine needles, pinecones, gas stations, pizza shops, trails, bushes, and plants that I considered home. The Dixie Fire—the fire that burned 963,309 acres for 103 days straight in Northern California—took from me the most sacred piece of my heart. It took my childhood. It scalded my memories. It incinerated my place of love, exploration, humility, dignity, birth, innocence, and maturation.

It began in the evening. The Plumas County Forest Service and CalFire were regularly posting on Facebook. Around six o'clock, the Forest Service posted that all remaining persons in Greenville needed to leave immediately. When Brad and Alicia left, they said they heard

propane tanks from the outskirts of town blowing up. I imagine it sounding like the firebombing we learned about in US History. Unknown, unsuspected, terrorizing bombs going off one by one. The Dixie Fire was claiming Greenville as its own. No less than an hour later, the Forest Service announced that all fire personnel were evacuating the Greenville area. Anyone with a glimmer of hope in their heart knew that Greenville was gone.

I don't know if I got more than two solid hours of sleep that night. I woke up a lot, but I specifically remember waking up at 1:32 in the morning. As I laid in my bed staring at the ceiling fan rotating again and again and again, all I could picture was the inside of my aunt's basil green home taken away in flames. Every decoration on the wall, the pictures of me growing up, the Christmas decorations, the photos, the same little twin bed I slept on, the SpongeBob straw that Uncle Brad and I would drink out of every morning, my aunt's sourdough bread, her vegetable garden, the books, and the dog toys. I watched the house burn at 1:32 in the morning. I witnessed the cremation of my family's life through the window. Date and time of death: August 5, 2021, 01:32 a.m.

The next morning, we didn't know if the house was really gone. We just knew that we'd be the one miracle. We knew we'd be the only house standing among the remnants of those that were not as lucky. This couldn't happen to us. Things like this didn't really happen to people, did they? We were so naïve, all in denial. I sent my dad a picture that I had of him and my aunt in their thirties. "In case everything is gone, just know I still have these." He called me sobbing. Later that day, a family friend stopped by to see if the house was still there. Nothing but the pump house remained.

Alicia didn't call me for two days. When she did, she would cry and then she wouldn't cry. The shock was still not gone, the reality had still not sunk in. Her sobs were the undigestible emotions she could not consume. Each moan a reminder of the hope lost to flame, each tear a memory ripped from the location it was taken at, each howl a request for her home back.

Today, that exact house, that exact highway, that exact lake, that exact volcano, are incinerated. The lake shore houses that my father built in the 1990s are nothing but black, toxic dust. The trees now stand as gravestones for the memories of thousands of people—black, scarred, lifeless. The town cannot be rebuilt. The trees cannot regrow in my lifetime. My childhood cannot be repaired to what it once was.

I thought that growing up was defined at a specific age. When I could vote at 18, I was a grown-up. I thought that when I drank my first legal drink, I was a grown-up. Or maybe I'd be a real grown-up when I could rent a car or when I was kicked off my parents' health insurance. I was wrong. I grew up the moment my aunt called me after the house burned. It was the first day of my life where I was forced to put myself aside and take care of my family—I had to take care of her. In that moment, my aunt, the woman I called for relationship issues, family drama, valuable conversations, a safe place to sleep, a warm meal, a delicious birthday cake, and life decisions was no longer the unbreakable hero that I had recognized. Since then, I have had to step up and return the love, kindness, and compassion Alicia and Brad had given me for 21 years. I try to call every other day. I send text messages filled with hopefulness. Sometimes I send photos just to get it off their mind.

Nobody prepares you for this. There is no exam, no due date, no warning or signal. Even now, while I have been living and breathing this feeling for months, I still don't know how to describe it. Maybe I do. Maybe I'm scared that I will be weak if I really talk about it in detail. Maybe I'm scared that no matter how much I write about it or how much I talk about it, nobody will care. The world moves on, and I am stuck. I am stuck in a home that no longer exists, and everyone else is just walking past. Some people walk past as I scream for help with a sympathetic look on their faces. Some turn their heads and pretend they didn't hear me. Even my own father. He's found his way out of our incinerated home and he's leaving, with or without me. I am begging him to stay and just wait a minute. Just wait a goddamn minute, Dad. But the new house has already been purchased. He gave me my time

to say goodbye to the only stable home I had for years, but after that, there is no returning. Right now, home sits as a pile of ash surrounded by half-burnt pine trees. In a matter of days, home will be a distant memory, a sad ending with a hopeful beginning. How do I ask people to understand this? How do I ask the world to stop just for me? How do I ask people to help me grieve?

It all feels draining. Every dinner, every text message, every email, every assignment. I just want it all to stop, for just one second. I want to gather my thoughts. I want to gather the ash in my hands. I want to sit in the forest and remember the way the wind felt against my ears. I want to hear the silent voice of the Plumas and Lassen National Forests. I want to gather with my family and cry. I want to say goodbye. I want it all to stop just for me. But it won't. I knew when I woke up this morning, and I'll know when I wake up tomorrow morning, that I have no choice but to get out of bed and start again. The world has never stopped for me, and it will not stop now. I'll find the small section of time to be sad. I've learned to grieve that way. I will write my frustrations in my exams. I will proclaim happiness to keep the atmosphere in the room fresh and lively. I have to move on with the world, even if I don't want to move with it. I will accept that there is no returning. My memories are now sensitive reminders of what has been stolen. Home will have to be where we make it.



Brad and Alicia's house days after my father completed it. Photo credit: Alicia Dalton.



The remnants of the house after the fire. Photo credit: Harry Rogers.



The photo I sent my father the morning after Greenville had burned. Photo credit: Becca May.



Greenville as it was burning on August 4, 2021. Photo credit: Stuart Palley.

Becca May is a geology and environmental studies undergraduate student at UND. She is passionate about environmental mitigation and solutions and hopes to one day pursue a career in public policy for watershed management. In her free time, she enjoys caring for her three birds, baking various desserts, and learning culturally diverse recipes. She is an avid outdoor enthusiast that has summited two 14ers and Mt. Lassen. Her next destination is Mt. Whitney.

Too Young to Take

Riley Macke

Everyone dies, but some die before their time. Four years ago, I learned this hard lesson myself, and it shaped me into becoming a better man than I ever was or thought I would be. Allow me to share my story, which starts in a simpler time; simpler in my eyes, anyway.

It's the summer of 2017. I was a young 16-year-old boy in the Army ROTC. My dream is to become an Army Ranger. My main motivation—my grandfather, a decorated Vietnam Veteran. During this summer break from school, I was offered the opportunity of a lifetime: to go overseas and live on a real army base for two months. The base is in a safer, almost non-combat environment. After lengthy talks with my parents, they finally agreed to let me go.

That next week, after many tests and interviews, I was on a plane to Camp Arifjan, a multi-branch base on the coast of Arifjan, Kuwait. When I stepped foot out of the airplane on to the base, I was hit with a blast of salty sea air. The desert wind washed over my face as clouds of orange and yellow dust swirled on the landing strip. It was bright. So, so bright I had to squint my eyes just to see the hangers in front of me. The sound of heavy military boots clapping against the pavement arose behind me. I turned and stood up straight and saluted my new platoon Sergeant. He was a tall Black man in his late thirties, built like a freight train. He had the aura of a giant, an iron wall of a man. He looked down at me and gave me a warm smile.

"At ease, Private Macke, and Private Strands. I am Sergeant Johansson, Staff Sergeant of this base and your new CO. It's nice to have you boys with us to see what it's all about!" he boomed in a kind, cheerful voice. I was taken aback by his kindness and sincerity. For the

last year I was used to the screaming downright scary voice of my drill sergeants and commanding officer, but this sergeant wasn't treating me like a newbie recruit or a waste of space. He was treating me like a fellow brother in arms.

Sergeant Johansson then brought us to the barracks, a small stretch of worn metal clad oval buildings. Inside were rows of black metal-framed bunks and a small, shared bathroom and kitchenette at the end of each building. "You boys settle in and wait till evening Roll Call." He smiled and walked out. That started and ended my first day overseas, away from home in a foreign land.

Over the next few months, every day was something new. Either helping with munitions and patrols on base or driving in escorts to nearby villages and learning the culture and people of Kuwait, we were always on high alert. Even though this part of the country was under superior safety due to the proximity of the base, there was still a risk of roaming Taliban fighters. Every move our sergeant made was with extreme caution to make sure the young men in the platoon like myself did not experience combat. We volunteered to be here, yet it was common practice to make sure our visit was safe and surveyed. The experience was amazing, and I was one step closer to my goal of being an Army Ranger. Until one day, only three weeks before our scheduled departure home.

It was another scorching day. The desert was bright, with the glaring sun shining in the sand like a plane of glass. We loaded our Humvees for a four-hour trip to a small village of Anjhashi. We loaded into the second Humvee in the line and departed. All around me was the roar of the engines and the laughter of my squad mates as they played cards in the back seats. About two hours into our trip, we passed the small ruins of old decrepit buildings. All of a sudden there was a flash of bright orange and loud bangs that rattled my ears. The Humvee in front of us rolled onto its side, its undercarriage blazing from an IED that was planted in the road. Suddenly a rusted white pickup truck come roaring from the ruins towards us. Tunicked men shout in Arabic and start firing AK-47s at our convoy. My sergeant looked at us and called,

"All units other than Macke and Nelson come with me!" My young self, having false confidence, begged my CO to let me fight, too.

Reluctantly, knowing the risks, he agreed. It was my own free will to fight. This was my dream, to be a good guy fighting the bad guys and protecting my country and being a savior, a warrior. I hopped out into the Humvee and crouched behind a dust ruin wall. I chambered my rifle and started firing like I was trained to. A rush of adrenaline and excitement came over me. I had no fear for my life. It felt like I could have taken on the world. The firefight lasted approximately forty-five minutes, but for me it felt like ten minutes. As I reloaded and aimed again, I saw a man with turban on his head and long beard peering across the way about 150 yards out. I aimed my rifle like I was in a video game and fired. Four bullets hit him—three in the chest and one in the head. As if in slow motion, I saw the blood fly from the back of his head and his hands drop his gun. His lifeless body fell harshly onto the scorching gravel, eyes devoid of life. A sudden realization hit me like an entire freight train. I just killed a man. I took another human being's life on purpose. I fired my gun with the intent to kill and killed someone. My head went blank, and a sudden pain was felt in my chest, an overwhelming sense of guilt and distress. Unimaginable amounts of sadness and guilt washed over me. I ducked behind the wall and started profusely vomiting. My vision blurred, my heart felt like it was going to rip out of my chest. Everything faded to black, and I awoke screaming back at the barracks. Sergeant Johansson walked in and looked at me with somber eyes. I started to uncontrollably cry as he held me in his arms and gave me a firm hug without saying a word.

I went home two weeks early on medical leave for my mental health. When I arrived at the airport my mother was there to greet me. She later told me she was horrified when she looked at me and saw my hollow eyes with emptiness and sorrow. She thought she had lost the little boy she loved so much. My father, enraged, immediately got me discharged from the Army and took me to therapy. After many years of night terrors and talks I finally came to terms with everything that happened. After so much time I can finally put my words into paper

and relive my experiment so others can learn the same thing: Cherish life. Whether it be the people you love or your greatest enemy. At one point you may have even wished death upon someone you dislike or even hate, let go of those feelings. Death is inviting and will take anyone sooner than expected. One should never have to take another's life by any means. I came to learn this the hardest way imaginable, even if it was an enemy, a terrorist, a bad guy. It does not matter, cherish life even if you do not cherish your own.

Riley Macke is a nineteen-year-old Aviation student from Duluth, Minnesota. Riley loves the outdoors and spend most of his time hunting, fishing, or hiking. He also loves to write and has helped develop a plot for a published fantasy series.

Envisioning De Sica's Documentary: A Proposal for Narrative Realist Documentary Filmmaking

Parker Stenseth

This fall I served on the jury for a film festival. I joined late in the process and was obligated to screen my category's forty documentary feature entries in about a month. The films ranged from horrendous to incredible, and, during my marathon of critical attention, I learned to put into words a kind of dread that some documentaries would fill me with. It had nothing to do with production quality or subject matter. It came down to the use of form. One of these films, which was eventually selected for the festival, was *Lost Lives*. The logline is as follows: "Inspired by the book of the same name, *Lost Lives* records the circumstances of every man, woman and child who died in a conflict – the Northern Irish 'Troubles.' A reminder that war is hell." I was enthused by the description, but that dissipated when I realized the documentary wasn't only "inspired by the book," it was composed entirely of voiceover readings from the text while glossy B-roll and occasional archival footage flickered by. It was an abridged audiobook with something to look at, and I couldn't, considering my love for the film form, rightly enjoy the product. At our festival, reviews for the film were mixed. Some of our jurors fiercely defended it—often those with a focus on philanthropy and not film—but it always settled on the question of form.

Somewhere in recent history, possibly with the advent of digital editing software, documentaries have ceased to be films in the fullest sense of the term. The tendency has become for documentaries to be approached as "visual essays" with an excessively literary through line—that may exist as voice-over narration, carefully arranged soundbites,

or a combination of the two—overlaid with b-roll that only affirms the literary base, an entity oftentimes capable of existing on its own. If the audio of a film is able to exist on its own, a proper balance has not been struck, and the visuals have become secondary or even, at times, redundant. As a matter of practicality, there will always be a space for this style of documentary filmmaking, but that it has become, overwhelmingly, the default is harmful to the public's and future filmmaker's conception of the film form. The following proposal will outline a new approach to documentary filmmaking that unifies audio and visual aesthetics and coordinates them as an extension of rhetoric by looking at the period of film history that did this first and did it most effectively.

The theory behind Italian neorealist films¹ along with the later traditions of film realism, can be used as a manual for achieving a balanced relationship between aesthetics and rhetoric. So, to begin, it is important to have a brief overview of Italian neorealism and how it pertains to our subject. To do so, I will be using a selection of critical writings by André Bazin because he is still widely read and understood and represents a bridge between the Italian neorealists and modern film theory, some of which he played a significant role in popularizing.

Neorealism: An Overview

The neorealist movement had its roots in revolution, originating at the end of World War II and the fall of Mussolini's government. The films reflected a new social consciousness and gave a platform to the plights of the impoverished and the working class. Writers from an Italian magazine, *Cinema*,² developed the style that would define the

1 This essay will look primarily at the collaborations between Vittorio De Sica and Cesare Zavattini, which by no means is meant to belittle the unmentioned work of the other great neorealist filmmakers.

2 To which Cesare Zavattini was a regular contributor.

movement.³⁴ Tracing back to the early dominance of Russian cinema, notably Sergei Eisenstein, there exists a trend of industries who are engaging with theory in new ways producing a strong and historically significant body of work.

Three qualities that are commonly associated with neorealism are choosing the poor and working class as their subjects, shooting on location, and use of non-actors. Today, Vittorio De Sica is the filmmaker most widely known as a neorealist,⁵ and his films *Shoeshine*, *Bicycle Thieves*, and *Umberto D* are excellent demonstrations of the evolution of neorealism, which, according to Bazin, as a whole “are first and foremost reconstituted reportage. The action could not unfold in just any social context historically neutral, partly abstract like the setting of a tragedy.” What he’s hinting at is that these films, more than any others, are centered on the relationship their subjects have with their setting.⁶ Later realist film movements would reveal that the relationship could be more accurately described as between a subject and a system—in Éric Rohmer’s this often appears as a moral system that the subject is wrestling with—but neorealism hadn’t quite reached this point, which can be seen as an indicator of how the French New Wave later expanded filmic ideas of character.

These films, especially the three listed above, function by proposing a progressive thesis intertwined with the world of the story that is difficult to contend because it is presented as context rather than an argument. To demonstrate using *Bicycle Thieves*, at the beginning of the film Antonio Ricci, played by non-actor Lamberto Maggiorani, has his bike stolen and is unable to work because his position

3 Heavily inspired by the Russian Social Realists (Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Kuleshov, etc.) and advances in film technology.

4 The French New Wave had a similar origin with *Cahiers du Cinema* producing directors such as François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Goddard, Eric Rohmer, Claude Chabrol, et Jacques Rivette who were all mentored to varying degrees by André Bazin.

5 Although he never identified with the title.

6 The movement itself was very much the product of the social, political, and economic setting of post-WWII Italy.

pasting advertising bills requires a bicycle. The police are unable to help Antonio, and his own efforts to recover the stolen property are unsuccessful even after tracking down and confronting the thief. Antonio is so desperate that he himself attempts to steal a bicycle but is caught immediately. The owner lets Antonio go when he notices Antonio's son, Bruno, bearing witness to the event. At this, the film ends.

How is this bare-bones overview related to the "thesis" mentioned earlier? Bazin says "the thesis of the film is hidden behind an objective social reality which in turn moves into the background of the moral and psychological drama which could of itself justify the film." The "objective social reality" that Antonio operates in is one in which "the poor must steal from each other in order to survive." In the film it is more nuanced, but this sentence summarizes what has caught Antonio. In screenwriter's terms, the society has become an insurmountable obstacle, barring Antonio from satisfying his "dramatic need." This thesis appears in the scenario written by Cesare Zavattini, but the rhetoric derives its authority from the realist aesthetic contributed by De Sica and his cinematographer Carlo Montuori.

A Realist Aesthetic:

The terms "realist" and "realism" have been brandished about in film since the beginning, so here I will outline what I mean by a realist aesthetic and what traits make the realist aesthetic observable in neorealist films, but first, I would like to dispel the misconception that a good portion of neorealist films' effect comes from their use of non-actors. I would argue that this is only important so far as the audience does not recognize the actors. Oftentimes, even above talent, this is the greatest assets an actor brings to a production, the audience's preconception of them. Whether that's an actor playing the same role in different situations⁷ or an actor challenging the audiences "horizon of

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i.e. Mark Wahlberg, Dwayne Johnson, Ryan Reynolds, Jessie Eisenberg; the actors who rarely act.

expectations”⁸ by playing against type.⁹ A skilled director—and I include casting or ensuring proper casting as part of a skilled director’s toolkit—will, given enough time, be able to coax the desired performance out of actor, know or unknown, and non-actor alike. From looking at the film alone—by which I mean ignoring the narrative spun around the making of the film—there is no practical difference between casting an unknown actor and a non-actor. Even the term non-actor itself is deceptive, because in the film they are, in fact, acting. What non-actor really means is person who has not acted before. Once they’ve committed to act in a film, they are no longer a non-actor, rather, they are an unknown actor, and the purposeful use of the former term while talking about neorealism is an extension of the written rhetoric that surrounds the movement which is important to be aware of while translating the essence of these films into a modern context, since our goal is to translate the films themselves, not the stories that have been told about them.

Transitioning to the films themselves, a realist aesthetic is derived primarily from two filmmaking principles: the cinematography and the story. The former’s contribution toward realism, and where most modern films fail, is by shooting their subjects so that the film form does not imbue them with significance. The significance emanates from the subjects themselves and their relationship to the world around them. At first, this may sound abstract, but it can be easily observed. There are established film principles whereby using proximity, angle, and motion, filmmakers craft an emotion. This is half of the principles behind montage theory. For example, a low-angle push-in from a full shot to a medium shot would communicate power or confidence, or an extreme close-up inherently denotes its subject as being of extreme importance. This can be nuanced to the extreme such as in Eisenstein films which

8 A concept developed by Hans Robert Jauss that is defined, in my own words, as the sum of experiences an audience has had or art that they are aware of that forms their ever-fluctuating, preconceived notion of what an artwork will be.

9 i.e. Charlize Theron in *Monster*, Adam Sandler in *Punch-Drunk Love*, or Emma Watson in Sofia Coppola’s *The Bling Ring*.

DeLillo beautifully describes in his novel *Underworld* as “in Eisenstein you note that the camera angle is a kind of dialectic. Arguments are raised and makes theories drift across the screen and instantly shatter,” and even though neorealist films overwhelmingly do not use these techniques, the absence of such a dialectic becomes a dialectic of its own as they purposefully deconstruct film language to shift where the film’s significance comes from. In Eisenstein, and films subscribing to montage theory, significance is derived from the composition individual shots and the juxtaposition of these shots. For films made with an aesthetic of realism, the significance is not from the juxtaposition or even the individual shots, rather from the subject themselves and the presence that is allowed to emanate from them. This is true for De Sica,¹⁰ that he allows his subjects to linger on-screen in a manner that aspires to make their souls tangible. The framing and motion are limited to what is necessary; how can we show the subject satisfactorily and how must we move the camera to keep it that way? This filmic honesty is what gives the films their authority. They give the impression that they’re not trying to convince the audience of anything except the true and plausible presence of their subject.

I invite readers to rewatch *Bicycle Thieves* and count the number of camera placements and movements that are not chosen for most effectively observing the subject. Viewers will note that De Sica establishes three proximities from which to shoot Antonio and cycles through these on the condition of necessity for most of the film. This method of filming is done to avoid one layer of “artifice” in the filmmaking process. It contributes to a realist aesthetic by not indulging in the filmmaking techniques used to distort reality or, more accurately and more importantly, distort the audience’s reaction to the presentation of “reality.”

The second neorealist trait that defines its aesthetic of realism is its frequent addition of spontaneity to narratives. This is antithetical to modern screenwriting practices,¹¹ that has instilled an attitude of

10 And it’s true for Rossellini, Rohmer, Bresson, Kiarostami, and Resnais.

11 The Syd Field, Robert McKee, and Blake Snyder generation.

absolute economy. While this make sense, and is inevitable for studio pictures, it also strikes me as the best way to remove the texture of life from a project. Paraphrasing Sartre, carefully arranged events are the structure of a life remembered but has nothing to do with the shape of life as it is. There's a balance to be struck, this much is sure, but to achieve a realist aesthetic, by which we mean an aesthetic that presents itself in a way that approaches the presentation of "real life," and to do this, what I've termed as filmic spontaneity, which establishes the possibility of further filmic spontaneity, must be present. Again, to illustrate, I will look at two examples from *Bicycle Thieves* both of which occur during a chase scene. The first is that Antonio's son, Bruno, needs to piss, and so he does. The second occurrence is when it begins to rain which brings a halt to the whole affair. These scenes are not utile—in a conventional sense, by which I mean they do not propel the plot forward—so a modern approach to screenwriting would suggest getting rid of them. But these scenes function by insisting that the world of the film is like our own in the sense that anything might happen. It gives the illusion that events are spontaneous rather than preordained, because it is true, sometimes little boys need to use the restroom and unexpected weather can throw a hitch in the day. What this does to the film as a whole is give the sense that the events did not have to unfold the way they did, rather, they just happened to unfold that way. Bazin describes the rhetorical difference between the two as "a propaganda film would try to prove that the workman could not find his bicycle, and that he is inevitably trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty. De Sica limits himself to showing that the workman could not find his bicycle and that as a result he doubtless will be unemployed again. No one can fail to see that it is the accidental nature of the script that gives the thesis its quality of necessity." By removing the spontaneity from a film, the element that makes the thesis dynamic is also removed. However, I find the opposite can also be true. By including too much spontaneity in a film, the structure and organization that forms the thesis slowly disappears. Too much or not enough are equally harmful to a film's rhetoric, which returns to the theme that it is a matter of balance.

These two considerations, deconstruction of film language and “filmic spontaneity,” are the primary factors that revolutionized the Neorealist aesthetic of realism, but their implications extend to every element of the filmmaking process.

A Reminder on Realism:

From its beginnings, film has had a tendency to be received as realism. Audiences are inclined to believe the images before them. Back to the form’s origins, *L’Arrivée d’un train en gare de La Ciotat* remains the mostly widely known of the Lumière brothers’ “views,”¹² because of the story surrounding it; the film, which depicts a train pulling into a station, frightened viewers so badly that they ran from the theater to avoid being hit. There aren’t historical documents to corroborate the veracity of this story,¹³ but there is a truth that we recognize and find plausible. If that anecdote isn’t convincing, what do we tell children when they’re scared by a film? “Don’t worry, it’s not real,” is an expression that comes to mind. We have an inherent belief in images and have to be taught otherwise.

With this inclination to belief in mind, there are two important points to consider. Firstly, realism in film, or any other art form, is never reality; it is an imitation created through artifice. It is a reflection seen through a glass darkly. This becomes important as we translate neorealist ideas to modern documentary filmmaking, because it keeps in perspective where the filmmaker’s obligation to reality, or truth, lies. The second point, borrowing Bazin’s words on the subject, is that “Realism can only occupy in art a dialectical position—it is more a reaction than a truth.” What is the aggregation of these statements? Realism can only exist as an imitation that occupies a dialectical position. Not only can a realist aesthetic be used as an instrument of rhetoric, it is inherently, and unavoidable rhetorical. This is partially because when the significance of a film is derived from the subject themselves—rather than the filmmaking—it becomes an act of selection rather than an act

12 What they termed their one-minute, single-shot short films.

13 Which is interestingly textured as we talk of realism.

of creation. The question becomes, what is the filmmaker choosing to reveal and why? Zavattini, the only person who identified as a neorealist, understood this, and, of his scenarios, said, "I am like a painter standing before a field, who asks himself which blade of grass he should begin with." Zavattini had a theoretical vision for the movement that few others had.¹⁴ Zavattini is recorded as saying that his vision for a full realization of the neorealist movement would be a film showing 90 minutes in the life of a man in which nothing happens. In other words, Zavattini's dream would be documentary, probably a very dull one.

Approaching a Translation:

The hope for this proposal is to employ neorealist theory to outline a method for making more 'filmic' documentaries—documentaries that make greater use of the film form. For this to happen, a two-part translation must occur. First, theory developed for narrative films must be applied to documentaries, and second, it must be updated to a modern context, acknowledging the technological changes and other advances in filmmaking since Zavattini, De Sica, and Bazin. The style derived from this synthesis and translation of ideas will be denoted as narrative realist documentaries for their strict adherence to a realist aesthetic and their reliance on traditional narrative structure.

Subject:

There is no decision that impacts a film more than the choice of its subject. This is especially true here, considering that, if we are successful, the film's thesis will emanate at least partially from the subject. Filmmaker and critic Anderson Cowan has said that, given technical competence, the three elements that elevate a documentary

14 Including De Sica whose greatest contribution could be seen as faithfully interpreting Zavattini's material.

are subject*,¹⁵ access,¹⁶ and luck.¹⁷ I bring this up to illustrate an important point. While making a documentary in a realist aesthetic, the first two elements become intertwined and the third becomes irrelevant.

Luck no longer matters because high drama is not essential to narrative realist film. Often, it detracts. Consider *Bicycle Thieves*. Bazin calls it “a walk through Rome” which isn’t too reductive. The most dramatic events are Antonio’s bike being stolen or the confrontation between Antonio and the thief’s neighbors. Admittedly, the bicycle being stolen is the *raison d’être* for the entire film, but if the film were a documentary and the theft had not occurred, it would have continued to focus on Antonio’s relationship with the social and economic systems surrounding him. The relationship simply would have looked different.

Subject* and access are intertwined, but it would be better to rephrase and say that subject* is dependent on access. This is a function of having proper footage, amount and variety, to craft a narrative. The filmmaker should approach the project anticipating an extensive time commitment, not unlike that of an imbedded documentarian. In an earlier quote, Zavattini likened his writing to selecting which blade of grass to start with. The filming process is gathering blades of grass, and the filmmaker must make sure that their access allows them to gather sufficient blades to make a field. A film is written three times: in the writing, the filming, and the editing. A talking-head documentary has the benefit of interviews to do their initial writing. A narrative realist documentary does not, so it’s necessary to rely on the filming which brings about the question of coverage.

The Question of Coverage:

15 Here, defined as a subject that will be found engaging or compelling (asterisk to differentiate this definition).

16 The ability to spend large amounts of time with your subject or gain access to an environment or atmosphere that is not universally accessible.

17 A turn of events that could not have been predicted or foreseen that lends itself to a dramatic or engaging narrative. This element could be summed up as ‘right place, right time.’

The first consideration to appear on-screen is how should a subject be shot? Above everything, it is important to film your subject interacting with the system you wish to explore their relationship with. If *Bicycle Thieves* were a documentary, this would mean filming his interactions with the economic system, his work and his struggles to provide financially. These moments, incepted by the significance you're searching for, become the scenes from which you will craft the final film. If the 'when' is chosen correctly, the scenes will contribute to the thesis—a person functioning inside a system—so selection of which to choose becomes a matter of practicality, of forming a narrative with some of the traditional narrative elements: an inciting incident, plots points, and a resolution. This inclination toward traditional narrative is one of the primary ways that narrative realism separates itself from direct cinema. It's also a more practical thing to ask of modern audiences who become bored by "experimental" filmmaking,¹⁸ that is, if they didn't avoid it altogether. Perhaps the beauty of narrative realist documentaries would be that they don't push against the audience's "horizon of expectations" because no single element is unfamiliar. Everything is recognizable from either narrative or documentary films. The only progression is the order in which they've been combined.

As most readers will have anticipated at this point, after the overview of a realist aesthetic, subjects should be shot in a manner that allows them to generate their own significance. Proximity will often be full shots to medium shots. Close-ups are discouraged because of what they inevitably communicate. Another reason for increased distance is to reduce the impact of the camera as events unfold. This is not a school of cinema vérité, so filmmakers are discouraged from participating in or altering events. The beauty of this style of filmmaking is that the manner in which events unfold should have no impact on the thesis—you'll remember Bazin's quote on if Antonio had found his bicycle.

Capture events as they occur with all their objects of significance

18 It's strange that for the last thirty years, the genre of "experimental" films has remained fairly constant. How long before these films are no longer experiments? This is equally true if you prefer the term *avant-garde*.

in-frame. This will mean many static double or triple shots for conversations. Many filmmakers feel a sense of anxiety over this concept, and the solution is to rid your mind of the requirements of psychological editing. This has been the popular, and nearly only, school of editing for narratives for some time, but it's not the only option. The rhythm of shot/reverse-shot is an effective way to shoot a conversation. It creates a visual cadence that doesn't allow the eye to rest (i.e. become bored), but it's also a tool that allows films to become less concerned with their visuals and rely on dialogue. It's an effective crutch that rides that line between enabling and improving. Aaron Sorkin is among the best and wordiest living filmmakers, but what conversational device has become intertwined with his name? The walk and talk. He found a visual way to allow his characters to beautifully run their mouths.¹⁹ Conversations of this length and eloquence won't occur in real life, so it's best to keep conversation and dialogue limited. If you find yourself in the middle of a conversation that stretches but strikes you as important, some camera movement, a reframing, could be in order. This movement shouldn't be self-conscious—which is always evident—but should be thought of as a chance to recontextualize the subjects with their environment. Are they speaking in a factory? Pull back to reveal the work going on around them. Are they on a busy street? Reframe to emphasize the flow of traffic pushing by. Setting is so integral to narrative realist documentaries that even a conversation is rarely just a conversation. The subjects are allowed to generate their own significance, yes, but so is the space around them.

A Note on Interviews:

If this wasn't made abundantly clear, interviews should be excluded. If this is absolutely unavoidable for reasons of exposition and context—and we often need far less of these than we think we do—then the filmmaker has two options that strike me as the best remaining options. The first has the least precedent but is derived from the school of

19 Watch episode four of season one of *The West Wing* and tell me you aren't floored.

realism pioneered by Éric Rohmer in his six moral tales, and this is to conduct a formal interview and use the sounds bites as sparingly and condensed as possible in the form of “voice-over narration.” This is the more difficult option and would require interviewing prowess to prompt satisfactory phrasing. I also have concerns over how an audience would receive such a voice over, since this is more associated with narrative films. In documentaries they’re often limited to the third-person narration such as in the true-crime genre. This may be confusing or off-putting to an audience—a push for a “horizontal change”—but I find it to be the most satisfactory from a theory standpoint.

The other option is to conduct interviews on location, preferably while the subject is performing a routine action. Returning to a previous example, if they work at a factory, a filmmaker could interview them at their post.²⁰

After mentioning ways interviews might be integrated into narrative realist documentaries, I should reiterate that avoiding them is always preferable. There are other ways to collect expository information without interviewing. It’s done in almost every narrative film. Think back to the kinds of scenes where this happens. What tactics do they use? Oftentimes it’s something as simple as a character catching up with a friend or family member or explaining something to a stranger. This might not be the most filmic exposition,²¹ but it can be necessary, and both are events that occur in our daily lives, as you break down your day with a roommate, talk with friends or family members on the phone, or explain to a boss why you missed a shift. Exposition is quotidian. A filmmaker doesn’t need to orchestrate these moments. He simply needs to be there, and, in all likelihood, it will end up being a more personal and thematically relevant way to impart the information than a self-conscious subject groomed for an interview.

Technically inclined readers are by now bursting with anticipation

20 If your thesis revolves around setting’s impact on your subject, then it might be useful to do this at two different locations—such as at the factory working and at home cooking—to juxtapose their body language and tone.

21 Look to something like the opening shot of *Rear Window* for this.

for that side of the discussion. I imagine it will leave them disappointed. There has been a trend in recent years to fetishize camera technology, deifying advances that would be considered negligible by the consuming audience. The neorealist roots of narrative realism push against this mindset. Use what is practical. In this case that would mean use what is mobile and utile. With a realist aesthetic, the quality of your image often isn't the end all, be all. There are many cases of directors working in a school of realism opting for a less polished look,²² but I would urge filmmakers to try to make their film look as polished as possible until they have got the track record to prove a bouncy, grainy footage as a choice.

In summation, use what's available to capture large amounts of the clearest and smoothest footage manageable. This will mean something different to everyone, but the main point is that technology should not be a barrier in this school of filmmaking. A phone can work if used properly as an extension of theory. I apologize to the gearheads I've let down. If you have RED cameras and anamorphic lenses, please use them.²³

Capturing Sound:

Approaching sound should revolve around one central pillar; it should be captured much like it would be on a shoestring, narrative feature. It would be impractical to be followed by a boom operator for an entire shoot, considering the timeframe, mobility requirements, and wanting to minimize levels of intrusion. A person can get used to someone following them around; I'm not sure the same can be said for an entire film crew.

Film theorist C.G. Crisp writes that the elements of filmmaking are only useful insofar as they extend the bounds of film realism. Natural

22 Éric Rohmer chose to shoot *Ma nuit chez Maud* on 35mm film, a step back from the 65mm he shot his breakthrough film, *La Collectionneuse*, on two years earlier. It worked for the restrained narrative. Sean Baker made a similar choice when he shot his film *Tangerine* on three iPhone 5s.

23 Although there might be an argument that at a certain point, resolution and frame rates become hyperreal, and should be actively avoided in narrative realism.

sound is important to the texture of a narrative realist document; it helps to build a complete representation of reality. There's a tendency in modern documentary filmmaking to restrict sound, reduce it to the essential elements. Interviews must be conducted in perfect silence. This doesn't fit narrative realist aspirations. Sound shouldn't be reduced to the essential, but it should all be functional. Robert Bresson, in his book *Notes on the Cinematograph*, says that if there is sound, it must be music. He doesn't mean this in a literal sense. He means that the sounds should be unified in purpose. In this case, the purpose would be to further represent the subject's setting. What is their quotidian music? Is it the sound of competing televisions in their home? Is there a rhythmic clanking at their factory that they are subjected to for hours on end? A filmmaker must develop an ear for this sort of thing.

In the spirit of reducing the amount of equipment needed, a filmmaker should begin with their on-body microphone, or, preferably, upgrade to a high-quality shotgun microphone.²⁴ A shotgun mic alone will get a filmmaker surprisingly far if used effectively, but there's also the question of "dialogue," for which I revert to my earlier statement that sound should be captured like a shoestring, narrative film. Often, it will be most useful to place a lav on your subject, especially when you know an important discussion may take place. This could look many different ways, a meeting with their boss, a family dinner, etc. Another option instead of or in addition to a lav would be to place a field recorder discretely in frame amongst the speakers. Hidden is best, but, if that's not possible, if the screen is busy enough, most viewers won't notice or notice it for what it is.

Additional sound design, if included at all, should be as sparse and naturalistic as possible. Even a score should be thoroughly questioned before being added. Plenty of successful realist films have been made without music. It could be interesting to determine where a filmmaker might find diegetic music in the subject's life to see how this might

24 Filmmakers should prioritize high-quality sound over high-quality images. If the image is of a consistent quality, the eye adjusts rather quickly, while the ear has a more difficult time reconciling with poor sound. Proof of this lies in the microbudget films that have found broad success, narrative and documentary.

factor into the soundscape.

Editing/Writing/Construction/The Story is Revealed:

Editing is two thirds of “writing” a narrative realist documentary. This is where the story is discovered, and editing, or at least planning for the edit, will happen concurrently with filming. The reason for this is that it will give the filmmaker an idea of when to stop the filming process. There will be no abrupt end, unless you reach the death of your subject. Even then, the proceeding events would likely be of interest. In theory, one could spend their life tracking a single subject, crafting a documentary biopic, possibly similar in spirit to Linklater’s *Boyhood*. For most, this is not practical. A narrative realist shoot will already be longer than most; there’s no sense in stretching it to infinity.

Before the cameras can be put away, a filmmaker should have a rough idea of the beats of their story, and this is where I encourage filmmakers to begin seriously considering forming their film to a tradition structure. How can scenes be composed? Where do they start and stop? What transitions from one to the next? What are being presented as the turning points? How can events be presented for and dramatic effect?²⁵ This is where hard drives of footage become a film. It’s also where many ethical questions are raised.

What is the documentarian’s obligation to reality? It’s been established that a realist aesthetic is not a recreation of reality but an artifice that resembles it. Editing is the creation of this artifice, and this is done through its reshaping of time, a conversion from real time to filmic time.²⁶ There’s two parts to this conversion: ordering and

25 The use of the term dramatic effect here, in reference to the ordering of scenes, is derived from the one admitted weakness of the form. Even in a direct rejection of montage theory, one can’t completely avoid the variety of juxtapositions from which the audience derives significance. It has been buffed from the shot-to-shot movement of the film but continues on the scene level. Why has one scene been chosen to follow another when other option surely existed, etc. Aside from in Zavattini’s dream film—90 continuous minutes in the life of a man in which nothing happens—this is inevitable, so it’s best to be aware of the shortcoming.

26 Even in film communities this is often underdiscussed, however it is crucial. Hitchcock described it as: “The ability to shorten or lengthen time is a primary requirement

duration. Ordering should be simple enough. In the film, events should occur in the order in which they occurred. Not a very bold take but an essential one. To take it a step further, information should be revealed as it became known to the subject. Withholding information for the sake of tension is as culpable as reordering events. Inserts such as an establishing shot of a location which functions as a spatial reference that doesn't change over time, could be captured before or after-the-fact in good conscious, but the exceptions are few.

The matter of duration is a more involved discussion and is where real time and filmic time differ tremendously. The questions that's raised is how condensed do events/scenes become—condensed meaning both how long does an event last and how close events are in relation to one another. Both of these, especially the later, will likely be distorted from real time. The aspiration of a realist aesthetic is to limit this distortion. This requires deft handling by the filmmaker. To make an individual scene where real time and filmic time are perfectly equal, there would be no cuts, or, if the filmmaker had a multiple-camera setup, which is unlikely in most cases, it would cut between these perspectives without lost time between. If a narrative were constructed from scenes like this, it would be flooded with unnecessary and redundant information. I'll provide two examples, one visually based and one conversational. If a filmmaker wanted to show the variety of tasks a subject performed over the course of their shift at a factory, to do so in real time would take the duration of an eight-to-ten-hour shift. This scene could also be completed in a thirty second montage. The footage could also be used at interludes between events that happened over the course of the day. The struggle is to find a balance that aspires to and gestures toward real time while respecting the pacing and practical demands of filmic time.

For the next example, in traditional narrative films, a five-minute conversation would be considered long. It would have to be dense with information to justify its existence. Compare this to a five-

in film-making. As you know, there's no relation whatever between real time and filmic time."

minute conversation in the workplace. It's often three or so minutes of empty phrases followed by two minutes of vague importance. Real conversations aren't structured or economical like they are in narrative films. By having a strict adherence to real time in these conversations, a filmmaker will subject their audience to stretches without narrative importance. From a story viewpoint, these are "empty moments," and while they are certainly justified in a theoretical bubble, this bubble ignores the fact that films ultimately exist as the relationship they form with viewers. The purpose of this proposal is to outline a method for making documentaries that are more effective through their marriage of aesthetic and rhetoric, but, ultimately, the first step for a documentary to be effective is to not be turned off within the first ten minutes. Some concessions must be made for the audience. These are determined by the filmmaker's working knowledge of their target audience's "horizon of expectations" and what might be a push for a "horizontal change" too far. Needless to say, this is not an exact science, and it is often the mark of a skilled filmmaker to know how to push without pushing too far.

Case Study 1:

The first case study will look at an existing documentary and reframe how its production would have changed if it were conceived as a narrative realist documentary. For the sake of accessibility, *Free Solo* has been selected, one of the most widely viewed documentaries of recent years and an academy award recipient for Best Documentary Feature. For those who haven't seen the film, *Free Solo* follows rock climber Alex Honnold as he aspires to perform a free solo climb²⁷ of El Capitan in Yosemite National Park. It seems presumptuous to claim a film of such critical and popular acclaim would be improved by this method, but it would inarguably have shifted the emphasis.

What makes *Free Solo* an apt selection for a case study is that a good portion of the footage would be suitable for a narrative realist documentary. The filmmakers had intimate access to Alex Honnold.

27 A climb in which the solitary climber doesn't use ropes, harnesses, or other protective equipment.

They were in his van, on his climbs, and along on different press and social events. It seems likely that they could edit a narrative realist film with the footage contained on their hard drives. For the most part, the general structure of the film could be retained, depending, of course, on the chronology of when events were captured. Some scenes may need to be added or removed, especially near the beginning, once the interviews and their easy exposition are expunged. This is where one of the benefits of having Alex Honnold as a subject reveals itself; one quickly gets the sense that he rarely speaks about anything but climbing. If the filmmakers follow him for long enough, they are sure to get the material they need, especially through conversations with other climbers and press events, both being places where exposition of this variety is inevitable.

The climactic sequences of Alex's training and final climb would remain as is. The harrowing footage of Alex inside and around his van, the picture of a man sacrificing himself for his dream, would remain. Many of the pivotal moments between Alex and his girlfriend remain, so what is lost? Some of the scope and history of his accomplishment will vanish with the interviews. Some might argue that this becomes redundant over the course of the film anyway, as they hammer home a made point. Some of Alex's background would also be more difficult to include, along with the more technical aspects of mountain climbing. What is left and what is refined, is an image of Alex and the exploration of his need to overcome El Capitan. In other words, it becomes more concentrated to the present moment. It becomes the story of a man and his relationship to his environment which in this case is rather extraordinary. That is another point to be made, most of the examples to this point have been exceptionally quotidian, but ordinary and extraordinary alike have ways of fitting inside a narrative realist framework.

Case Study 2:

This second case study will function to demonstrate how the concept and framework for a narrative realist documentary might be inceptioned.

In recent weeks, I've been considering how the inherent problems of economic systems become more pronounced in underdeveloped countries because of how they fit into the global economy. As an extension of this curiosity, I began researching Haiti because it seemed to be the best cross-section of my interests and expertise. Something that struck me as interesting, was the way gender dynamics play into a family's financial outlook, especially if they are poor. In most places, there isn't access to free public education in Haiti—even though this is written into their country's constitution—so lower-class families often have a difficult time affording it. If a family has multiple children, it is common practice to pull one from school so they may work and provide a supplementary income so the other child/children may receive an education. As one, unfortunately, might expect, it is often the girls who are pulled from school so the boys may still attend. What happens later in life is that the uneducated women are unable to find better work than factory jobs, often in the textile industry, with wages they can hardly support themselves on, much less the education of a child, and so the cycle continues.

If a filmmaker was interested in documenting these conditions, and from a rhetorical angle, highlighting the helplessness of these conditions, the first step would be to book a ticket to Haiti, to a place like Delmas in the Port-au-Prince Arrondissement. Needless to say, there's no substitute for this in a narrative realist documentary. Once there, they'll need a subject. It would be helpful to have some leads or even a definitive choice before arrival. As tempting as it might be to turn the camera on an entire community, I'd urge filmmakers to center on a single person, a particularly apt representation of the entire community. For this example, I'd attempt to find a single mother who works in a textile factory and is trying to put a child or children through school in order that they might have better prospects than she herself has. I would want to be able to follow her inside her workplace. This access would play a large role in determining the subject and would require speaking to or negotiating with her employer beforehand. These considerations of access that can't be passed over.

Once this is settled, the filmmaker will be imbedded in the environment for some time, capturing the texture of their subject's life, especially as it pertains to the thesis. Hours and hours of footage will be gathered so it would be helpful—possibly necessary—to take copious notes about what occurred in each day's footage. Seeing this in writing will also help the filmmaker to think of the events as the building blocks for a larger narrative. Occasionally the turning points will be obvious. Perhaps the school requires an addition fee to be paid before the children may return to class.²⁸ The problem becomes more immediate. There's a question or tension that can be resolve, or not, within the bounds of the film; can the mother come up with the money required for her child's education? The rest of the film is an attempt to scrounge together fifteen or twenty dollars for the future of a child over the backdrop of her attaching the price tags onto sixty-dollar Levi jeans. The mountain proves nearly insurmountable. Does this take a toll on the mother or is she used to it? Does she expect this? Either way, the thesis is confirmed. The result is inconsequential. It's the rules of the game that the mother is forced to play that support the film's rhetoric. The rules are set, so revealing them becomes a matter of being present, being technically competent, and being aware of how the events will come together as a narrative.

Conclusion:

Narrative realism proposes a solution to the tendency of documentaries to be excessively literary and not make full use of "filmic expression." Grounded in theory and updated by time, the framework aspires to tell stories of setting and subject, using a realist aesthetic to back a visual rhetoric, an argument made in images. It's not didactic in a conventional sense, that has been stated and can be refuted. Rather, it allows subjects to generate their own significance which gives the "presentation of reality" its irrefutable quality. And to make the rest of the package worth anyone's time, this form of documentary, while progressive,

will be immediately understood and received, if not welcomed, by audiences because every progressive quality is recognizable from narrative films. In fact, a narrative realist documentary is at its most successful aesthetically—and therefor rhetorically—when it is visually indistinguishable from narrative films sharing in a realist aesthetic. In this way, it can be seen as an agreement and a culmination of the film form.

Parker Stenseth is an undergraduate student studying English, Economics, and French. He has a special interest in film, and is planning on pursuing graduate studies after this academic year.

Contributor Notes

Kylee Danks is a senior at UND, graduating in December 2021. She is majoring in Communications and Visual Arts with an emphasis on Painting. She has interned and worked at the UND Art Collections and has been involved in local art events and exhibits. When not working with the arts, she spends time with her dog, Casper, and enjoys the outdoors.

Casey Fuller is an English PhD student at the University of North Dakota.

Leah Noel Hanley is currently in pursuit of a Master of Arts degree in English at the University of North Dakota. Her writing focuses on the exploration of deeply human experiences, through which she hopes to inspire empathy across cultural boundaries. She also hopes to inspire conservation and preservation of our Earth through her use of natural subjects and landscapes. When Leah is not writing (or grading papers), she is likely cross stitching, cooking, or spending quality time with her loved ones.

Charles Henry is a second semester English M.A. student at UND, with interests in composition theory, sociolinguistics, and the early modern and medieval British periods. He received his undergraduate in English and Education at West Liberty University, where he also began his creative writing journey. His writings often deal with exploring the underside of the expected experience of language and examining the shifting forms and conventions of writing. Charles has lived all over the eastern U.S., originally growing up on a farm in the Ohio valley, and he

enjoys bringing those experiences into his writing.

Olivia Kost is currently a senior at the University of North Dakota, graduating this spring with a Bachelor's in both English and Secondary Education. She is originally from Bismarck, North Dakota and grew up with two loving parents and twin sisters, Abby and Amelia. She enjoys writing of the world around her, but with her own particular twist on things. Her time spent at UND has consisted of many Archives runs and taking naps in the Merrifield library.

Riley Macke is a nineteen-year-old Aviation student from Duluth, Minnesota. Riley loves the outdoors and spend most of his time hunting, fishing, or hiking. He also loves to write and has helped develop a plot for a published fantasy series.

Maria Matsakis is a UND grad student and teacher who writes poems in the notes app on her phone in her spare time. Constantly romanticizing life, she fully believes that life is about love and beauty and feelings, and she tries to capture that in her writing and live that in her daily life.

Becca May is a geology and environmental studies undergraduate student at UND. She is passionate about environmental mitigation and solutions and hopes to one day pursue a career in public policy for watershed management. In her free time, she enjoys caring for her three birds, baking various desserts, and learning culturally diverse recipes. She is an avid outdoor enthusiast that has summited two 14ers and Mt. Lassen. Her next destination is Mt. Whitney.

Grant McMillan is a former accountant who quit his job as an auditor to return to school for an MA in English Literature at Western Carolina University. He is now a second-year English PhD student here at UND and is constantly discovering new things to love about language and writing.

Hailey Narloch is a tired student here at UND who loves science fiction and fantasy in all of its forms.

James North is a student veteran majoring in Commercial Aviation with a minor in Leadership and Philosophy. James currently works as a flight instructor for the university. In his spare time, he enjoys writing science fiction, cooking, and walking his wiener dog Ollie. James is currently editing a science fiction novel which he has written with hopes of getting it published.

Delaney Otto is a Junior with a major in Communications and minor in English. She enjoys a variety of stories, though she has a preference for fantasy, magical realism, horror, and happy endings. She has a habit of starting stories and projects without finishing them and buying books but forgetting to read them. She's also a big fan of the moon.

Jona L. Pedersen grew up in Norway, but has since relocated to the US where they are pursuing English and biology at the University of North Dakota. Weaving contemporary culture with old myths, Jona's fiction and poetry unveil the spaces in between reality and dreaming. Passions such as wildlife biology, entomology, and environmental justice also inspire their writing. For more about their work, check out their Twitter (@JonaLPedersen) or website (www.jonalpedersen.com).

Aubrey Roemmich is a sophomore double majoring in English and Political Science. She plans on going to law school after graduating from UND. She hopes to work with intellectual property and copyright law. Her hobbies include reading, writing, and listening to music.

Parker Stenseth is an undergraduate student studying English, Economics, and French. He has a special interest in film, and is planning on pursuing graduate studies after this academic year.

Julia "Jay" Tietz is a third-year English major with a Spanish minor.

She aspires to one day be an English professor and publish a book of poetry. The majority of Jay's poems are inspired by nature, spirituality, mental health, and last (but not least) the feeling of love. In addition to poetry, Jay is an avid animal lover and is intrigued by the understanding of auras and energy. She loves to spend time with her friends and family, oftentimes singing, playing, or listening to music.

Karissa Wehri was born and raised in Grand Forks, North Dakota. She has always been interested in other cultures and moral viewpoints, and she uses her writing to explore these themes. She plans to use UND's Study Abroad program to expand her knowledge for even more stories!

Floodwall



Kylee Danks
Casey Fuller
Leah Noel Hanley
Charles Henry
Olivia Kost
Riley Macke
Maria Matsakis
Becca May
Grant McMillan
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Delaney Otto
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