

RAINY DAY

Volume XLIX, No. 1 / Spring 2019

Dear *Rainy Day* reader,

Thank you for picking up our Spring 2019 issue! We're excited to continue to bring you the best undergraduate fiction from across the country, as we have been doing since 1969 as Cornell's oldest literary magazine. In the 50 years since our founding, great changes have occurred in the world of fiction and poetry. The literary scene has exploded with brand new voices, experimental styles, and new questions about what it means to write in English. Young writers especially are spearheading these changes, and expanding the way we think about literature and poetry.

In this issue, you'll find classically beautiful images, experimental structures, intricate narrative voices, and much more. These talented young authors, even as they are just starting their careers, are already pushing boundaries and redefining writing. Please enjoy these works, and we hope they inspire and challenge you in the same way they did us.

I'd like to thank the *Rainy Day* staff and editorial board for their continued dedication to producing this magazine and maintaining its quality. I could not wish for more capable hands to leave this publication in. I would also like to thank you, our readers, for continuing to value this magazine and the authors featured in it. This is my final issue with *Rainy Day*, and I am eternally grateful for my time with the magazine. I have learned so much, and look forward to reading what the next 50 years of *Rainy Day* have in store. Happy reading!

All the best,
Audrey Marek
Editor in Chief, *Rainy Day*

RAINY DAY

an independent student publication

Volume XLIX, Issue No. 1

Spring 2019

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5'3

Justine Ramos

I am 5'3"

towering over Filipino boys like the *Burj Khalifa*
making me an undesirable selection to preserve their pride.

I am 5'3"

too big, too bulky
My family says, "When I was your age, I was petite!
Light enough so that men could swallow me whole.
So I can be safe in the pits of their inflated bellies
that matched their inflated pride.
I was small enough to be wanted,
to be an appetizer for their patriarchal hunger."

"While you," they mock, "you are too big to fit into their mouths.
You rip through their arrogant intestines.
You are not weak enough. You must be weak enough."

But I am 5'3" and I know two things

1. My body is too big for my dwarfed confidence.

But, 2. The tallest building in the world is not the *Burj Khalifa*, 2,722'.

It is me.

5'3" and unable to be swallowed whole.

WHITE SOUTHERN WOMAN

By Julia Byrne

You speak French.
You learned to draw.
You float and perch and hasten.
You don't know a thing about the mob last night.
You pat children you don't raise and host tea you don't make.

You're good at it because there's no necessity.
You have plenty of help. Plenty of the help.
You're an artist
Because they are practical.
You're an expert
Because they're professional.

You sit like the lilies in the drawing room, pale fabric blooming like ink in
water
Like other things in water
You laugh and flowers loop from your dancing needle. In and out, up and
down, a flash of quick steel and another bud flounces.
Paint woven valleys over petticoats, handkerchiefs,
Daisy chains through thin linen cuffs
You have the smallest, primmest stitches in the county
Your vowels sashay open, your ankles click closed.
Your monograms could hold water.

So your husband knew just who to come to when he needed something
special.
Something the maids shouldn't touch. Something with challenging angles,
odd hemlines that nobody else could get just right.

Did they give you a pattern?
Who?

Was there a sewing circle for y'all to gossip over?

Did you buy new cloth?
Did you iron it for him the evening before?

Did a black woman starch it alongside his Sunday best?

It doesn't matter.

All that matters

Is that your husband's hood is the only one in town

With his initials embroidered neatly in the corner.

And when he brings it back, stiff with rust brown stains, lye soap makes it white
and clean again.

You don't concern yourself with the world of men.

You don't concern yourself.

Does hanging laundry remind you of anything? As the bed sheets billow in the
soft breeze and one odd shape catches the wind like a cup, like a sail, like a breath.

Does your heart beat faster when you hear gospel chanting?

At least he's not going to any cheap open legs, cheap open houses.

At least he's doing something with his time.

You eat peaches and grow strange fruit.

Stitch flowers and sew suspicion.

You squeeze a lemon into sugar water and the first drop is dark.

You are lovely and complicit

How many threads are in a rope?

Strands that lend their strength because they'd rather not fuss by breaking?

Because what really changes?

Because you don't mind another load of laundry?

What would it take to fray your stitches, to split your seams, to weaken your
flowers? What would it take to pull the loose ends back through all the careful punctures
you've made?

But flounce all you like.

Because we will not forget you.

Because one day, a girl who looks like you will find your work and know
the neat

White

Stitches

On the clean

White

Sheet

Certainly weren't sewn by your husband.

PREMONITION

By Talia Green

Last night I dreamt
we were hosting a dinner -
both of our hands caked with
uncooked food and
thinning time -
I baked bread
as the kitchen clock jabbered
like an inlaw,
and when I reached for the cinnamon,
the bottle slipped from my hands
and fragmented on the floor.

And when I looked up to you
you were unfamiliar;
like I thought I followed the recipe right
but your skin was singed -
your perfume curdled,
souring the inside of my nose.

Today when I reached across the sink
to brush my teeth,
my elbow hit the porcelain bowl
that held your makeup,
and it fell to the floor, fragmented -
your blush like dried blood
against the ceramic tile.

ANTIGUAN SUNRISE

By Talia Green

Your eyes, they peak behind your shoulder blade
 like how dawn assaults the Antiguan sky:
 no peaceful still, no morning colors cascade,
 just haste incandescence, absorbing all shade -
 downpour your sunlight on my naked eye

and I will struggle then to see you clear.
 I'll stare until I've counted all your lashes,
 fixate on that phosphorescent sphere
 until those garish white spots disappear
 until we've burned the daylight down to ashes.

And if my vision fades before the night,
 I pray your eyes had been my final sight.

THE IMPLEMENT

Tyler King

In the late spring of 1909 I received a letter from an old university friend, Henry Whitlock. Though we hadn't corresponded in a handful of years—in truth, since I had secured my current position at The Metropolitan—I trusted him completely, as I knew him to be as sober and discerning as myself, traits one needed in a field fraught with fakes like ours. In his letter, he explained that he had been touring the Middle East when he heard rumors of an antiques dealer in Constantinople who possessed, with a verifiable written provenance, the “implement” (his word) by which every masterwork of Greek, Roman, and Renaissance sculpture had been made; he had it on good authority that this implement had been passed from one master to another, through the ages, before becoming lost to history and then resurfacing in the old Roman capital. The letter was brief, but Whitlock indicated excitedly that he personally had confirmed the reality of the tool, owned now by an aged Muslim man known as Irfan ibn El-Amin. What's more, he wrote, it is said that whoever uses the tool gains the knowledge and skill to use it as the old masters did—to create works such as theirs. He wanted to know, was I interested in seeing this as well?

This was all quite normal as far as letters I received went: rumors of a temple unearthed on Mykonos said to belong to a mysterious cult; a new language found on a tablet uncovered on the banks of the Euphrates; and so on, those sorts of things, always phony, always from some past acquaintance hoping I could help shine the light of glory on them. But this was different, both because I trusted Whitlock and because there was apparently proof of its legitimacy.

As I reread the letter in my office my mind began to swell with thoughts of an ancient chisel, handed from Myron to Praxiteles or Polykleitos or even Epigonus, then on to the unnamed Roman masters who served Caesar, and on and on, until it rested in the palm of Michelangelo and who knew who else? Imagine having such a tool in the museum, beside the perfect forms it carved! Of course I was interested; I wrote back straight away, announcing I was on my way and telling him to try not to arouse too much interest around the tool lest the dealer realize the true worth of what he held. I put myself on the next steamer out of New York to San Sebastian, then traveled through the French countryside to Genoa by rail, where once again I boarded a ship, this time bound directly for Constantinople.

Thus in less than two weeks I found myself in the Ottoman capital, a strange and unfamiliar city, packed thick with people from all over the Mediterranean. I made my way to the interior, to the address my friend had sent his letter from. I found my destination was a squat two-story inn with an open courtyard in the

middle, in which a dog slept away the afternoon. The proprietor, who gave his name as Hazim, wore a turban and spoke no English. I know no Turkish, so I tried first Spanish, then German, neither of which he understood; finally we settled on French, through which I managed to ask about Whitlock. In halting, unsure phrases he told me he was unaware of anyone by that name having stayed at his inn. I told him Whitlock had likely come to visit Irfan ibn El-Amin, an antiques dealer. At this Hazim brightened. He offered to take me to Irfan as soon as I was ready. I put my bags away, changed into fresh clothes, and gathered into a satchel a bit of money, some identification from the museum, and a set of magnifying glasses.

Hazim didn't take me far, and at first I thought he had taken me to the wrong place. Outside the building was a courtyard littered with old pottery and the remains of broken statues. A few were missing only arms or heads, but most lay in pieces, some half-buried in the dirt. After confirming it was the correct place, I thanked Hazim with a coin and told him not to wait for me. Once inside, I found the place to be more of a junk shop than an antique store. Old vases, chairs, lamps, and all other manner of detritus rose and fell in mounds along the walls. At the back there was a counter, where Irfan stood, watching me across a labyrinth of unwanted desks, bureaus, vanities, and *étagères*. Unlike Hazim, he understood English perfectly. He remembered Whitlock; I'd missed him by a few days, but he'd told Irfan I was coming.

I asked if he still had the tool my friend had mentioned. He said yes, but wanted to know why I called it a tool. I asked him what a better word would be, but he only shrugged. I asked to see it, so he retreated into a back room and brought back out a hatbox and a pair of books. One book was vellum, bound between two slats of rough wood and filled with Greek; the other was thin, brittle paper bound in cracked leather and contained only Latin. I leafed through them but learned nothing other than that they were extremely old. When I moved to open the hatbox, Irfan stopped me. He asked if Whitlock had not told me the nature of the item. He told me to always use a mirror, and produced from behind the counter a rather dirty one, which he placed on the hatbox. He told me to take everything and go. I didn't understand at first; I tried to offer him money, but he only grew agitated, so at last I took the unopened hatbox, the ledgers, and the mirror back to the inn.

After thanking Hazim again for his help, I took the hatbox to the inn's center courtyard, where the sunlight was still good, and then pulled the mirror from my satchel. The dog that had been sleeping there earlier was now awake, and watched me from a distance with its head cocked to one side. With one hand I held the mirror vertically in front of me. The hatbox I held at an angle between my knees, and with my other hand I lifted the lid. The dog whined as I raised the lid, and in the mirror's reflection I saw why: in the box was a head, its leathery skin drawn taut over the skull; the brittle remains of snakes laid broken along the velvet bottom of the box. I recognized the meaning of the word "implement" immediately; I knew the irony of Perseus immortalized in stone, holding aloft the dripping head of Medusa. I admit

my hand trembled, both with fear and with understanding, and I dropped the mirror in the dirt. By the time I realized what I'd done and finally closed the box, the dog was already white marble, a beautiful and immaculate likeness, eternally curious and afraid—my first masterpiece.

THE WEST WAS WON BY STARLIGHT

Ryan Varadi

Before there was anything
 before that great expulsion of energy and sound
 before the nude descended
 the staircase, there were only two
 figures, frigid and shivering in the silver light
 of shadowed skyline. And in the night like worms
 they writhed together in negative-entropy:
 staring at gaseous galactic smatterings
 on the ceiling, gazing through
 telescopes turned towards blank walls.
 And no one knew what it was, until it began.

A GOOD BLUFF

Hannah Grace Gruebmeier

she says, can you taste it, the choir
singing, singing, engulfed by the
yellow light. the girl says, the
church loves homosexuals, even,

Is out here to hurt you, even for
the softness of her footsteps,
the cabin floor, the fog, lowers and
a crescendo on her lower back.

she says, this is not of your blood,
of your people, I remember
The careful way my grandfather
pushes into the soil,

a revelation of god, he is
believed in the softness, a creator,
the sweetness of the tomato crushed
whole, she says, I did not know I

cut the sinuous skin while
a thumb meets a forefinger. This,
a lilting melody for the ancients,
this, a story written before, this,

flowers thrown for the sake of it,
an unspeakable sin,
feel the body writhe, in the new,
The light; trapped by more time, now

the juice out of honeysuckles,
entire mouths around half
Of the grapefruit, claim, holiness
Now god reports to no one, creates

the length of her toes, they say, do you taste
that, love, curling into the soft places between.
they say, her love, viscous and brilliant,
say, a gift, darling –
a cracked ribcage is

consumed by sin, even for the twisted
way they break their bodies, this a
choice, handed, shattered, the plaster
in your skin, sin, stop, this world,

the bodies, not unlike rain,
a futile form of reaching, yearning,
we should take the earth with us, a body
In stars, a face in the sides of a cliff.

the way he kissed my forehead, now,
a lesson in poker,
convinced me of brilliance, a light
surges into the screened in porch,

worried about you, and how the sky
fell, and the blue coffee cup shatters,
in my hand, the blood revealed,
had years, caught between my legs,

the thunderstorm watched, now
the wind chimes, an echo of a place
we used to be, we never were,
a slow waltz in the back of the chapel,

wrap your fingers around the bulbs
buried, deep, hold, life springs
in the ugliest of places, god loves me,
finds the body, whole, she imparts

miracles for the hell of it,
the freckles on the girl's arms, the curve
of the other girl's breast, says, this, truth
holy word, in the sturdiness in knuckles,

the type of hate that could kill you,
gun in mouth. feet over the fire escape,
pills in hand, type of hate,
back again and again. now,
teeth in the right light.

ESSAY ON GENDER MEANT TO BE READ ALOUD

Hannah Grace Gruebmeier

girl, you call her, before she can form the heavy metal
of it in her mouth for good, for infinity.
girl always.
girl, like an exhale, like a rallying cry, like here, is the breast,
stomach, neck, throat, see it? call it
girl and watch her rise and fall. drown. if we let her.
girl, like swarm, like pink, like the red of who we once were.
girl before she wrote it herself, before she lived it herself. so I will
wake up one day and find my love switched bodies.
now, softer, more full, and yes, I will worship how
her body curls into mine, in the morning, in middle
of the day, sun like intruder, sun like villain. an exposure
all the way up. and yes, I will worship (how)
her hands search
for my hands, praise
them finding my thighs
in the darkness. worship from worthy, hands from man herself,
like protector, like guardian, hands as the way to the soul.
 so I will wake up one day in every place I wasn't supposed
 to be, the backseat of the car with the hands like violence, now
girl, in the middle of the street like madness, eyes twist upwards like
salvation, like conversion, like exorcism. say, you sent us away
for our twisted love, knew our gender so well you beat it out of us
in the streets. so I hand over my femininity like bruised
apple, and you hand it back devoured, rotten, like the inside

of your stomach. so I leave my throat in the offering plate.
the veins and vocal cords splayed out like violence, say,
girl, no money for the sick & starving, but six hundred grand
to siphon our sanity into pools of holy water. and
girl, forget what your mother told you. the saved are here
for blood, and she, for lightness,
for flying, so wake up darling and never fall asleep (therefore dream)
again, lest they say you can, lest the desires turn sour like milk, and
girl, remember the morning before, how the light in the village
warmed the red flowers on the side of the streets,

remember stonewall, remember bash their fucking heads in,
remember the beauty of her body and

remember the first time, and blood, but righteous regardless.

girl, remember, a stomach rises and falls, the quiet miracle of
her breath.

girl, come home, the drenched hills, the promised sun of east
atlanta, of pigneto, the river arts district at dusk. hands,

settled, knotted, together, and the delicate beauty of youth,
and now, light. floods in.

POTATO BAKE TODAY!

Alexander Schaef

Potato bake today! Athletic jeans for sale at the mall! And we all experience trauma in different, convoluted ways. “It’s virgin oil season!” exclaims the homeless-bodega-corner-man. So then it’s something of a fluid nature, right, so everything’s a thing, right? Okay. The wide blue vault that is my chest is a squalid fowl, that’s me, and turbulence, and virtue. These things are hopeful. This town is great. Fuck you.

So I kick the door dark-shut behind me, latch that and passkeys clangor, condo’s still. And I construct a wonder! Pulling from three polyester sacks: two long, horizontal lines of the ingredients I’ll use to make the “best baked potato of all time.” Country Living says: “simple yet elegant, creamy yet zippy... and it packs a sturdy punt!” I don’t subscribe to this particular literary concoction, but I do surreptitiously swipe a few magazines from the dentist waiting room each visit. And I papyrus my thumbs through the colorful pages, rub my pointer along the rim of a sour cream carton. I inhale deeply into a baggie of minced garlic, flick at some slippery salt granules emerging from the carafe, and twist off the sexy cap on a bottle of blue wine. So fuck you. These things will get your summer party rockin’, and will also get you laid! the magazine told me. I cherish the moments, dissecting the recipe section, over a tall glass of dry Gewurztraminer, like a housewife on crack, as if I’ve known a darling of my own, as if I’ve got the capacity to savor a thing or three about cooking. I do not. So now I smile, and pour a chalice full.

The phone screen lights up. Buddy Johnny, down at the docks, rings me for the sixth time since noon, begging me to hop on his raft, and just float off. It’s become a biweekly incidence; he entices me, worships this new boat of his, The Hurricane. I imagine popping Proseccos as we zoom off at sunset, to a bar on an island, maybe. He says there’s the freshest fruit and the skimpiest bikinis on a strand upstream. Oh really, Johnny? I get the sense that suffering and masochism, respectively, have delivered us to our unwonted circumstance, and I finally find the motivation to reply.

not in that kinda mood today man, sorry, I’m sure you understand, man...
next week I’m down!

Send.

So what? Friends, to me, are turkey vultures, crazy hungry, and I’m the massive, decaying, fly-covered heap of meat. A healthy creature once, maybe, now laying with gnarled head in crotch. Beaks peck deeper and deeper into this unrecognizable skin. And that’s me.

My friends are cool though. They love to hate me. And usually I love it too. They tell me I’m whatever, saying, this is insane, are you sure you’re okay, I

mean, whatever makes you happy bud. I say, it is what it is, still shooting tongues and looks of disapproval (but also pleasure, somehow, there's always pleasure), and slapping my ass in the smooth, hot sand. But really, I'm down for the count, I tell them, and on the far counter's a half-eaten banana, and an ovalar, silver bowl, which, up until quite recently, held the house's chipmunk pet, Rusty, as he rotted to slush. "Oh boy," I remember yawping into the empty house, "the neighbor's Toyota's done it again..." And for once, we all feel fine about it. We meaning me and the voice in my head that originally told me to trap a wild chipmunk and teach him to front flip. Rusty died before he ever could. It's sad, actually. But maybe the reason I feel so yellow about the whole shebang is that the murderer himself is a beautiful soul. A bearded Turkish man, with dazzling, brick eyes, like zircon ore or the twilight itself!

This angel, the man who turned dear Rusty to a bloody pancake, has been real good to me since I moved in. Now and then, on raw, reclusive nights, he calls to me from behind a broken attic window. He's in his chamber, reading Shakespearean sonnets aloud, flooding the sleepy streets with nuance and fantasy. His growly voice carries swiftly towards my own. All the elements are here, and sometimes I get the feeling he controls them. He speaks, and a billowing gust whooshes. He smiles, and some road lamps flicker. And both our gardens sway to it! Wet fragrances of petunia and pink and purple lilies massage my pallet, and in that instant, I think I'm his.

I still remember that crystal moment: I finish peeing, he steps out the shower, and we stare ourselves down through the mirror. Small and big, hairy and smooth, we looked like aliens that night, critters of the light. And we laughed! And we laughed as if we could cry, as if we would die, soon, like that Hollywood happiness we've all seen on screen, like love might actually be. And I surprised myself because I wasn't looking at me at all. I only saw him, with his beautiful everything, and nothing mattered. So there you have it. And yes, we fought once. Yes, we fight. Once, I said I'm sorry for having a voice. And he took it bad. Once, I said I'm not okay. And he continued washing the dishes like I hadn't said a thing. Still, I miss him. It may not be glitter and giggles always, but I really do.

So whatever. Neighbors need to know each other's issues, ins and outs, their uses, that's just common sense. So I'm remembering now, now's a memory: I untangle the limbs of another man sleeping next to me, make quiet breaths as I recall the escape. I crawl out of my trousers, out the window, down two flights. My feet catch hold of the blueberry vines whose dense canopy keeps me from slipping. The berries' blue juice leaks between my fingers and down my arms as I squeeze each rootstock rung. Once on land, I scamper across the street and use his finely-grafted ropes of common hibiscus to repeat the process in reverse. I ascend three stories, up to the broken window. The light is on. He's waiting.

Sometimes, when the grass is gooeey with frost, my feet squeak on the bedroom's polished floors. His head will turn sharply towards me, practically a full circle. I know always he's happy to see me but it's terribly difficult to tell. He'll whisper aggressively. "Don't wake Uncle Bern!" Bern's not really his uncle, and I'm

not exactly positive how he acquired the title, but he's lived on the first floor of that house for forty-plus years, shamelessly selling drugs through the backyard dormer to minors and their parents. Every sink in the house brims frantically with empty prescription bottles. I've heard people say that drugs heal minds, and for most of my years I've wondered if they could heal mine. But now I stand corrupt and corrected, because drugs are what damaged me in the first place, right?

So anyways, I slide as an eel into the attic. We bird dance and kiss and flutter. We swell beneath the sheets, his spider lamp twinkling, Paris poster peeling, breathing, heavily, until we're full. Oh, we put on such a show! Or used to. Three and a half months gone by since our last. It feels like eternity. And here I am – melancholy, miserable, gelled and drooping. Me.

In the daylight, I pretend we're grocery shopping. And I pretend people enjoy the sound of silence, like maybe nothingness is enough, or the empty air holds its own sort of passion, or its screaming, depending, sometimes crickets and occasionally toads. In general, they do not. All they do is talk. So all I do, all I can do, is listen. Hear and I hear and I listen and I nod, and the pain grows, more and more, drowning a different part of me every minute. I'm a great companion, and a great pretender, which is why nobody knows the degree to which I die. Can't say I've ever been okay, but I say I cannot stay to play today, my apologies, and confront my sorrows alone. And still, above all, I can't say where my head's been at, recently, I don't know. But I do know that my hands get covered in dirt during the day (and ants and dill and dust from the vacuum hole), and at night they're waxed with small rings, gin and soda, a variety of lubricants, maybe. The tendency to keep intimacy secret is overbearing, there's just no right way to put it, I explain, because deep down I'm paralyzed by fear. It's this uneasiness and dread, of love mostly, and the idea that someone might love me, for good, that keeps me in darkened shackles. Certainly, there are brief moments here and there. I'll confess a sin or two, then close back up, tight as dogwood. But every other word's overlooked. And so I have no choice, I continue to survive alone.

I tell the homeless-corner-man exactly what I do when my mind's wasted with this burdensome bulk, or when my body's pulsing with bad blood, and I'm naughty. He pulls a shiny, ebony business card out his torn polo pocket, and mumbles about a mind healer. "There's help," he wheezes. I bite my bottom lip, tuck a five-dollar bill into his blouse, and walk quickly home. I tear the card to pieces over my kitchen sink later that night.

So, anyways, there's that, and here's this: why can't I be looked at the way I used to? I mean sweetly, excitedly, like a match being dropped into a pool of whimpering ethanol, and having the feeling of summer burn intensely inside a ribcage that's never felt so terrifically uncertain. So terribly free... and gentle too. Where a tiny torpedo pulls a plug and a brilliant potion is drained, I am left gooey, as a thick bubble of smoke dissipates. Too free? Too wild? I don't know. But also, poor Rusty, that adorable motherfucker! I wish I could give a darn. I wish I didn't keep

his mangled body around for as long as I did. Why was your head the only part that wasn't crushed by Turkish man's tire? So much to contemplate there, as well as over there. Where the hell is the other half of that banana?

I'm scrubbing potatoes with a brand-new toilet brush, one with sparkly twirls along the handle. My belly gurgles. I refuse to eat shit tonight. A lady from a few doors over struts by my window, holding a leash with a poodle and an iced cappuccino. Her muddy eyes have aged I see, as they squint beneath a shantung sun hat. I twirl some wooden spoons in a salad bowl, acting busy 'til she's out of sight. Not everyone needs to see my shenanigans, spiraling out of control, my self-destructive cloudburst. At least not all of them.

So now, as I lay the potatoes out on a long sheet of parchment paper, I find a dusty, old memory, from the depths of my mind, to feast upon. This time, it happens to be all the things my parents told me not to do, what not to indulge myself in. And of course, I have pounced upon each with joyful anticipation over time. Yeesh! So it's me, sitting naked and embarrassed, on the edge of my bunk in sixth-grade. And it's me, slouching in the doorway, with red eyes and liquor breath, after a tenth-grade bender. And it's me in college, in the ER, with my foot wrapped up and my voice all crackles. And it's so much more.

I must admit, today, as in throughout this period of my life, I am not entirely free. I mean, sure, I do what I want. I am what I want. Because isn't wanting what keeps us above murky water, right? Someone must've said that. Whatever. And I no longer go out of my way to have fun. Why go out when you can get drunk alone? I need to exist and that's all, I explain, out of spite, mostly, or to potentially see my grandchildren smile, and then suffer the way I have. And it's fucking hard. It's so fucking hard and nobody talks about it. And I'm having a potato bake-off just to emphasize that it's fucking fucked and I'm fucking making sure the invitation list is my name and my name only. I pour another glass.

In times like this, preparation's key, so I've sprinkled some powders in the Jacuzzi, even lit a large, multi-wick, pine-scented candle, for later, of course. I'm wearing my jorts, and boy do they hug my ass cheeks like no man ever could! These jorts are the same ones papa's second wife hand stitched her initials, P.O.O., on the back of before presenting them at Easter dinner, and realizing they're three sizes too small. Too small for him, anyways. So yeah. I plan on throwing up my hands approximately two times throughout the evening, once in glee, with the reappearance of an ice cream truck that plays smooth jazz on its downtown route, there's nothing like a few seconds of groovin' saxophone around dinnertime to really make you think about what your life could have been, and once in anger, when I spill a glass of Chianti on the carpet and the cat tries to lick it up then vomits all over (this has never not happened). Oh, and I'm covered in a blend of olive and coconut oils. I try to look less like a frosted flake, meaning white man shoulders and chesty-hair in the vicinity, like no more blinding, raw flesh, and look more like a totem pole, whatever that means... Hell yeah, I like the outdoors; my honey knows that. I like to stay

slippery too, my honey knows that. He'll say you dirty puppet, you filthy mutt, and he'll be gone on business for the next three days or so. So yay!

Oh, my sweetie. He loves it when I talk crazy, he calls my potty-mouth a tease. I tell him that impulsivity's great, and the craveful body's a golden gift, not to be twiddled with or twat (I've never actually said that). I am human, yes, but I am not alive, I say to him before breakfast sometimes. And I mean it. At least, I don't know, I guess I don't feel alive, most of the time. And that doesn't mean I feel dead, oh definitely not, but I often imagine myself gliding through this bewildering intermediate, on a surface of jam, just crumbling to bits and bits. Like, what are feelings anyways? A punch in the groin? A kick in the teeth? I often feel like reality's merely an option, and fecundity's a behind-the-scenes sorta thing, like barely a burden, if you know what I'm talking about. "So explain that!" I say, when what I actually want to say is you don't need to explain, please stop talking, just sit, sit long and hard on it, sit on it forever, then tell me you've never felt more grey. Because I'm fucking dying here. But no worries. Laugh out loud! Carry on.

But actually, I hold my tongue the way I hold a body, or a boiling bisque, and I try to meditate alone, around brunch, in silence. I think goodbye my beautiful trauma, hello morning glories, and I'm mourning a future self, focusing too hard on questions that have no answer! As I age, however, I find that maybe there really are some answers, just not ones that can be expressed in words, and certainly not the kinds I've been wanting to hear. It's so difficult, and more times than not it's all my goddam fault, right?

A ghostly quietness engrosses the entire house. Sigh. "Are you ready to start potato-ing?" I ask the empty kitchen. Nods all around. I preheat the oven to 435. My body begins to bubble with thrill and rage. I want to scream louder than I ever have, I want to break holes in all the walls and all my bones, but I don't. I pull up a stool, take a bite of banana, and watch the oven's temperature rise, one digit at a time.

FOREBEARS

Katarina Pavlidis

waves come in sevens—
a neat
descrescendo.

there lay coves undis[covered
in vibrating groves of anemones
and urchins that adore close
quarters]

ECHO AND EXALT

Katarina Pavlidis

Sprawled out like cats
 in rusty pre-sunset heat
 we wave/red, like
 jostling rhododendrons in
 drawling lonian wind
 against azure roars of
 water, tunnel, home.

Then love:
 not a succumbing
 but a coming home
 into lulling cradle,
 loose-wristed baptism,
 summer-salting union,
 ebullient
 ab[sol]ution.

FALL

Ben Papsun

Spry as mice
Not yet as clever as foxes
Two boys race through the autumn bluster
To see who can outrun winter the longest.
Laces unfurl, and entangle—

The leaves jolt up to meet him
The leaves and the concrete
Leaf, concrete, denim, and lace
United in one substance by gravity
And the wind and the sun and the moment
A moment forever lost
When the boy's friend offers him a hand
And he redoes his laces
And he gets back on his feet
And he pretends that he does not know
that he has lost the race for both of them .

THE BALLAD OF T.S. MONK

Ben Papsun

He knew
that his ideas would make him
the loneliest one
in the loneliest art
but he persisted.

He knew
the sanctimonious thunk
of a Bible
but he worshipped at the altar of freedom.
He cast away the false idols
of harmonious junk.

His God was an angle, an elephant, two left hands,
a liberator in the lands where the
chained euphonious slunk.

On the day of his death
a budding jazz pianist, only nineteen
calls his mom
on the phone; he is drunk
with emotion, and says through tears:
“He gave so much, and had so much more to give,
and I would give anything,
I would give all!”

all
for Thelonious Monk.

WHAT I AM

Isabella Bruzzese

I am the desert god's bastard daughter,
the warmth left in these red stucco walls
after the sun sinks beneath the mountains.

This is what I am,
a mass of root-circuitry that runs beneath borrowed skin
like lily stems under water.
Or the root hair itself
pointing hungrily into the soil.

I am the pause before thunder
after lightning threads the dark bruise of the sky.

As the self-sufficient only child,
I am meant forever to hold my own hair back when I vomit.

There is a careful map on my body
of where all color has fallen away,
as the pigment on my knees and elbows saw the face of God
and ran.
I am afraid of where that leaves me.

I am the old woman at the bottom of my teacup,
and these dregs are far too bitter.

I am as unknown as
the beautiful spines of books standing upright, expectant
in the deep underground chambers of the library.

I am you,
standing naked at the edge of the water asking,
"Oh God, what am I?"

SEX DREAMS ABOUT BARISTAS

Isabella Bruzzese

In the violent mouth of the afternoon,

I can hardly tell the difference

between a dream

& drinking something hot.

The milk is thick here,

sour at the edges &

the apron he wears says his name but doesn't say

how last night he entered my brain, pulling

the entire room behind him.

Faded red tiles & velvet curtains,

mismatched chairs & floor lamps,

the dark smell of his wooly hair as he

drew me aside &

I gave myself without asking.

His face was the trunk of an elephant,

curling & uncurling in the dim light

of the doorway &

he could hardly stand the feel of me.

It didn't last long--

my legs flung open like a window

to my childhood:

At seven,

I knelt in a museum, praying

to the mounted head of a buffalo

as if I knew, then,

that it was sacred.

YOURS TRULY, FLEA MARKET BABY

Briana Campbell

I can buy anything at the flea market,
dried poblano peppers by the box full and tires
with treads so thin, they're not even worth buying and
if I'm lucky, the man who sells the tires will
sing me a bad cover of some classic rock song,
his toothless smile happy to be heard for once
by the boiled p-nuts and Frito pies in the next booth.
I can buy cherry red cowgirl boots, hand-sewn
and belt buckles so big I get lost in their shine,
across the breezeway, there are t-shirts
neon spray painted with words like princesa or
names like Valeria across them and the artist works
under a small spotlight and the kids crowd,
breathing in the fumes, deep.

I can bargain down already cheap chancletas with
flowers sewn into the front and earrings with my
name in them, second-hand fishing poles for a girl
who doesn't who know a herring from a salmon or
a mild landscape painting which could go
in the suburban home I don't own, over the
fireplace I'd never light if I had one
and a dusty old trumpet with sticky keys, plus the
ascot-cap-wearing vendor will cut me a deal
since it can only play a couple of notes,
that's really all I need to be the best 50's jazz seductress
this flea market has ever seen.

BODY OF BLUE

Briana Campbell

I bought an over-sized jean jacket
the color of peonies in early spring
from the men's section

and told the cashier
it was a men's jacket
because I wanted someone to know
I liked the way it masked my body,

more denim than person,
breast pockets rather than breasts,
sleeves rather than arms
buttons to close me up,

collar that smells of the last girl I kissed,

and I wear it like a second skin
like an overcoat hymn,
lullaby of layers
and ballad of blue,

a jacket that leaves me shapeless, baggy
to the naked eye
and almost comfortable
in this body.

COMING OF

Tatiana Su

once I thought mountain peaks paper thin
 & wondered how anyone could stand on them

now I know they are thinner than paper
now I know narrowness
of my own two feet

how I fall softer with time, more musically

call me cavernous
 and wild
as I hold turmoil by its pinky finger hold myself howling

call me willow tree call me steel wire

watch the wind beat me senseless again
swallow the whole again

THE ANDROID ARRIVED ON THURSDAY.

Bryan Graeser

Case #5683.

Debrief #012.

Author: Mariah Walters

Involvement: Reponendum© Acclimation Supervisor #4.

Author Statement [Day 0; Introduction of Artificial Element]:

The android arrived on Thursday. It drove itself in the husband's car [hatchback sedan, the color of which the husband claims perfectly captures that of a Scarlet Tanager]. It pulled into the husband's driveway [cobble], having returned—as far as the wife believes—from the husband's job [tour guide for the Williams-Marshall Conservatory and Bird Sanctuary]. The android stepped out of the car at dusk. It was wearing the husband's clothes [mustard-colored shirt—wrinkled at the cuff in accordance with husband's nervous habit of rolling and unrolling his sleeves—and a pair of tan khakis, the ends folded thrice to reveal Thursday's bird socks^[1]].

The android walked up to the husband's house [standard, beige colonial approximately equidistant between the husband and wife's places of employment], mimicking the husband's limp [volleyball accident; 3 months until recovery] as programmed. Having arrived on the husband's porch, the android knocked on the husband's door [the husband regularly forgot his keys and had yet to fix the doorbell].

The actual husband was stunned, undoubtedly struck by the wonder of what he was watching. He sat, paralyzed as it, the android, embraced his wife and kissed her forehead. He fiddled with the ends of his hospital gown as it placed his briefcase beside his shoes. He watched as it stepped into his bedroom, changed into more of his clothes, and had dinner with his wife. And all while he, the real husband, sat in the Acclimation Room [colorless, aseptic fluorescent lighting casting shadows on the array of screens before his gurney].

It was at this point I placed my hand on the husband's shoulder and told him Statement 17: "It really is for the best. It should only take a few weeks for you to get acclimated."

Author Statement [Days 1-114; Acclimation Summary]:

On Tuesday^[2], the android would return [from the storage unit where it was recharged and updated] with a bouquet of flowers for the wife [always a pastel

[1] An opulent, carmine Phoenix rose from speckled embers on both black socks. Quote from the husband when questioned as to why a fictional bird: "What is life without whimsy?"

[2] Raptor-sock day. Husband quote: "Reminiscent of the day I met my wife, tracing those beautiful eyes through the crowds at the conservatory."

Hydrangea bouquet with five stems; usually violet to match her eyes]. On Friday^[3], it would ring the doorbell early [between 12 and 1 PM] and take the wife to their fencing workshop where the two would dance, their polished swordplay carrying them back and forth across the fencing strip until, without fail, the android would let the wife win in a calculated display of carelessness. And on Sunday^[4], the android would wake early and prepare a lavish breakfast [sunny-side eggs as was the husband and wife's favorite, fresh juice, and an arrangement of fruit so fastidiously crafted it verged on deficiency through perfection], rushing so that it could be brought to the wife while she was still in bed.

As per his contract, the husband was digitally present for all of the android's actions. He would lay there, Phoenixes on his feet, myriad pills piled beside him, Reponendum Inutlia© pumping intravenously through the many valves now surgically attached to his torso, all the while watching the android on the provided screens.

[*Following Text Flagged; Disciplinary Action #736*] I recall wondering if, in his time with his wife, the husband actually did any of these things he had directed the engineers to code into the android. After all, the wife was shocked with each bouquet and every early breakfast, and it seemed, from my vantage at least, that it was more than the usual feigned spousal surprise.

I know for my husband it was shame and maybe a fear of dereliction that drove him to better his act. After I found out about his little animalistic, lust-filled indiscretion, and after the subsequent confrontation at the theater, it was all candlelit dinners on the bank of the seasonal Flood Overflow Canal, sappy love letters delivered by the waiter with my Rigatoni. Until finally I forgave him [or rather told him I forgave him]. So perhaps guilt dug at the husband of Case #5683 as well. Perhaps when faced with permanent embarkation from his past life, from his wife, he thought why not make up for it all? For all the lies and infidelity he would offer her a perfect husband. As long as he didn't have to do it himself.

I almost asked him, when his wife and the android were busy having intercourse, if he actually was jealous, if the sight of his wife, splayed out under an animatronic, emotionless being that was doing a better job than he ever had—if that image, realized with full audio and video on the screens before him, made him feel at all protective. Resentful? Covetous? Indignant? Or my anecdotaly-derived hypothesis: guilty? [*End Flagged Text*]

Yet the husband remained moderately impassive for the majority of the android and wife's interactions. After all, with the yellowing and thinning of his skin came a similar fraying of his mental acuity. He was fussier and more dramatic in the earlier weeks. After the initial awe had faded, he found the whole situation too unsettling, and as such, could not be left alone in the Acclimation Room for long, instead opting to distract himself with innocuous talk of birding trips long concluded [I of course—after much whining on his part—the begrudging audience of such scintillating stories].

[3] Albatross-sock day. "Albatross are famous for their enthralling, battle-like mating dance through which they determine a mate for life."

[4] Bowerbird-sock day. "The male Bowerbird constructs a colorful display to woo female Bowerbirds."

Disciplinary Action #736.

Issuer: Reponendum© Case #5683 Manager

Recipient: Mariah Walters

Disciplinary Statement: You, Reponendum© Acclimation Supervisor #4, are hereby officially reprimanded in regards to your reporting of Case #5683 by your immediate Reponendum© Case Manager. In your recorded statement, you break protocol and include personal or subjective emotional tangents. You are to cease this practice in all future reports else you face termination of your involvement in Case #5693.

Author Statement [Days 1-114; Acclimation Summary] Continued:

Finally, at the suggestion of Reponendum© R&D, I left the husband alone for a week [of course I continued monitoring him remotely]. This forced the husband to confront the choice he'd made, to look into the eyes of the android now responsible for his wife's happiness. He begged Tuesday^[5] through Friday^[6] for us to undo it, crying to the Acclimation Assistant whenever she brought him his twice daily meal. But by Sunday^[7] he began to see the merit. His wife was content.

It was as if his exit from her life had never occurred. Their relationship hadn't crumbled, nor had it grown in any real way. From her perspective there was almost no transformation—save for perhaps a slight submissiveness adopted by the new husband [coded by the engineers at the request of the real husband]. Instead the wife just went on, her doting, loyal partner staunchly at her side.

[Following Text Flagged; Disciplinary Action #737] But was it actually better for her that way? Was this life of unrecognized, fabricated love preferable to the pain of loss? Or an even more intimate question: was this lie preferable [ironically enough] to being with someone whom you could no longer trust? I don't what I would choose. Would I rather have a fraudulent, yet devoted, husband if I truly would not know? There is an irrefutable allure to ignorance, to a life where anguish and trauma are mere shadows behind the facade.

A fragment of me admired the husband's choice: accepting he wasn't adequate for his wife, disease or not. I recognized the selflessness in it and I admit I felt the first piddlings of sympathy. Yet I remained on the other side of the observational glass, limiting my interaction for fear of bias [apparently I've learned some semblance of professionalism in my years of Clinical Neuropsychology]. *[End Flagged Text]*

The husband still cried regularly, but I believe now more from nostalgia and melancholy. He understood that this path was far better than subjecting both he and his wife to the tragedy of his illness. Why should two lives be destroyed when biology only necessitates one? It was at this point that his consciousness truly began to slip. I was only visiting him

^[5] Raptor day. "She wasn't always good to me, nor I to her. But the last few years... Well they'd been wonderful. She had this newfound optimism about her."

^[6] Albatross day. "The day I found about the... the sickness we went to Lake Elizabeth and she fed the ducks. I almost told her."

^[7] Bowerbird day. "If you love something, let it fly."

once a week now^[8], but during each consecutive checkup I could sense his growing apathy towards life. The screens remained on [as mandated], but he had little interest in watching his wife and what he deemed “this pantomimist of love.” Inquiring further, I found his statement didn’t come from a place of animosity, but rather the perception that his life had become irrelevant and even worse: redundant.

[Following Text Flagged; Disciplinary Action #737] I almost asked him at that point. And I think he would have had an answer, some newfound understanding of love achievable only through the conscripted observation of your own evanescence. [End Flagged Text]

I repeated Statement 17, Part A: “It really is for the best.”

Disciplinary Action #737.

Issuer: Reponendum© Case #5683 Manager

Recipient: Mariah Walters

Disciplinary Statement: You, Reponendum© Acclimation Supervisor #4, are hereby officially reprimanded once again in regards to your reporting of Case #5683 by your immediate Reponendum© Case Manager. Throughout your recorded statement, you regularly break protocol and include personal or subjective emotional tangents. You are hereby recused from the remainder of Case #5683, save for a mandated, brief Acclimation Completion Author Statement.

Author Statement [Day 115; Acclimation Completion]:

The husband died on a Thursday. His body was cremated in a Reponendum©-owned mortuary and no family were present. The Acclimation Assistant cleaned his bed and donated his socks to a local homeless shelter where no one took them. No media outlet published the death [the confidentiality agreements ensured the wife would never know].

I labeled the case status [fixed] and the subject [resolved].

Additional Commentary Request #142.

Issuer: Reponendum© R&D

Recipient: Mariah Walters

Request Statement: You, Reponendum© Acclimation Supervisor #4, are hereby officially requested for an extension in regards to your reporting of Case #5683 by Reponendum© R&D. Throughout your recorded statement, you regularly break protocol and include personal or subjective emotional tangents. This potential insight into the human condition has been deemed useful and Reponendum© R&D would like your reflection on the development of Case #5683.

Author Statement [Day 154; Additional Commentary Request by Reponendum© R&D]:

I have been made privy to the entirety of Case #5683 [classification level: 14], so that I may provide further analysis on this remarkably unique situation. I suppose they

^[8] On Phoenix day. No quote from the husband.

came to me because protocol isn't really sufficient here.

After all, this is the first recorded incident [to my knowledge] of two Companion Androids living together, each programmed to please the other. And, because both androids, as per the documents signed by the husband and the wife, are legally required to be left in service until the death of their companion [which in this case, will be never], this recursive relationship will continue indefinitely.

I can see why the engineers in Reponendum© R&D were so excited. It is, without question, the perfect opportunity to experiment. They'll go on tinkering with code and mechanics until the real husband and wife are less than memories.

And so it's my job to appreciate the somber beauty of it. Two former lovers gone, yet their marionettes remain in eternal rhythm, circling an amorosity and tenderness that can never be. Is it tragedy that the wife had bought an android of herself for the husband when she left him for another man 265 Thursdays ago? Is it tragedy that the husband had done the same upon his fatal prognosis? Is it fortune that neither knew of the other's departure from the relationship?

What I do know is that Reponendum© R&D have already switched the wife android's core code to that of the husband's to further the experimental symmetry. And I know that on raptor-day^[9], the androids return [from the storage units where they were recharged and updated], the husband with a bouquet [now 11 stems of vivid, red roses] and the wife with an appreciative smile [accompanied by a wink meant to allude to intercourse later]. And that on albatross-day, the two dart back and forth across the fencing strip, their once elegant swordplay descending to chaotic parrying and frantic lunges as they both fight to let the other win, caught in a ceaseless dance now more inline with the jitterbug than the tango, until finally [at around 6 PM] they agree on a tie [confessing, however, that given another bout the other surely would have emerged victorious].

And on bowerbird-day, the androids race to wake before the other [soon rising between 2 and 4 AM] so that they can make eggs [scrambled; it is the fastest] and present them to their companion before they wake.

I find the ludicrousness of it comforting. As if it exists to remind me that there remains a distinction, no matter how fragile, between human and not. That there is something that makes me and the deceased real husband and my husband and the real wife fundamentally different than some Reponendum© animatronic beings. Something irreplaceable.

But the issue is Thursday. Phoenix-day.

The Companion Androids [by nature] have no semblance of sentience or free will. The husband and wife are programmed to perpetually serve the needs and happiness of the other. And that is exactly what they did—six days a week. But every phoenix-day, they seemed to toss aside this intrinsically coded mandate.

The husband android would flip through pages upon pages of bird anthologies, sipping a hot chocolate he made [for himself!]. And the wife android would take the day and visit a local gym [despite her synthetic nature preventing any muscular development]. For the life of them, the engineers in Reponendum© R&D cannot

^[9] I have decided to, at least temporarily, adopt the husband's bird day-counting metric. Someone must commemorate his life.

figure out why. Update after update. Rewrite after rewrite. And although the specific actions may change, the self-indulgence remains. So they have asked me to take a look, see if a background in human psychology holds any water in the murky realm of Companion AI.

My hypothesis?

It's all about those silly birds.

The engineers in Reponendum© R&D programmed the sock habits into the android from its first arrival that Thursday. And sure, they were included only to better imitate the [now-deceased] husband. But from the albatross to the bowerbird to the rising phoenix, those feathery clothing ornaments brought the husband [the human one; the real one] humor and comfort. If there's anything I'll remember of him from his time in the Acclimation Room it won't be all those tedious bird stories. It'll be the way his sunken cheeks lifted when he told them. How when he began forgetting where he was, when his scalp was long bald and his skin tore and bled at the slightest friction, he found joy in those avian creatures. He'd look down at his socks, eyes clouded and barely open, and he'd smile, sometimes even chuckle. "What is life without whimsy?" And that's something a spouse would have to have notice.

So perhaps somewhere deep in Reponendum© Learning Algorithms or Software Simulations the androids decided that human love [despite its greed and perceived requisite selfishness] is not a unidirectional relation, and that to feel loved by a partner, one must also love that partner. Of course, with love comes genuine care and concern. So the androids learned to make themselves happy so that their companion could derive joy and satisfaction from their contentedness, and, given time, maybe even love.

With that the barrier crumbles. The delineation that makes machine and human different grows porous. There is an intermingling, a confusion. And soon those candlelit dinners turn murky, a nebulosity descends over each apology, each love letter.

I can still, three years later, clearly recall the day I caught him—my husband. I'd grown wary when, a month prior, our typical, bitter morning arguments ceased without explanation. He no longer asked what exactly I did at work, no longer demanded I explain why I could not tell him. And suddenly, this unemployed man I had chosen to spend my life with, was busier than me. I'd asked him about it, but he just told me I wasn't the only one with obligations and responsibilities.

So I'd followed him, used one of my Sick Days from the yearly Reponendum© stipend. I'd watched him go to a coffee shop [Mark's Fresh Brew] despite his high blood pressure, and I'd waited until he left with the young barista. They'd gone to a Holograph-Theater [a business that allows couples to experience "the intimacy of another reality"] and I'd snuck into his booth, watching as he danced [virtual reality goggles on] with the digital avatar [that only he could see] of the barista who danced in the room adjacent.

It's strange, but I remember feeling more confusion than indignation—a clattering of thoughts and an aimless melding of past conceptions. I had stepped up before him, mirroring his eerie solo waltz [to music I could not hear], my hands inches from his. Never before had I more wanted to share a song with him. The psychologist

in me told me it was merely lust aggrandized by envy, but I didn't listen to her and pressed myself against him.

He blamed me, screaming about how it was I that expelled him from my life, that I decided that my happiness, my contentment did not require his inclusion. I never saw the barista again, but we did meet in that coffee shop when he apologized—chocolates in hand as he articulated his jealousy of my secrets that led him to seek out his own. And I'd listened. I brought him home. I made love to him.

But now. With Case #5683.

Could he really have changed so fundamentally? Learned to truly love a woman he'd so wronged? Were those nights we spent, wrapped in each other's arms, beating hearts separated by what I then assumed flesh and blood... Were those nights real even if he wasn't? Were those feelings real?

Another query met with silence.

#5683.

Love.

End Author Statements.

Additional Information Request #010.

Issuer: Mariah Walters

Recipient: Reponendum©

Request Statement: I would like to know if my husband, Mr. James Walters is a part of any active Reponendum© Companion Android Case.

Request Status: Denied [on account of Confidentiality Protocol #01: "Reponendum© shall never confirm nor deny accounts of suspected Companion Androids"].

Final Author Status: Mariah Walters relinquished her duties as Reponendum© Acclimation Supervisor #4 on Day 155 [based on the Case #5683 counting metric]. On Day 158, citing an "inability to trust her husband," Mariah Walters requested a Companion Android to replace her in her relation with her husband [husband status: not an Android]. Case is pending approval of Reponendum© Case #5839 Manager. If such action is approved, her replacement Companion Android will be released on Day 160.

End Debrief.

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

Justine Ramos studies English with a minor in Global Health. Although English is her second language, Justine has utilized the literary arts to express her experience as a first-generation Filipina immigrant. She spreads her love for poetry and writing by hosting Open Mics, mentoring young writers, and by starting her own spoken word/poetry club called SLAM uniVERSE. Justine has performed spoken word pieces for schools, conventions, and conferences throughout California and has been published in numerous literary magazines and anthologies. She hopes to use poetry as a means of creative therapy in her future practice as an Occupational Therapist.

Talia Green is a fourth year Creative Writing Major at Emory University in Atlanta, GA. Most recently, Talia received the Artistine Mann Award, as well as the William Faulkner Literary Competition 1st Place Award, for her play "Boots". Her work has appeared in SELF Magazine, the Gathering of the Tribes Literary Magazine, Ear Literary Magazine, and Underground Literary Magazine. All of Talia's written work, as well as her original music, is featured on her personal blog, InTaliasWords.com.

Tyler King is a senior at UC Berkeley studying English literature and creative writing. He lives with his partner in San Francisco.

Ryan Varadi is a senior at Northwestern University studying Creative Writing, Spanish, and Film. He has poetry forthcoming in the literary journal Catfish Creek and is currently the Poetry Editor for Helicon Literary & Arts Magazine. When he isn't writing, he is usually reading, consuming nerdy media, or thinking about dogs.

Hannah Grace Gruebmeier is a student from Western North Carolina currently studying creative writing at Emory University. Alongside poetry, she writes fiction and memoir, and tutors at a local elementary school. Hannah-Grace lives in Atlanta, Georgia.

Alexander Schaeff: The main inspiration for 'Potato Bake Today!' came from mental illness -- the internal chaos associated with disassociating, and the endless self-love strangely woven into a lifetime of self-destruction. It's one thing to write for oneself, and another thing to literally write oneself out. So this is me. Enjoy!

Katerina Pavlidis is a Greek-American writer. She studies English at Vassar with a minor in Women's Studies. Some of her other works can be found in Zeniada Magazine and The Foundationalist. Words are some of her many blessings.

Ben Papsun is a junior at Vassar College, majoring in English with minors in

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Isabella Bruzzese is a junior creative writing major in Vanderbilt University's College of Arts & Science. She enjoys rainy weather, earl gray tea, and dismembering National Geographic magazines for her own artistic fulfillment. She is originally from Albuquerque, New Mexico.

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Bryan Graeser is sophomore at Cornell University majoring in Computer Science with a minor in Creative Writing. His literary interests lie primarily in the realm of speculative fiction, especially soft Sci-Fi, as well as the study of narrative structure. When not writing prose or code, Bryan can be found at the gym, strategizing with his friends over a board game, or showing photos of his pets to anyone that will let him.

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