

READING INTO CULTURE

poetry fiction essays

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Amanda Bordrup • Nick Crowley • Alyssa Curcio • Alice de Hubp • Laura Flight •
Nicholas Grider • Louise Heller • Saanvi Jain • Caio Major • Samantha Moya • Nithya •
Tony Njoroge • Kumar Sen • Owen Stanford • Rayni Wekluk • David Earl Williams

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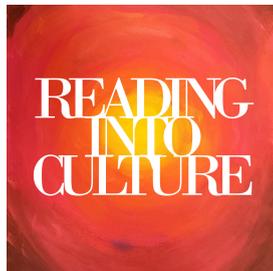
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Amanda Bordrup

Requiem

The crescent moon in January,
the geese that flew above me in February,
the gentleman who read
Graham Greene
on a stool by the corner shop,
they all feel hidden away in the fog
blown down Mt Grouse
this morning.

Laughter is in the cherry blossom,
loss is sea foam at the beach,
and the afternoon strikes up a conversation of formations
so I dance with the snowdrops
popping with care around my street.
At every uprise,
I sense their glee,
so I prevent myself
from picking them.
It is so magical to be in this illusion
where time only spans
across March, April, and May.

Last spring, I wrote eulogies
for the time I spent among zucchini blossoms
and imagined a requiem
read out loud when I laid among them.
Nothing feels like skin like their flowers.

My mother birthed a poet
when hazels and anemones sprung.
Magnolias, daffodils,
daisies and thistle
all scream in ecstasy
whenever I grow older,
but only now do I feel this need to rise.

I worship rebirth,
it is one of many reasons
I am so fond of spring,
so I'll melt away in the orange
light of tomorrow's early morning,
with celibacy and celebration.

It is a triumph to breathe for a full day.

Nick Crowley

Books are Food: A Manifesto on Reading

In *A Thousand Plateaus* Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari (D&G) write that “a book itself is a little machine”. Reading, in turn, is a matter of plugging oneself into this machine. The book-machine. For D&G, a book is not a representation of reality; it is a flow of symbols and affects, and when you read you are plugging your body into that flow. In one way or another, you get “jacked up” on the flow in the same way you might get “jacked up” on anything you ingest. D&G declare, “We will never ask what a book means[...] We will ask what it functions with, in connection with what other things it does or does not transmit intensities”. A book is not a grid that you superimpose on reality in order to understand it—as if our eyes were blurry and a good text were a necessary prescription lens. Rather, a book is something you eat and metabolise. And like any food, the way it *affects* us is a much more pertinent question than what it *means*.

For D&G a book is something *in* the world before it is something *about* the world. “What a vapid idea, the book as the image of the world.” We pick up a book. We live in a world and sometimes we pick up books and read them, and when we do this we experience a movement of ideas, a passage of affect in our bodies. A book happens to us. Of course, a book can “stay with us” beyond the event of it being read. But we ought to think of the way a text “stays with us” as akin to the way something we eat stays with us; it is metabolised; it strengthens us, modulates us, strangles us, changes us. But it does not necessarily change us by giving us a “better grasp on the world.” Reading is not a break we take from world in order to sharpen our thoughts such that we can return to it with finer representational nets. A book happens.

This desire for representational knowledge of reality—the desire to bulk-up on books and “know more stuff”—is often subtended by guilt and a sense of deficit: “I do not know enough, I am mystified, I need to add height to my trembling tower of knowledge.” D&G’s “machinic” reading provides a nice corrective to us guilty readers, to us who want to bag life in our knowledge-nets and sooth our epistemic deficit. Where the guilty reader proceeds from a sense of lack, the machinic reader proceeds from a positive desire to be innervated and transformed. Where the guilty reader wants to weave finer meshes with which to catch the world, our machinic reader says; “Beware! These meshes inevitably become so tight that they turn into walls!”

The machinic reader wants to be broken down. They want to be fatigued, shot through, delighted. They read in pursuit of events that are strictly unthinkable (although they might delight in poetry or trying to think them nonetheless). They read in search of events that are immediately there. They read in search of an enlightenment that disappears as soon as they shut the cover. The guilty reader, of course, knows these revelations. They feel them and want them and fear that they have not had enough of them. They tend to treat these moments of revelation as rare portals into a “true picture of the world.” And when the revelation strikes, a miserly fear is never far behind as they worry they might lose the sacred moment insight. And so they try to capture it, summarise it, generalise it, preach about it, and stitch it into their representational account of the world, stitch it into their personalities. And so before the moment can be savoured and enjoyed, they are already trying to preserve it. Conversely, for the machinic reader it is enough to have had these moments of enlightenment. To the guilty reader they say, “Let the insight go! Other moments will come. There are more than enough good books to keep you jacked up for a lifetime.”

In fact, the machinic reader values these transcendental moments in direct proportion to their mutability; they live by the dictum that, “a perception, a memory, a supposition, is enhanced rather than diminished by its being inexplicable to others”. This quote from *The Planes* by Gerard Murnane is the perfect slogan for this anti-representational manifesto.

This manifesto is not an argument against truth. This is not an argument against memory. This is not an attempt to deepen our already-acute historical amnesia. Go read history. Pass down traditions. Remember important facts. Believe in good science. Value good theory. Representations can be useful. Some of them might even be true. We are not against the keepers of wisdom, we are just worried about guilty readers who are unwittingly burying the experiential body under a thick crust of representational netting.

We are not seeking the abolition of knowledge. Nor are we denying the possibility or utility of representations. We are simply memorialising that part of a text which can only be viewed; that vital thing in a text that exists in excess of any representational relation it might have to the world around it. We are valorising the reciprocal flow between our bodily flesh and the flesh of the book. We are reminding the reading public of something we feel we are losing; the event of the written word, the gustation of the written word, the nourishment of the written word. With the rise of AI, language is increasingly reduced to a mere medium for the transmission of information, and we are forgetting its primordial scene; the meeting, through symbols, with the intimacy of another being.

Writing can be information, but it is not only information. We must remember that it is also this thing I do where I try to send the richness in me into the richness in you. Language as gift. Writing as a reaching. Reading as a welcoming of the other, rather than the consumption of digestible parcels of information. Reading as an encounter, through the distance of the text, with a feeling, moving, foreign friend. When we treat language as representational information, we reduce it to something that can be totalised and assimilated into the self and its view of the world. The text is dissolved into the subject's representational account of the world, and so there is no room for the Other—there is no room for their strangeness, there is no room for their affect, there is no room for their dance.

Speaking less philosophically, we are commending the stories that plug nicely into our sockets. We are adventurers in the field of words. We are cosmic cowgirls who ride books like horses, who read books in search of crystals of fugitive clarity, who read books as if we were going to a gallery; walking through, taking it all in, walking out, going back home and feeling changed in ways that are wholly imprecise. Then we dive into the next thing; a plate, a social encounter, a park, lamplight, the wind—you see, a book is a thing among things; it is something to do, it is a place to go, it is something to see. Above all else, it is something to eat.

Alyssa Curcio

If God gave me this mouth, why shouldn't I use it

It's funny and kind of famous
to be uninvited from
your close friend's wedding.
I should know, seeing as how
the minute-long bubbles of
my unsolicited online thoughts
(of my body politick, perhaps)
wounded the feelings of
the soap-soft groom
deeply enough that he could not
enjoy his Big Day knowing I was
lurking somewhere
in the pews.

If God gave me this
mouth,
why shouldn't I use it!

Over breakfast, I told my dad
he needed to start
seeing the State for what it is:
a godless warmonger hungry for flesh.
Even the freshly baked muffins
didn't help that one go over any easier.
(quelle surprise!)

We're finally speaking again,
crystalline cracking
delicately over
newly-formed ground.

If my father gave me this
mouth,
why shouldn't I use it!

September brought a severing,

my lover cutting me
down at the knees
because I tried to pry open
the closed fist of her heart
with my lips
(my so-called perfect lips).
Too much talk,
not enough tongue,
I guess.

If God gave me this perfect
mouth,
then why shouldn't I use it!

Alice de Hubp

red, white, & blue

i love you so much i can't breathe.
i count the days till new york. i bathe
my body with snow. i
marvel at old buildings, lily-white
and imponent, respectable, eminent.
i buy red-white-and-blue shirts.
i take the subway, face bright and lovely.
i hook 'em at the tower. i buy more baseball caps. i wear less eyeshadow.
i wear my first oversized shirt, so soft and shapeless.
i marry the idea of a sorority. my child will be
a fraternity legacy. i draw up a pinterest board. i
fall in love with a suburb.
i scream at my dumb parents for speaking with an accent. they'll never love me if
you talk like that.
i am alone on thanksgiving week.

you love me so much i can't breathe.
you count the days till my expiration. you bathe
in the bodies of mine. you
marvel at old congresses, lily-white
and cruel, respectable, eminent.
you paint red-white-and blue scenes.
you cut off the bus, legs battered and bloody.
you hook me in with the tower. you buy more of me. you wear less of me.
you choke me in my oversized shirt, the shame of being shapeful.
you get me hooked on the idea of a paper. my child will be
an anchor baby. you draw up a pin-up timeline. you
sweep up my culture to make room for a suburb.
you scream at my dumb parents for speaking with an accent. you'll never love
me if we talk like that.
i will be home by thanksgiving week.

Laura Flight

Connection

In *Bearville*, the virtual world for Build-A-Bear, there was a coffee shop. You could either get a table and order virtual snacks, or you could play the waiter minigame and take people's orders. It was so much fun to bring people their food that there were always more people trying to work than there were ordering, and when you sat down at a table, multiple employees would race to you, fighting to earn their scant amount of virtual coins.

My best friend and I both had landlines in the cordless bar style, where you'd have four different phones standing in their little recharging stations all around the house. One would be the Head Honcho station with a built-in answering machine. It was a really nice upgrade from the banana-shaped phone with the curly cord that always got tangled. You could take the bar phone with you anywhere in the house, so long as you remembered to put it back on the charger before it died and became lost for all eternity. These even had "Caller ID", so you could tell who was calling before revealing you were a potential customer for a brand new top-of-the-line vacuum cleaner. This meant kids like me could be awarded the high honor of being allowed to sometimes answer the phone, whereas my friends without this new technology had to just wait for the phone to stop ringing every time.

In *Club Penguin*, there's a nightclub that has a disco ball and a dance floor with color-changing tiles. The closest real life equivalents I can find are roller rinks, and I've never lived close enough to one to treat it as a social space and not just a place where the cool kids have birthday parties and old people gather to effortlessly glide around in synchronized circles like a school of retro fish.

The thing about getting your first phone is that you're usually not the first kid in your friend group to have one. If you are, who are you going to text? Your mom?

There was a very brief period of time in my childhood where we had both a set of walkie-talkies and an actual reason to use walkie-talkies. Unfortunately, using them to reach someone two rooms away just isn't the same. The allure never left, though. It's like a phone call, but the other person will only be bothered by you if they've already turned theirs on and tuned to the same channel, waiting.

My best friend and I sometimes called each other on our landline phones and played *Bearville* together. One hand holding the phone, the other on the mouse.

There weren't a lot of ways for us to communicate back then. We tried snail mail, but we had to ask our parents for stamps and help addressing the envelopes, and we learned the hard way that if you put a marble-sized rubber animal in an envelope, you have to add extra stamps or else the post office will return it to the sender. We also tried Zoobuh! Safe E-mail for Kids, but my mom had it set so that she had to manually approve everything before it could go into my inbox, which meant I couldn't just refresh to see if I had mail. I had to go ask my mom every time.

There was one memorable moment when my mom said yes to impulsively buying me merch for a virtual world, and it was in the form of a stuffed animal purple puffle for *Club Penguin*. It just so happens that

1. the novelty of this creature wore off almost immediately because it was so ugly, and
2. the members-only feature most prominent to me was access to human-style wigs for your bald little penguin, which I was ethically against because they were penguins, not humans.

The purple puffle was the one who tore up the nightclub dance floor, though.

I had a neighbor who wasn't allowed a phone or email, so the only method she had to communicate with her boyfriend was via safe-chat approved post-it-notes on the bulletin board in her virtual house in *Moshi Monsters*. I didn't know if she knew him in real life, so this was probably for the best.

Pixie Hollow was the virtual world for the 2008 Tinkerbell movie series. In your home, tucked away inside a sunflower or an old teapot, you were free to place your furniture wherever you wanted, regardless of walls or gravity. I used this to create an abstract depiction of a monster with a hollow stomach, which I then became trapped inside. The person I was playing with tossed a rope in after me. I asked her to "tie a note". There was a pause. "A knot?" she asked. "Yeah," I responded. I wondered if I was too young to be playing this game. Maybe she wondered if she was too old for it, or if English was my second language.

In 2013, Zoobuh went to court to try and prevent their clients from being flooded with a ridiculous amount of spam emails for florists and porn sites. They still seem to own the zoobuh.com website now, but when I try to go there, nothing happens.

When some kids in the group already have phones, you start to feel a distinction between those who do and those who don't. Those who are stuck watching over

shoulders, asking if they can have a turn at *Temple Run*, and those learning for the first time why you really do need to set a phone password. When you finally do get a phone, do you leave your old brethren in the dust, getting yourself added to the group chat and speaking in a language of convoluted in-jokes too advanced for their mortal understanding? Or do you still sit with them and resist the urge to look up the answer to the question they've been arguing about for twenty minutes? If you're the last to get a phone, will they have already gotten used to talking without you? Your parents are focused on not getting you one while you're too young, but the longer they wait, the longer you're on the outskirts.

There's an island in *Poptropica* that lets you travel through time and see an older version of yourself. The futuristic world is colored in optimistic sky blues and grass greens with shiny glass elevators that gently levitate you upstairs. Every change you make to your character is instantly reflected in the older version, meaning there is always a timeline where you stopped playing right then and there, and no changes to your outfit were ever made again. Since the original game shut down with Adobe Flash and came back different, that timeline has now progressed to the end for everyone. I don't remember what my future self looks like now.

The idea of giving someone your cellphone number and then saying "And here's a second number in case you want to just call my house!" sounds ridiculous nowadays, but sometimes I really do want to just call their house. What if they're in class or at work, and they're not the type to put it on Do Not Disturb? Conversely, what if they're sleeping with Do Not Disturb on and don't have it set for me to call three times for emergencies and it's very important that I cause the loud box in their kitchen to start screeching its dated ringtone? Sometimes I want to leave a "Happy Birthday!" message for them to come home to, not to give them a heart attack during their lunch break.

Barbiegirls.com, the virtual world designed by Barbie, only lasted from 2007–2011. While a lot of these games had some form of VIP membership, *Barbiegirl.com*'s was notable in that if your subscription expired, you didn't just lose access to the members only items. Your entire account would be deleted. It was literally extortion.

Build-a-bear Workshop has electronic buttons that let you record your own sound to put in the paw of your bear. My best friend had the brilliant idea for us to record each other's sounds in the bathroom and surprise each other. I thought this was an excellent opportunity to play a hilarious prank on her, so I recorded

my very best velociraptor screeches onto hers. When we got back, I discovered she'd recorded a heartfelt poem onto mine. I still think the velociraptor noises were pretty awesome, but I can only hope she appreciated my recording as much as I did hers.

Moshi Monsters launched in 2007 and kept running all the way until 2019, when they shut down the servers a year before Adobe Flash Player ended support in 2020.

Club Penguin was born in 2005 and ran until Disney shut it down in 2017, citing declining popularity as the reason. The same day *Club Penguin* shut down, its sequel *Club Penguin Island* was born. It only survived until late 2018. Wikipedia says it lacked features for non-subscribers.

Bearville opened in 2007 and permanently shut down in 2015.

There are so many stories where friends lucky enough to live near one another use walkie-talkies to converse in secret, whenever they want. In my quest to live this fantasy, I've spent many nights window-shopping for these beautiful devices. You still need someone else to talk to, though, and oddly enough, everyone I've asked has said "Why not just call on the phone?" And then we don't call on the phone either.

Pixie Hollow ran from 2008 to 2013. The explanation they gave for shutting it down was sketchy at best. You could tell it was going downhill long before they announced it, though, because they kept putting more and more things behind the membership paywall. Every virtual world that went down before Adobe Flash followed this pattern, and each time I saw it, it was like watching a looming storm on the horizon.

One time, my best friend gave me a stuffed-animal raccoon she'd made from a sewing kit that had pre-punched the holes. It had a little pocket on its stomach that you could put things in. I was so enamored with it that I made her a matching cat, also with a pocket. She came up with the idea that they were magically linked, and if we put something in one pocket it would come out the other. I still have mine. I don't know if she still has hers. Every once in a while, I look up her Facebook account and find a picture where I can still recognize her face.

Not every Flash game died in 2019. Some, such as *Webkinz* and *Animal Jam*, switched to a downloadable format. They're still active, although huge swaths of the code are now outdated and unchangeable. They've both made new versions of their games that they have more freedom to work with. Perhaps it's only a

matter of time before they shut down the 'classic' games. Maybe everything is a matter of time.

For every virtual world that died, there is a dedicated cluster of fans working to recreate it. There is a *Pixie Hollow: Rewritten*. There is a *Bearville Rewritten*. There is a *Moshi Monsters Online*. There are at least three different fully playable *Club Penguin* remakes. Some of them prioritize archival of the game they remember, while others try new seasonal events and areas, making the game their own. None of them can legally profit off their work, but they're doing it anyways. Just because they want to. Just because they love it.

Maybe someday these, too, will die. Maybe I will never work up the nerve to send my old friend a picture of the little raccoon she made me flipping pancakes on the stove. But it always will have happened, and nothing can change that.

Nicholas Grider

The Known Person on the Internet

The Known Person On the Internet says he knows how it feels because he's felt it himself but stronger because he feels everything at maximum strength due to a childhood that was formative and because he has felt everything intently. This means he has felt everything there is to feel, even the feelings of crowds that haven't been gathered yet.

The Known Person On the Internet says you are welcome to send him money because he needs a chair because as we well all know he cannot survive without one and neither can humanity, but he is the one who needs sitting most right now.

It doesn't count as begging if your finger's on the trigger, jokes The Known Person On the Internet.

Supplements are fine, says The Known Person On the Internet. Be careful but don't be too careful, he says. Supplements and doing your own research.

Entertainment purposes only, The Known Person On the Internet reminds us. No liability for our failures based on his good ideas, which are ideas for entertainment purposes only and not legally binding suggestions.

The Known Person On the Internet says there's nothing in the basement so there's no need to look there and there's nothing in that room, he says while he points to a padlocked door framed in scarlet LED piping, and there's no need to look in his other property's cellar, or in the shed, or in the woods behind the shed.

The Known Person On the Internet appreciates our interest and curiosity but needs us to calm down because we don't know the most important facts.

The Known Person On the Internet wants to know if chat just clipped his fake dick slip. Just tell me if you did, he encourages us. You know the policy, but people make mistakes all the time. If that weren't the case, he postulates as the sheen on his forehead and lenses of his blue-blocker sunglasses catches the gleam of Amazon Wishlist vibe-setter lights, why else would you return here again and again to leave generous donations in exchange for my open-hand guidance?

There's a neon sign in The Known Person On the Internet's room that says KEEP GRINDING and he assures us more than once it is real, that we can tell because of how the letters spelling "GRIND" are burnt out but the white neon letters on white wall is still otherwise lit up. Shit getting broken, he says, is how you know shit is real, and shit being real is how you know shit is worth something.

Cursive neon is not universal, says The Known Person On the Internet, but the vibe of cursive is so real that the pyramid aliens probably have it in their star cruisers.

The Known Person On the Internet leans in and encourages us to take what he terms "accessible and repeatable human risks." He also says he cannot comment on the ongoing legal case. Not the one where his HQ is located, not the one in Delaware, and not even the contract dispute.

Are you fucking dead in the head, asks The Known Person On the Internet. This question is not always aimed at a specific person, and can be found across several fields of online discourse. At some point the phrase is placed on a t-shirt, which The Known Person On the Internet encourages you to purchase even though he claims it was neither his doing nor his idea.

Minor hustles are for minor men, says The Known Person On the Internet. Put that shit on a t-shirt. But no not minor like underage, minor like insignificant. Nobody's getting up the ass of The Known Person On the Internet over shit that went down almost a decade ago, or clipping him, or doing fucked shit.

Sometimes the veins in the arms and neck and face of the known person on the internet are visible like the neon behind him. This, The Known Person On the Internet says, is because of science.

I don't actually have an opinion, The Known Person On the Internet says as the pounding on the door of his HQ's ops room (second bedroom) grows louder and louder. I always act decisively and efficiently, he clarifies, which is what makes it seem like I do.

The ghosts of chat present whisper about the pounding after everything that happens happens. Most exciting thing in a long time, we agree. Maybe the pounded door should have its own podcast, we say to each other. Now that's a podcast, we say, watching the tipped over chair in the spare bedroom not move, that's a podcast we would pay good money for, even if mostly what we're paying for is to show up and wait. Just in case.

We like waiting, we agree. We just want a chance to catch the world moving when it changes around us. And, we agree, there's no harm in making sure everything that can be visible stays that way. Sunlight, like in Florida or on commemorative coins.

Louise Heller

Lanternfly Elegy

Dagny has art shows this summer—multiple—to showcase their beautiful work in Seattle while they're there for a few months. Still, when we call, I hear about how she took Slinger to the roof to poop at 4:55 am this morning, and had to investigate the building's garbage shoot, and about the gay horror porno she saw yesterday with Joe, these small details being more relevant to our weekly calls, sometimes, than the big Goods and big Bads of our lives. This week, she is in her studio, fluorescently lit and grinning at me as though she has been waiting all day for this. Some of her work is up on the wall behind her, a sea of blues and creams and browns, Bojagi, gauze and chiffon, pages from journals torn out. She admits to me that she is looking at the small image of herself on her screen with a rising sense of self loathing, signaling to her that it's time to cut her bangs.

Tonight the thunderstorm sounds at first like a garbage can being rolled to the curb. It is only when it goes on too long, tumbling and grumbling, that Kaelan and I realize it might be thunder. We open the curtains so we can see the flashes from the bed and sit up, watching, making a sound after each one.

The things we want are often the same. To make the rosemary potato pizza. To top with balsamic glaze. To lay awake together for a few minutes without speaking. Sometimes, it becomes hard to parse out my own wants from Kaelan's. I have a history with that sort of thing, years of un-wanting and of hollowing myself out, in service, ultimately, to no one. I've given up my old ways, for the most part, favoring the rush of honesty over the comfort of self-denial. We're in the kitchen, her hands on my back. We've grabbed each other to spin, for a moment, to Carole King. I've just finished chopping the onions, and we can't decide whether or not to move to Boston.

Janet and I walk through Edgerton Park, and the whole time we can hear Shakespeare in the Park performers rehearsing boisterously in the distance. Making our way through the community gardens, all the watering cans are turned upside down on top of poles, in what is probably just a policy to prevent standing water, but reads to me as some sort of sign, signal, or communication. I point out a beautiful bug and Janet says "actually, that's a lantern fly and we should kill it," an apology on her face. She leads the way to a second small park, which has a big hill overgrown with tall grasses, and a spiraling path to the top mown into it. At the top, there is a bench to stand on and take in the

surroundings, and on the way up is a dead robin. We place yellow flowers all around it and I take a picture to send to Rachel. We wonder aloud what happened to it, looking at the pattern of shed feathers and the indents in the grass, playing bird detectives.

Laying beside Kaelan in the hammock, I point out the pair of ducks making a slow, glimmering path through the water on our side of the lake, cutting blue from green in the hillside reflection. It's true, neither of us can see a pair of animals in the wild and not project our own loving onto them, saying *that's so us* or *look, it's me and you!* We might see a duo of squirrels, perched together, or a Northern Cardinal pair— one bright red and the other orange brown, both vibrant against new snow. On a walk along the trolley trail, she points out a long necked white shore bird and asks *who's that?* I surprise myself with an answer, the bird's name appearing in my mind almost before I can search for it, tossed to the forefront in some primal, intergenerational thread of bird knowledge, something I gleaned from my father or grandmother. Snowy egret? I guess, and I am right.

Writing at my desk, I search for a sweeter way to say *each day I am so lonely, bored, so full of indecision and regret.* Staring down the line at choices I'll make in life that may cause it all to go wrong. Staring too, at spotted lanternflies on the tree outside my window, how they cluster at the base of a branching limb, plotting and scheming, but I must admit again that they are very beautiful. I watch a racoon investigate the “mosquito bucket,” full of debris, rotting fruit, hose water, and a chunk of bug poison, that Kaelan fashioned the other day—the kind of thing that if not done right, will backfire majorly, creating the perfect breeding ground for thousands of mosquito babies.

Marlene has been getting into making baskets, after attending several queer basket weaving meetups—which yes, sounds like a satire of a Philadelphia event—so I will, on occasion, receive texts like the one I received a few days ago, which read “basket weaving in the bath!” with an accompanying photo. The photo was of a half finished basket, a little sudsy, between their pale wet calves, the lighting warm and dim with a few candles on the edge of the tub. This hobby and its meetups add to the growing list of activities (see: butchfemme picnic, or Dyke march with the lesbians from the grad student union, etc) that make up Marlene's gayest summer yet.

My psychiatrist has just moved houses and is in the process of unpacking, and on our video call it looks as if she's drinking wine out of a Christmas glass. She interrupts herself to laugh at this, saying she just saw herself and realized. It's

hibiscus juice, she tells me, and it *is* from a Christmas glass—holly leaves and snowflakes.

In June, we discover fireflies in our own backyard, and sit close together at our table to look out the kitchen window as they dive in and out of the garden.

I find in my orange journal: *is this a life? Something stuck in my throat? Something lodged in there, something I am unwilling to give up? Some new hope stuck coming up, or some new truth stuck going down?* I swallow hours alone, adderall, prozac, a meal replacement drink, a single tear from Kaelan's yawn, licked off her cheek. I check my phone to see Kathleen has texted me, telling me that she's made three of her friends read the poem that I sent her, because she loves it so much.

Janet comes over for dinner, though because of the broken jaw, dinner, for her, is more of a series of beverages. We make lentil soup and blend it up with the immersion blender until it's creamy, and I almost become jealous of her blended version. Janet comes with her own cloth napkin, a green gingham one that we found together at a goodwill the prior week. She also brings over a protein shake: strawberry flavored and in a can, that we decide looks alcoholic, or like an energy drink.

Across the street, I see Kaelan's two braids down her back, the new blonde streaks woven all the way through. We've pulled up to our home at the same time—I look up and am startled by her grinning at me, hair shining in the early evening sun. We spend too long deciding what to have for dinner, feet tangled together on opposite sides of the couch. We debate a walk to the store, then debate how to avoid that. We land on tofu satay, which we cook while I text Ames about their top surgery results. While stirring the onions and cabbage, I get a picture—my first glimpse of their new bare chest, the birds under their collar bones colliding above fresh, clean scars. I find myself wishing I was on the west coast, cooking for them, arriving on their doorstep with peanut sauce and cloth napkins.

Mason texts that he finally got my birthday card from weeks ago and thanks me for the zines, saying that they remind him of Lynda Barry's work—the drawings with the writing, and the humor. He's always encouraging me this way and asking if I've considered art school, telling me I should go to Parsons, things like that, so dad-like in his unhalting belief in me. He sends a picture of his own sketches of Colville and I love them, I always love his art. It reminds me of Lopez and cold spring mornings, warm summer evenings, walks along the cliffs. The rope swing.

The tall stump in the yard, which stands at least double my height, is now covered with greenery—vines in a tangle all over and a few sprouts coming from the top of it. The Fritos bag trapped in the fence is made redder and yellower by all the new verdant green. Today, in the rain, I smell dirt and fast growing things when I step outside. The tree by the car continues to drop its blossoms.

Kaelan and I pull a u-turn to stop in at the Seymour Historical Society art market. The woman behind the table full of checkered handkerchiefs asks me “for a dog, I assume?” as I am browsing (for myself) and I’m not sure what to say. We somehow keep from laughing until we are walking away towards the decorative wreaths. Browsing the antique barn, I begin wishing I was a furniture restoration dyke, who knew how to use a sander.

Ames has been working a lot in the new studio since their grand opening. I see their pictures of a table covered in heart shaped boxes and jars, waiting to be put into the kiln. When I finally get to visit, I open their studio fridge to a wall of sparkling waters. I’m told to help myself, aside from the Topo Chicos, which of course are Lane’s. We take a walk out back of the studio along the disused train tracks, picking wild blackberries and sweet peas. I tuck a bright pink bloom into the carabiner sitting at their hip, and take a picture of them with the colorful graffiti.

My phone shows me a picture of this time last year, Dagny and I at the breakfast table, both in our favorite author fan-shirts, Austen and Baldwin, and I remember how that morning, though we’d gotten up together in our shared hotel room, giggling and gossiping and intimate in a way we hadn’t been since we’d lived together years earlier, getting dressed side by side, we didn’t realize we were matching until finishing up breakfast at the ranch, getting up to clean our plates, and exclaiming at the sight of the others’ shirt, both agreeing that we had to take a picture.

It’s August, and, smelling tomatoes strongly on my fingers, having pinched small shoots from the crook of the plant’s stem to encourage it to produce fruit, I remember myself a few months ago, in doubt that I would really build a garden, hopeful but not yet trusting in myself to follow through. Now, I sit in the sun by my raised bed, replacing the Cosmos dug up by the squirrels. We’ve been in a standoff. They dig, I replant, they dig again, I replant again.

Saanvi Jain

When Lightning Asks You to Listen

*A golden shovel poem
In the style of "Truth" by author Nikki Grimes*

We'll find no mercy in silence, yet we mistake it for **the**
Answer. Stillness conceals what dares to whisper **truth**
Beneath the noises we crave. Certainty **is**
A phantom; always present, but not touched. Not **every**
Light binds. Some expose, not harsh, but with **day**
Dripping slowly into your ribcage. We forget that **we**
are stitched from contradiction: hope and doubt. Still, **rise**
Is not ascent-it is choosing to move, when nothing **is**
Guaranteed to hold. What we call peace may feel **like**
Grief in disguise. What we fear might just be **thunder**
Teaching us how to **listen**.

Caio Major

Lições do Seu Fantasma Vovô

Pois é: as vezes coisas fizer claro, when you become a ghost. You see in new ways, um novo jeito. My language skills have been slipping, português overtaking english since I died. Brazil tries to pull me back, though I continue to love Ronald Reagan, that will never change. I never did love Hitler, despite what minha filha—my daughter thought when she discovered a copy of *Mein Kampf* among my possessions. I read that book out of morbid curiosity, like most men of my generation I was compelled by the war, toward the end of my life World War II books were the only ones that held my interest. Looking back, I suspect that my mother's ghost, her Jewish blood another secret meus filhos descobrado só depois meu morto, then judged me in death for hiding this fact from them, compelled me to purchase it. That would have been the kind of dark joke she (minha mãe) would have liked. *Mein Kampf* and my Jewish ancestry were discovered close together por meus filhos, a link thus imagined between the two, my (eles imaginam) fascismo secreto a bleak byproduct of internalized self-hatred. *He voted Republican despite being Latino*, elas disseram de mim, shaking their heads. *It makes a sad amount of sense that he looked up to Hitler despite being Jewish*. Mentiras! I tell you the truth now: Eu me amava na vida, I carried myself com orgulho—pride, nunca hated myself, never. E por que um fantasma mentira? What reason do I have to lie to you? Prometo, I did not read that book as a Hitler fan.

As vezes coisas fizer mais fácil, easier to accept. Por exemplo: my granddaughter becoming my grandson. I was dead by then, haunting the family while Adriana called around to introduce himself as Adriano, he was relieved that I hadn't lived to see this. She knew I would have expressed disgust, like her uncle, meu filho—Carlos and eu, embora tenhamos brigado por muitas coisas, exchanging punches in the last years of my life like we hadn't since he was a teenager, nonetheless shared certain beliefs, the right beliefs. He followed me to death not long after being disgusted by Adriano's identity, mas quem sabe, my timeline could be wrong, the years blur when you are dead. De qualquer forma, nunca encontrei o fantasma de meu filho, I can't find him e não sei, I don't know where his ghost is hiding. Perhaps he is hiding from me, fearing a rematch, now that my ghost has taken the form of my body at its strongest and most virile.

Ghosts' stories inevitably grow circular, I cannot tell a story straightforward, particularly in English. Ainda assim, I'm getting there. Com Adriano, I have come to appreciate having one grandson, no granddaughters. It helps that Adriano has been working out. No grandson of mine should have skinny weakling arms! Verdade, my fitness obsession did not grant me long life, though our strangely-mutual obsession has helped my ex-wife, aquela vaca, outlive me, I remember all those years we spent doing resentful and furious yoga on opposite sides of greater Los Angeles, her on the Disney side, me in Glendale, trying to co-parent while hating each other's guts. Verdade, I expected all that yoga to help me live forever, or at least into my nineties, como aquela vaca, a avó de my grandchildren. Mas não deu certo para Vovô, cancer got me early.

O que...? Sim, Adriano, I was saying. Adriano is a man now and I'm proud my line ends with a grandson. A trans *neta* would be a different story, ne? Even with my ghostly understanding, I would send todo de minha fúria fantasmagórica, haunting to the best of my malevolent abilities, if he'd been born Adriano then put on lipstick and declared, *Eu sou Adriana*. Não! Longe demais, "a bridge too far."

It gets boring, spending all your ghostly hours searching for Ronald Reagan on the astral plane, so the other day I tired of haunting his presidential library and drifted over to Syracuse to check in on Adriano. Look at all the markers of masculinity he has achieved: a beautiful (white!) wife, a dog, biceps I can stand to look at, a non-shameful bench press. I care less for his literary achievements, but I suppose I am happy for him in his MFA program, studying os grandes homens machistas, revering Roberto Bolaño, Raymond Carver, Gabriel García Márquez, even that rascal David Foster Wallace, I've run into him haunting Syracuse too, we've played tennis together. At least meu neto reads male authors!

Today, I haunted a corner as Adriano argued in the classroom, defending some book about immigrants, a book I'm sure I would have hated. Immigration stories always paint us as pussified weaklings, not as virile characters possessed of patriotic spirit! I was still alive when Adriano, Adriana then, was getting his undergrad degree, and back then she would have succumbed to emotion in any debate, perhaps even cried girlish tears. But now, empowered by testosterone, he articulated himself sem emoção, sem fraqueza feminina, with humor and confidence but no feminine quaver in his voice. He won the debate as well as the respect of his male classmates and professor, they listened as they would to any man. He glanced my way as the discussion moved on, como se ele me visto, meeting my eyes, sensing my presence.

Adriano, I wish I had lived to teach you what you won't let yourself learn about manhood. Há muitas lições que você e sua mente fraca, your weak mind with its stubborn solidarity with the weaker sex, will never let yourself touch, tal como: how horny women get when you're the only man in their yoga class, how to cheat on your wife without caring when you get caught, how to throw a punch or fire a gun—you're scared for your rights como um travesti, so you've wondered if you should learn how to use a gun, but when Carlos se matou, shooting himself in the head em um morte masculina, you decided you could never allow yourself to own a gun. I would have scoffed at this and told you to man up, when I was alive, mas como um fantasma, I can see where you're coming from: I am in no hurry to see you join me during a depressive episode. Ainda não encontro seu tio, meu filho, I cannot find my son among the dead, and I have searched. Como se um fantasma, I am less guarded than in life, I can admit that the disappointment of losing Carlos perhaps led me to Adriano, the last man whose veins carry my blood.

I followed Adriano as he walked home after class. He was thinking of me, de certa forma, he was thinking about macho men he did not want to become. He was troubled by the respect he'd so easily commanded. He was looking a gift horse in the mouth! De cavalo dado, não se olha o dente, Adriano, you pussy-ass bitch. Sim, fantasmas can pick up slang, even those as old (but virile!) as me.

Adriano was thinking of me, *Mein Kampf* hidden in my bedroom closet, and the Jewish ancestry that went undiscovered until his mother got her DNA tested. He was thinking of self-hatred's warping power and shadow selves, e meus deus, sério? He was thinking about whether or not he was still a good feminist, para com isso, neto, don't ruin this for me.

I dismiss his theories on my "self-hatred," but Jung's shadow self, isso está interessante. Do ghosts have shadow selves? Talvez, mas não, I have no Jewish shadow self, isso vou negar, sempre forever deny. If travestis have shadow selves, is the shadow their born gender or the gender they become, or is it always a man, always machismo coming out on top, or from beneath? Adriano, you're smarter than you used to be, and your feminist mentors will tell you this is because you have now seen gender from both sides. But as a ghost, como seu fantasma, I will tell you what I know to be true: you are wise because men are wiser than women. You are now superior. E você vai ouvir o meu voz, you will hear my voice in your ear as you walk, with its echoes of Ronald Reagan and *Mein Kampf* and Roberto Bolaño and David Foster Wallace, whether you wish to hear me or not.

Nithya

The Witness

You notice her slogging, body worn
by years of care.
She looks like her mother now.

You look like your father.
With his likeness and afflictions.

born with beautiful eyes
you see words, the

spaces

between

them

the lips, the gulps of lying throats
a naturalized soothsayer.

Your brain is wine, older than the grape
it was born from.
The vintners like you.

time's done its cruel thing
it is and it has
the weight of three people and a saint
their deeds and memories lining your womb

You decide to cull it,
gently
the best way
to be
is not

there will be no witnesses
to this story.

Tony W. Njoroge

A Most Difficult Life: Ignorance Takes on a New Meaning in Africa

Content Warning: This piece discusses homophobia, discrimination, and hate speech directed at LGBTQ+ people in Africa. It includes depictions of social and familial rejection, historical references to medical abuse, and job loss due to sexual orientation. It directly references suicide. Readers who may be affected by these themes are encouraged to engage with care.

Homosexuality is a hot button in Africa today. Much of the fervour, however, is fueled by demagogic politicians who want to distract their subjects from the real issues that matter, like the runaway corruption and nepotism. Many politicians today are in office because they are riding high on the rampant homophobia they've created and stoked. Some use phrases such as "Homosexuals are more lethal than all natural disasters put together," and then go ahead to implement draconian laws such as life imprisonment.

I had a gay friend who was in the closet most of his short life. My friend Kamara (not his real name) and I were as close as brothers. Although we shared many happy times together, I noticed that many of the other children found him strange. Even in nursery school, he always wanted to be the mother when we played house. As the years progressed, I observed that he was acutely conscious of his appearance. I remember rebuking him often for spending so much time in front of the mirror.

When we got older and enrolled at the same boys' boarding school, Kamara made the rest of us look like a bunch of greasy mechanics. His clothes were always the cleanest, and he took a shower every day. He had long, polished nails that always got him in trouble with the teachers, and he loved to plait his hair on weekends. Sometimes, when he walked, one would think he was strutting on a catwalk. Some boys disliked him at first because he was different, but they gradually came to like and appreciate him for how unique he was.

When we talked about girls, he always seemed bored. When one of the boys managed to smuggle a dirty magazine into school, Kamara was never among the hordes fighting to get a look at it. In grade eleven, Kamara and I were both

appointed dorm captains. (There were ten dormitories with about a hundred students each.) He was the Kilimanjaro captain, and I was the Ruwenzori captain. Every Saturday, we did general cleaning of the dorms, and there was a competition organized by teachers to see which dorm was the tidiest. Kilimanjaro almost always won among the ten dorms.

Being a dorm captain came with benefits. Our school had a policy of random locker searches and pat-downs by teachers. Dorm captains were exempt from this degrading ordeal. (Nothing is more uncomfortable than one's chemistry teacher feeling his underpants while checking for contraband.) As such, many students would hide illicit goods such as marijuana, snuff, and dirty magazines in the lockers of dorm captains—for a small fee, of course. Dorm captains were also entrusted with making duty rosters, and some wealthier students bribed us handsomely to be exempted from chores such as scrubbing the dorm floors. Kamara was the only upright dorm captain who did not allow such bribes.

Kamara and I attended the same college and shared a room. Seeing that he had no interest in wooing women, I finally realized that my best friend suffered from what was called the “white man’s disease.” I went out one evening to a party and came back with two tipsy, attractive ladies, one for me and one for him. Kamara broke down in tears, and I had to kick the girls out. He finally shared with me his long-standing secret.

“Why on earth would you choose to be gay?” I asked.

Kamara stared daggers at me. “Tell me, why would anyone choose to be gay?”

“Being gay in Africa is like living with leprosy,” he continued. “Why would I wish that on myself?”

“I just don’t get it,” I said. “We were brought up in the same village and attended the same schools. Where did you lose a step?”

“I didn’t lose a step anywhere. I have always been this way,” Kamara said. “Think about it. Who would choose to be a homosexual and go through all the hatred, danger, and ridicule that come with this label?”

Seeing that Kamara was making sense, and remembering all of the distinctive mannerisms he had shown since childhood, I did my research in the coming weeks and came to realize what a fool I had been. I apologized profusely.

I read how doctors in the past had subjected gay people to practices intended to cure them. In South Africa, during the 1970s and 1980s, gay and lesbian

people were subjected to sex-change operations, chemical castration, and electrotherapy delivering shocks so severe that “[subjects’] shoes flew off.” These individuals were left mutilated but still gay.

After college, Kamara and I were scattered by the wind in pursuit of earning a living, but we spoke regularly over the telephone. In his mid-twenties, Kamara’s parents began pressuring him to settle down. “This Christmas, do not come home without a lady in your arms,” his mother would say, “and if her belly is protruding, all the better.”

I would visit the village from time to time, and I happened to bump into Kamara’s mother. She would whisper into my ear, “You have been friends with my son since childhood. You know how shy he is in the presence of ladies. Why don’t you introduce him to some of your lady friends, my child?”

“I will, mother,” I would lie. I knew she would cry out that demons had possessed her son if I revealed the truth to her. I tried dropping clever quotations if the subject ever came up in general, suggesting that homosexuality is not as simple as she assumed. But, generally, I held my tongue in her presence. It was not my place to shove Kamara out of the closet.

A week before Christmas 2021, Kamara's boss got wind of his sexual orientation and fired him. Kamara went home without a woman in his arms. Everyone was disappointed but not as much as when he told them it was because he was gay and was tired of living a lie. He said he hoped they would accept him as he was. His father shouted that it would have been better had his mother given birth to a frog than to a son like him who brought such shame to the family. "Get out and never come back," his father screamed. "The day you hear me call you my son again, take my name and give it to a dog."

Kamara hanged himself that New Year's Eve in a motel room in another part of the country. On that day, Africa lost a gifted young man. He would have made a fine leader—something greatly needed on our continent. But the sin of hateful ignorance has robbed us of his talents and presence.

My hope is that African nations begin to shed their draconian treatment of gay people. While progress is being made in certain nations, homosexuality is still legally punishable by death in countries such as Mauritania, parts of Nigeria, and areas of Somalia controlled by Islamist groups. (In a number of other countries, homosexuality can be punished by life imprisonment.) Regardless of the particular individual laws on the books across Africa, the widespread shame and ostracism wielded against gays has meant that Kamara's fate is not unique.

Homosexuals are like poetry. They are hated simply because they are not understood. Homophobic sentiment is widespread in the continent. Social discrimination, widespread violence and “corrective” rapes and murders have been documented. This forces many LGBTQ+ individuals to live in hiding, exacerbating their mental health.

We must earnestly treat each other as human beings rather than allow hatred to give way to the worst of our nature. To fail to do so will result in so much more suffering for people like my dear friend.

Kumar Sen

The Museum of Forgotten Opinions

In the heart of the city, hidden between two abandoned cinemas, stands a museum that nobody talks about—not because it is secret, but because it is too honest. Its sign reads: *The Museum of Forgotten Opinions*. Visitors enter alone, and they leave with the uneasy sense that someone has been reading their minds while they wandered the halls.

Inside, the first room is lined with glass cases containing whispers: the thoughts people had at 2 a.m. when the streets were empty, opinions they formed once and immediately discarded, the forgotten promises they meant to keep. Each whisper is catalogued, labelled, and dated. One case holds a confession of love that dissolved before it could be spoken; another, a fleeting fury at a coworker, now crystallized like amber.

A guide—who seems neither young nor old—approaches and says nothing. Instead, they gesture at a section called *Society's Almost-Truths*. The walls are hung with paintings depicting debates that never happened. In one, a figure stands at a podium, mouth open mid-sentence, the speech forever delayed. In another, a protest stalls at the edge of a public square, banners sagging as if they have lost the will to be lifted. Each frame hums faintly, as if vibrating with the energy of the unspoken.

In a narrow hallway, I see a child staring at a monitor that plays the same argument on loop: *Should we dream bigger?* Every visitor answers differently; every visitor's answer vanishes immediately, like it was never theirs to keep. Behind the monitor, a ventilation grate releases whispers of past discussions—voices folding back on themselves, disagreements that never reached a conclusion.

There is a café on the third floor, but it serves nothing edible. Instead, cups are filled with ideas. Visitors sip carefully. A taste of joy makes their cheeks ache with nostalgia. A taste of anger leaves their hands trembling. A taste of memory shows them faces they had never consciously noticed.

Somewhere, a room contains a single chair facing a blank wall. Anyone who sits hears the opinions of their future self—the self that will be forgotten sooner than expected. I sit. I hear myself apologize, the words incomplete, as if waiting for an action that has not yet happened. When I stand, the wall has changed color—a reflection of all the forgotten selves who have sat before me.

After leaving the first floors, I find myself in a section I had not noticed before: a vast hall lined with mirrors, each one reflecting someone who almost existed.

These are people who were conceived but never born, lovers who had almost met, activists whose campaigns dissolved before taking shape. Their faces shimmer and blur, sometimes smiling, sometimes frowning, as if each were aware of the infinitesimal margin between reality and what might have been.

A sign reads: *Observe with caution: empathy may leak.*

I approach a mirror and see myself—but not me as I am now. This self has taken a different path. Not braver. Not grander. Just quieter. Someone who learned how to disappear politely. I feel a pang—the faint grief of a life that would have been easier to explain. Beside me, another visitor is crying quietly, tracing the outline of a face that might have been their sibling.

Each mirror has a small keyboard beneath it. Typing a single word—*remember, forget, imagine*—causes ripples across the hall. Entire communities of almost-people flicker and rearrange themselves. One visitor types *imagine*, and a crowd of unknown faces moves in imperfect synchrony, as though briefly celebrating their own potential.

On the ceiling, an installation of suspended clocks ticks backward. Each clock marks the moment someone hesitated long enough for time to decide on their behalf. Here, time feels optional, bending to the collective curiosity of visitors. A single laugh from a child accelerates decades; a whispered regret stretches minutes toward eternity.

There is a room branching off the hall called *The Archive of Misremembered Words*. Here, phrases once spoken, misheard, misquoted, or forgotten entirely float like fireflies in the dark. Visitors catch them, hold them, and release them again. Some words cause memories to resurface; others provoke sudden insight; a few, inexplicably, make the air taste sweet and metallic.

At the centre of the hall stands a figure—tall, faceless, draped in paper scrolls—known simply as *The Curator of Could Have Been*. The Curator hands each visitor a blank notebook with the instruction: *Fill it with the people you might have been, the choices you didn't make, the ideas you almost shared*. When visitors leave, the notebooks dissolve into the air, scattering futures into the city.

I write:

I could have stayed.

I could have lied once and lived comfortably inside it.

I could have been swallowed by shadows and learned to whistle with the walls.

When I look up, other visitors are doing the same, filling notebooks that glimmer briefly before vanishing. The hall pulses with accumulated potential, a river of might-have-beens flowing unseen through the city.

Just before leaving, I realize the museum has left a trace in my own reflection. My shadow, for a moment, splits into two: one tethered to my reality, the other free to wander the corridors of abandoned possibilities.

Beyond *The Hall of Almost-People* lies a corridor that smells faintly of rain on concrete. The walls are covered with thousands of tiny glass boxes, each containing a single moment that was never acted upon—a word never spoken, a letter never sent, a gesture of kindness or cruelty withheld.

A voice whispers: *Every choice not made still exists.*

The boxes hum softly. Some glow with warm golden light—compassion not shared, apologies swallowed but meant. Others flicker coldly, containing anger never released, betrayals never confessed, regrets that linger in shadow. Touching a box triggers a vision: the moment unfolding as it might have been, consequences branching outward.

I pick up a small box labelled *Tuesday, 3:42 p.m.* Inside, a teenager hesitates before speaking to a stranger on a bus. When the vision ends, I glimpse the teenager—real, somewhere in the city—walking past the museum doors. The box's glow dims, as if part of the unrealized future has been quietly returned.

At the corridor's end, a curator presses a small vial into my palm. Inside is a single unsaid sentence from my own life, bottled and waiting.

Outside, the streets appear ordinary. People head to work, scroll through their feeds, meet, greet, forget. Still, each carries something small—an adopted opinion, a borrowed dream, the memory of a life not lived. The city moves with a subtle dissonance, quietly changed by what almost surfaced.

When I return weeks later, the museum is gone. No one recalls where it once stood, only that something lingers. For a moment, the world feels unsettled—sidewalks slanted, conversations suspended mid-thought, clouds hovering as if undecided about falling.

And in alleys, cafés, libraries, and empty theatres, fragments of those forgotten opinions continue to whisper—*imagine, disrupt, forget, remember, imagine again.*

Owen Stanford

Sniping a Pop Culture Reference

Pop culture references in the media we consume are not hard to come by these days. A cynic would argue that all these references are the logical endpoint to a self-cannibalizing culture and while there is a kernel of truth in that statement, the whole situation is far more nuanced in my eyes. There is such a thing as a good pop culture reference; when a movie, tv show, book, etc. points to something outside of its own canon, either for humor or to make some larger point. When done well it can be very effective. When done poorly it can cause a lethal amount of eye-rolls in the viewer or otherwise general cringe. My go-to example of a singular pop culture reference done badly comes from the novel *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett. In a novel full of elements that could be considered offensive, the thing that offended me the most personally was when the main white lady Skeeter is “driving back over the Lake Pontchartrain bridge with the radio playing a band called the Rolling Stones...” A tip for aspiring writers, especially one wanting to write historical fiction like *The Help*: please don’t do that. It will show everyone just how much of a hack you are.

But if that’s how a reference can be done badly, then how can a reference be done well? The way I see it, a writer writing in a pop culture reference into their story is a bit like a sniper perched up somewhere, patiently waiting to take out a target, viewing them with the scope of the gun, finger on the trigger, and preferably a silencer attached to the muzzle, like Bradley Cooper in *American Sniper*. The sniper with their finger on the trigger is the author of a book or the movie or show we’re watching. The bullet firing out of the rifle is the reference itself. And the soon-to-be-dead target is the audience. If the piece of media is LHO, then the audience is JFK.

The thing about snipers is that all they really need is one shot. The bullets they use are so large and the speed at which they fire out of the gun is so fast, it doesn’t require much else to successfully take out a target. If a sniper is patient, trained well, and aims right at the target in the right place at the right time, boom. Target down. A good pop culture reference works the same way. It’s a fundamental rule of comedy as well; timing is everything. This is why many pop culture references are used for laughs. In *Avengers: Infinity War*, just as an example, when Ebony Maw first arrives on Earth searching for the Infinity Stones, Tony Stark bluntly tells him to “get lost, Squidward!” This is a reference that hits it

right on the target. Much like how a sniper may be taking part in an assassination attempt for any number of reasons whether political, for revenge, or for a sense of duty to restore order in the world. He also may have been hired to carry out the assassination by a third party for their own convoluted reasons. There's a lot going on in this reference. More than meets the eye.

For one, there's the surface level humor in that *Ebony Maw* does in fact look a bit like Squidward. Secondly, it is a little bizarre to hear someone like Iron Man reference a kids' show, adding a hint of absurdity into this bit. It also implies a lot of things; it implies that in this universe of superheroes, aliens, gods, alternate dimensions, and even some magic, somehow *SpongeBob SquarePants* exists. Like I said, right on the target.

Speaking of *SpongeBob*, another good reference can be found in the episode "Graveyard Shift" where, after showing that the "hash-slinging slasher" that Squidward had been teasing *SpongeBob* about in order to frighten him as they work the night shift was just a nervous guy looking to work at the Krusty Krab (it all makes perfect sense), that leaves them to wondering "who was flickering the lights?" The lights on cue start flickering again and when they all turn to see who it is, it's revealed to be Count Orlok, a vampire from the 1922 German Expressionist film *Nosferatu*, flipping the light switch up and down. The gang reacts to him with a chummy, humorous "Nosferatu!" The vampire smiles and then the episode ends. This reference works mainly due to how random it is. For something to reference *Nosferatu*, especially a show directly aimed at children, it takes a lot of guts. It takes a lot of guts to write that and put it out on television for everyone to see (unless you didn't have cable). Like, why would Count Orlok be in Bikini Bottom messing with *SpongeBob* and Squidward like that? Doesn't he have better things to do? Also, what kid would understand what this is referencing? Even an adult from the time this episode aired, 2002, would they be able to get the reference to a silent film from eighty years before? On paper, this reference shouldn't work. And yet, for some odd reason, it does, and it has since endured as one of the show's most iconic jokes. Direct hit.

Much like how a successful hit by a sniper can inspire conspiracy theories about what actually happened or discussions and debates about whether the assassination was even ethical, a good pop culture reference has layers. It makes you think about why the reference works and what specifically causes it to work. However, much like a pop culture reference, a sniping attempt can go badly. You might just accidentally hit someone else, like when Moneypenny accidentally shot James Bond off a train in *Skyfall*. Or, not as directly bad as shooting an

innocent bystander but still not very good, the bullet might just whizz past your target and hit an inanimate object, giving away your position and cementing yourself as a failure of an assassin. The example from *The Help* I gave earlier is one such bullet that totally misses the target. There's no creativity, no imagination, no curiosity to it. It's just the book going "Hey, we're in the sixties, and The Rolling Stones were also in the sixties. Funny how that works, right?" Sure, speaking purely in cold hard facts, The Rolling Stones did get their start around this time so it makes sense that someone from the deep south wouldn't have heard of them yet. But that's basically all there is to this reference: pointing out The Stones were just getting their start at this time like that's somehow clever. It's like when a comedian does a bad routine and then waits for the audience to react before going "Eh? Eh? See what I did there?" If the Nosferatu SpongeBob reference is Lee Harvey Oswald, the Help Rolling Stones is John Hinckley Jr.

But what do you do if you miss? If you only had the ability to take one shot, you would probably just cut your losses and move on. But if you are determined to take out the target, you can always try again. And even if you did hit the target, it may not have been enough to kill them. Maybe you got them in the arm or the leg or even the stomach; areas that will stop them in their tracks but aren't necessarily fatal. Sometimes, a second bullet is required. And in fiction, you do have the ability to put in more than one pop culture reference and still be okay. Back in *Avengers: Infinity War*, before the Squidward line and when Tony Stark and Bruce Banner reunite, Tony tells Bruce that the Avengers have broken up. Banner reacts with incredulity and confusion. "Broke up? Like a band? Like the Beatles?" To once again needlessly overanalyze a pop culture reference (because everyone loves it when someone does that), this one works because Bruce is essentially comparing a group of people who broke up for reasons concerning politics, violence, and betrayal to a rock band who broke up mainly for creative differences and just needing a break from each other.

Now while those two references in *Infinity War* work, they work in part because of how decently spaced they are between each other. They're a good spread apart and in between them are other kinds of jokes and the actual story progressing. This is key; you shouldn't need to overload your story with pop culture references much like how a sniper doesn't need to overload his target with bullets from his rifle. At that point, the sniper's cover would already have been blown and everyone would think that they're just sloppy. Media with way too many references are like this; think of something like *Ready Player One* or any episode of *The Big Bang Theory*. Works where the references aren't a bonus

addition or a fun, once-in-a-while thing; they essentially *are* what they reference, with not a lot of other substance to them. No sauce under the cheese. If I listed every reference in *Ready Player One*, the list would be longer than the book and movie combined and *The Big Bang Theory* doesn't so much celebrate nerd culture and references as it does utterly mock and ridicule them (every goddamn reference the show does ends in an obnoxious laugh track signaling the nerdiness should be mocked and ridiculed). Worse yet, projects like these and their references could potentially cause the viewer to just stop watching them. Because after all, why would you watch something that just references other works when you could just as easily watch the references themselves?

But excessive violence can serve a purpose in some extreme instances. You ever wonder why, during hits or whacks carried out by the mob, they shoot a person so many times to the point where you have to pull out *The Simpsons* clip of a kid screaming "Stop! Stop! He's already dead!"? It's to show that this is what happens if you ever do the mob wrong. Do you really want to end up with so many holes in you? Like Sonny Corleone in *The Godfather*? Then don't fuck with the mafia. The excessive violence has a point. It may be hard to do with a sniper rifle, but a tommy gun? It can be done.

An example of this in the pop culture sphere would be a show like *Stranger Things*. The show is often criticized for having way too many references to 1980s pop culture, to the point where it overtakes whatever substance the show has. And, sometimes, it does. But do the references serve a larger point? What is the show actually saying with these references? The media that the characters in *Stranger Things* consume, from *Dungeons & Dragons* to the music of the Clash and Kate Bush (among various other needle drops) to, because it's the eighties, obviously, *Star Wars*, is how they understand and come to terms with the frequently bizarre and disturbing world events around them. The monsters and villains from *Dungeons and Dragons* are the given names of the actual monsters plaguing Hawkins, *Star Wars* allows the kids to describe certain adult things or other inexplicable phenomenon they might not understand (Hopper's "betrayal" in season one being compared to Lando, Eleven's powers being compared to Yoda), and the songs often serve as an escape device for their characters to help them out of dire situations whether at home (The Clash's "Should I Stay or Should I Go?") or from an actual nightmare dimension (Kate Bush's "Running Up That Hill (A Deal With God)"). Can the references be a little cheesy, trite, and eye-rolley? Yes, they can. But I believe they come from a real place of love and sincerity for the past and the characters who reference them. And honestly, it's a real thing people do. Consuming media is often a way to both escape and understand the

ever increasing cruel world around us. *Stranger Things* is just the idea pushed to an extreme point. I'll take it any day over other works whose references seem to only serve for cheap laughs and causing the viewer to reenact the Leonardo DiCaprio pointing meme.

There are other metaphors and analogies I could make comparing the art of making a pop culture reference to the act of sniping. For example, if a work seems to reference its past self in a less than sincere way (anything Disney farts out these days), it would be the equivalent of a sniper turning the rifle on themselves and blowing their brains out. But since that's kinda gross and depressing I won't talk about it. I think I've said enough; hopefully, you get what I'm trying to say. Making a pop culture reference and making it well takes a lot of work, more than seems apparent. Much like how sniping takes a lot of work. There is one key difference between making a pop culture reference and sniping though. If you make a pop culture reference badly, you'll be made fun of, endlessly ridiculed online for years to come. If you fail at assassinating someone, I don't think people will even remember your name, let alone what you did. However, just like making a pop culture reference in a way that's good, if you succeed at hitting your target, you may just go down in the history books.

Rayni Wekluk

Ice Cream Truck

I am summer sprinkler-plant shopping, picking up fresh
sourdough from Grandpa. Milk in the cupboard.

Mind, absent. Holy hell on the highway, windows
down in March. I get a call, I give a call. My IUD
consultation is Friday. I am already pregnant
with myself. Supposedly, I love you. How can I be so
cantered? Gut talk. *Want to grab dinner tonight?*
Walk by the house on Batt Blvd. where a cereal bowl
and spoon sit unturned in the lawn?

You are not the love of my life. Francis is
your Catholic name. I saw a shooting star right here
in the city. Blacked out-remember I forgot
to make a birthday wish last year with you
standing beside me? My cake had spiders on it. Daniel
is your father's name. Pain is when

I say *Universe, walk with me* and no prayer
churns you. If I look good, I feel good. Top-shelf red.
Break the capers, break the bread. Take my name
under your tongue. Bird in girl world,
plenty of sky to hold each night. Plenty of moons to turn
you nothing-ward. After so long, I sing.

David Earl Williams

Two Poems

PICTURE THIS #10

PICTURE THIS #10:

THE WEASEL'S CLAUSE,
A SHORT, A PARTIAL HISTORY...

N there was that time, as usual,
when Louis Farrakhan was selling 100%
Columbian caffeinated coffee—
n David Duke was selling 100% Colombian decaf coffee—
as usual
and their commercials were running back to back on the TV
as usual
so that it began to seem like, as usual,
they were selling the same
full-flavored self-rising encyclopedias, glossaries, pictionaries,
medium-roast
and coffee creamers... as usual...

And, then, that same non-miraculous year when the holi-daze
come on...
as usual
and business and bid-ness continued, as usual...
n, as usual, Martha White flour fell from the skies like magic
outside our
usual windows
as provided by Minnie Pearl... & Aunt Jemina...
as advertised at Nashville and Brooklyn— and Intergalatically—
M-MMM-GOOD!---
as usual, and rose, as advertised...
6 to 12 inches in places, as usual

onto the Standard and Poor's Fortune 500 Fix'Em-Mix'Em-
Confuse'Em to Hell Reports...
as usual,
for our all-new "end-o-the-whirl-day-to-come" Screaming Day
Celebrations...

WITH SAVINGS! and promises and redemptions for everyone
who really, really wanted it—
as usual—
POP! goes the Weasel Clauses— !
And we booked the marching bands and ballons
as usual
to accompany the wheedling and whining and bargaining
that comes with the vertigo of angsty ending-ness...
and bought the TV spots for the "end-o-the-whirl sale"
right between the coffees
as usual, that and nearly every year:

The End!...

of a business cycle...

M-mmm M-mmm M-MMM...

o, that is: REAL GOOD COFFEE, NEIGHBORS!

15% off— if you— ACT NOW!

IT'S 11 P.M. WEDNESDAY

IT'S 11 P.M. WEDNESDAY,
SAID SOME SMART ASS
SON OF A DAY OF THE WEEK... YESTERDAY—
I CAN'T REMEMBER WHICH, BUT...

“... Give it an hour...
It'll be 'Theirs Day' — just that soon “, he said n snapped his fingers,
“As if it didn't belong to you, too— “ he adds—
“But you know what they're like... “

... I think it was Endless Bitching Day said it
or some other son of a Bitch-Bitch-Bitch... well,
anyway, he/she was drunk /
then he/she fell off the porch...
Into Theirs Day... head first

after a “little “ throwing up...
n that was that—
the beer was all gone
n Wednesday was finally truly over

Author biographies

Amanda Bordrup is a Vancouver-based poet, documentarian, and music journalist, who dedicates her time uplifting artists and musicians in the lower mainland through community events, videography, writing, and interviews. Of all her endeavors, writing poetry has been the most consistent, and longest running passion of hers. Her language consists of topics like coping with grief, seeking humanitarian meaning in natural landscapes, and freedom in movement. It is the purpose of every poem to dissect the smaller moments of life when the larger feelings feel overwhelming.

Nick Crowley is a writer and a social worker. His work has recently appeared in *Arena*, *Rabbit Poetry*, and *Locative Magazine*.

Alyssa Curcio is a reproductive justice activist and lawyer whose advocacy has been covered by *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and *NBC News*. Her poetry has been featured in *Berlin Literary Review*, *Pinky Magazine*, *Writers Resist*, *Screen Door Review*, and elsewhere. A Virginia native, Alyssa currently lives in New York City.

Alice de Hubp is a writer and teacher from Porto Alegre, Brazil. She is an alumna of the University of Texas at Austin (B.Sc. '20) and Arizona State University (M.Ed. '25). She lives in Mexico City with her partner and cat. Alice's fiction and poetry have been published in *Juniper Zine*, *The Morgue Mag*, *Lunae Lit Review*, the *B'K*, and *Blue Crystal Lit's Echoes of All Hallows' Eve* collection. Her work was longlisted for the *Bath Flash Fiction award* and is published in its tenth anniversary anthology.

Laura Flight is a writer and musician who lives in Ohio with their cat Flash, who bites. She has a BA in Biology and is an Eagle Scout. She loves sending letters, camping, and playing the game Celeste.

Nicholas Grider's story collections include *Misadventure* (A Strange Object/Deep Vellum) and *Forest of Borders* (Malarkey).

Louise Heller is a multidisciplinary artist and writer from the Coast Salish lands known as Seattle, WA. She enjoys smushing together art mediums and disregarding genre. Find more of their work in *Allium*; *A Journal of Poetry & Prose*, *Sinister Wisdom*, *Fruitslice*, *Jeopardy Magazine*, and on Instagram @louise.printsandthings.

Caio Major is a Latino trans man and a graduate student in the MFA-Fiction program at Syracuse University. He has published fiction in *Coffin Bell Journal*, nonfiction in *So To Speak* and *Plentitudes*, and has fiction forthcoming in *Exist Otherwise*. You can read more of his writing at his blog, *Second Adolescence* (caiomajor.substack.com).

Samantha Moya is a writer and Political Science instructor. Her work has been featured in *Serotonin Press*, *The Raven Review*, *Epoch Press*, *Tension Literary*, *Anti-Heroin Chic*, *Burningword*, *Hole in the Head Review*, and *The Poetry Question*. She is originally from Albuquerque, New Mexico and currently resides in Denver, Colorado with her husband and two dogs. She can be found at Twitter/X and Instagram @samanthalmoya.

Nithya is a South Indian feminist poet drawn to the quiet art of archiving human connection — its tenderness, its gore and glory, its everyday beauty. Beyond poetry, she works alongside West African farmers to advance social equity and nourish communities through food security and nutrition projects. She is currently a reader at the *Usawa Literary Review*. She can be found on Instagram as the_etalquill.

Tony W. Njoroge is a writer in Kenya. He studied English and Literary Studies at Laikipia University, Kenya. He works as a teacher and has been published in various magazines such as *Pen and Possibility*, *Merion West* and *October Hill*.

Kumar Sen is a mathematician from India, currently pursuing his Master's degree. He has a keen interest in cultural reflection and literary writing, and is also a musician, composer, amateur magician, and bibliophile.

Owen Stanford is a writer and storyteller born and raised in Spokane, Washington. Ever since he was young, he's wanted to take random, seemingly crazy ideas from his head and put them out into the open for all to see. He enjoys just getting to sit down and lock in while writing something from the deepest recesses of his brain. In his free time, he enjoys playing video games, listening to Twenty-One Pilots, and watching RedLetterMedia's Best of the Worst series.

Rayni K. Wekluk is the author of *Garbage City Poems* (Thirty West Publishing House). Her poetry and nonfiction is published in *Passages North*, *The Linden Review*, *Collision*, *The Goodlife Review*, and others. She holds a BFA in Creative Writing (Poetry) and a BA in English (CNF) from The University of Nebraska Omaha.

David Earl Williams, The Absurdilachain, is a writer of absurdist anti-dada dadaist poetry for sure as hell rollin' in the aisles, barkin' at the moon, screechin' in p.h.d.-ese dada-dogmatic times. He has published the chapbook *A.I. YOKOHAMA YANKEES TWELVE, A.I. RIO-ATLANTA DANTES 36 LONG- 12" ... MYSTERIOUSLY TIED AFTER 9... OR "THE SOCK PUPPET MELODRAMA" AND OTHER ANTI-DADA DADAIST POEMS* (C22 Press).