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Before the sun rises across the horizon, the confused rooster crows to signal the start of a new day. Raju lethargically climbs out of his mattress and steps out from his trailer. The frigid, cold air sends chills down his spine. He cleans himself by a pipe, picks up a shovel, and heads off to work. Every year, thousands of migrant workers travel to foreign lands in search of job opportunities to support their wives and children. Thrust into alien lands, they are forced to adapt to new cultures, values, and people. Some even have to live in harsh conditions and undergo starvation or injustice. Comparatively, the cloud forests of Costa Rica are home to more than a thousand species of tropical birds that are forced to leave due to increasing temperatures. Ornithologists have noticed that the appearance of birds has decreased significantly over the years; populations have shifted towards the poles and higher regions as temperatures in the forests continue to increase gradually. Even then, the birds are not moving fast enough in response to climate change. Birds that move to new locations have to compete with existing species for food and habitat. Various species have not been able to adapt as quickly as others to the new change in environment.

In their book *Winged Sentinels: Birds and Climate Change*, Janice Wormworth and Çağan Şekercioğlu write that, “birds are . . . sentinels, the quintessential ‘canaries in the coal mine’ of dangerous environmental change. Highly visible, mobile and reactive to changes in climate, they are among key indicators of global warming. If we were oblivious to the present changes in Earth’s climate, a careful look at birds’ patterns of responses over recent decades would warn us that some sort of widespread and systematic change is afoot” (3). From the time Al Gore started his campaign to fuel efforts towards green energy, the media and its critics have accused him of masking political agenda behind a seemingly noble cause. Some would even go as far to label global warming as a conspiracy, a huge hoax used by the elite to control the lives of the masses (Delingpole). As a result, the controversy of global warming is shrouded with doubt, cynicism, and political agenda. Nonetheless, Wormworth and Şekercioğlu argue that birds have been signaling the earth’s warming for a number of years, but humans have not heeded their warning.

Birds, the sentinels of climatic changes, play a critical ecological role in every corner of the globe. Wormworth and Şekercioğlu explain, “From penguins pursuing ocean prey to depths of hundreds of metres to tiny hummingbirds whirring through tropical forest to pollinate bromeliads, [they] possess an astonishing diversity of ecological function, unsurpassed among vertebrates” (5). Alongside bees and other mammals, birds disperse seeds through pollination or ingestion. After eating seeds from fruits or flowers, they fly off to another tree and excrete the seeds from their system. In this way, they carry the seeds to other regions of the forest. Seagulls and other birds in coastal areas promote the growth of moss when they step on mossy rocks and fly to other areas. Moss plays a crucial role in maintaining the acidity and nitrogen levels of aquatic ecosystems. Without birds, insects would proliferate and forests would diminish; the imbalance of ecosystems would cause unprecedented and possibly irreversible consequences to the earth.

Humans have affected the environment since they began to clear forests and swamps to build farms, houses, and factories. In fact, “Today, roughly one in eight bird species face the threat of global extinction from wide-ranging impacts, with habitat destruction being the most serious present-day hazard” (Wormworth and Şekercioğlu 4). Heavy deforestation from industrialization and agriculture has destroyed the homes of many living organisms in forests including birds especially in developing countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. The rapid rate of decline in bird population should,
in the least, alarm humans that the earth will face drastic consequences in the near future if they do nothing to change the present situation.

Michael Nores, an ornithologist who studies birds in tropical and subtropical forests of South America, notes that “bird activity and diversity in tropical and subtropical forests of South America have apparently decreased markedly, which could be associated with climate change.” Mores carried out studies in Iguazu National Park, Argentina. In a five-day study in June 1975, he recorded “120 species, 50% of which were common or fairly common” (Nores). Nevertheless, he repeated the same study twenty-three years later and found “only 48 species and 1-2 individuals per species in most cases.” Additionally, “bird activity was very different in the two surveys: in 1975, it had been unceasing throughout the day, but in 1998, it was in general very low and … there was no bird activity 80% of the time” Nores illustrates the immensity of this global crisis. Even in a national reserve protected from human activity, the numbers of birds continue to decrease. This suggests that climate change is a possible threat to bird populations. Admittedly, correlation does not prove causation.

Climate change not only causes an increase in global temperature, but also changes precipitation patterns. As greenhouse gases trap more heat energy in the earth’s atmosphere, the heat energy disperses towards the poles and decreases the strength of air current. This causes changes in the pattern and timing of precipitation. Increased heat energy also causes humid air at the equator to become warmer and carry more water. As a result, “rainfall is expected to become more intense in their tropics, but the periods between rainfall events are expected to lengthen” (Wormworth and Şekercioğlu 175). These circumstances lead to “mismatches between food supplies and reproductive timing among tropical birds that breed seasonally” (175). The consequences of these mismatches will be explained in detail later in the essay.

Tropical birds are especially susceptible to the effects of climate change as their “ranges tend to be narrow in both geographic and the climatic sense” (Wormworth171). In Biology-online.org, “range” is defined as “the set of conditions throughout which an organism naturally occurs” (“Range”). We read, “Elevational ranges are narrower in the tropics than in the temperate regions. These narrow ranges reduce the likelihood, under global warming, that a population’s current distribution will overlap with its range of suitable climate in the future. This could constrain a population’s ability to disperse, and elevate its extinction risk” (Wormworth and Şekercioğlu 171). In other words, temperatures in tropical regions vary less than in temperate regions because they receive relatively equal amounts of sunlight all year round. Rapoport’s Rule states that “range size tends to decrease toward the Equator” (Nores). As a result, organisms in the tropical region are more vulnerable to an increase in temperature than those in temperate regions.

Additionally, timing is absolutely essential in the tropical rainforest. The “important and energetically demanding events in bird’s annual cycles” are timed carefully “to coincide with optimal environmental conditions, such as abundant food for raising young” (Wormworth and Şekercioğlu 32). Birds generally time their breeding seasons; thus their young hatch in the rainy season when food is abundant. Climate change alters precipitation intensity and duration. Although “some birds appear to be shifting their seasonal activities in ways that allow them to track climate change. Others, however, are mistimed or mismatched . . .” (32). Wormworth and Şekercioğlu write that the offspring of birds who cannot adapt to climate change will potentially decrease in number or have lighter weight due to malnutrition.

Even if tropical birds can move towards cooler regions of the earth fast enough, they have to compete with the existing population for food and habitat. Çağan Şekercioğlu’s article titled The Effects of Climate Change on Tropical Birds contains a case study of “the tropical cloud forests of Monteverde, Costa Rica.” As increased temperatures lift the cloud base and reduce mist frequency of the cloud forests,
lowland bird species should move upwards in search of the conditions in which they are used to living. Unfortunately, more aggressive species in the higher regions would prevent them from moving upwards.

Şekercioğlu also discusses the increasing importance of cavities in trees as temperature increases. Tropical birds make their nests in holes or hollows in trees as they provide safe nesting cavities from higher temperatures outside. As temperatures increase, “cavity-nesters such as woodpeckers, owls, and parrots will face more competition for . . . hollows.” Hollows in trees provide shade from outer heat. Birds that previously did not require hollows would need them to shield themselves from increasing temperature. With that in mind, birds will also have to compete with other cavity-dwelling mammals. Another key point is that human population will continue to increase and “reach 9 billion by 2050” (Şekercioğlu). This causes an increase in food demand and will result in an increase of deforestation for agriculture. The bird population’s ability to carry out range shift is further complicated as they have to deal with competition for habitat and habitat loss due to deforestation.

A point often overlooked is the availability of resources for bird species due to temperature change. According to Şekercioğlu, “different types of birds will have varying rates of success in coping with these changes. Success may depend on whether birds’ preferred food sources successfully track climate change and shift to these new vegetation zones or, alternatively, how well the bird species adapt to new vegetation and food sources.” To put it differently, when birds migrate to a new location, the food sources that they prefer to eat may not have shifted as fast as they have. The birds would have to adapt to the new vegetation in the new location. This will prove to be difficult especially if birds with beaks used for consuming pollen move to locations that have less flowers and many fruits with hard shells.

More compelling evidence is found in László Garamszegi’s Climate Change Increases the Risk of Malaria in Birds. Garamszegi, a faculty member from the department of Evolutionary Ecology of Doñana Biological Station in Spain, states, “Human-induced climate change may alter both the geographic range and local abundance of malaria pathogens.” Rise in temperature causes increase in rainfall, extending the breeding season of mosquitoes. It also “increases the time window of malaria transmission resulting in a larger number of generations of parasites per year that can positively affect parasite abundance” (Garamszegi). In other words, an increased number of parasites increases the number of offspring, causing an exponential, non-linear increase. Furthermore, malaria pathogens benefit from an increase in temperature because they can only incubate mosquitoes at temperatures above 15°C. Global warming increases the distribution and prevalence of malaria pathogens, and “Even the conservative estimates of change predict that . . . malaria will spread to higher latitudes and altitudes, and consequently, the disease will show up in places where it was completely absent before or has been eradicated in the past” (Garamszegi). The increasing likelihood of malaria pathogens not only threatens the existence of birds, but also the health of humans.

The National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases states that malaria is caused by “a single-celled parasite from the genus Plasmodium” (“Understanding”). Plasmodium can cause malaria in humans and animals. It requires a mosquito from the genus Anopheles and a vertebrate host to proliferate. Interestingly, the National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis states that “birds with avian malaria have been used as model systems for studying the pathogenesis and treatment of malaria in humans” (“Malaria”). It is believed that Europeans introduced rare birds that may have been the source to avian malaria to Hawaii in 1826. As a result, wild populations that did not have resistance towards this new disease died in large numbers.

In his study of Galápagos finches, Charles Darwin noticed that the bird population evolved in response to its environment. The size and shape of the finches’ beaks adapted to the availability of food sources. Şekercioğlu writes, “most vertebrates will be unable to evolve rapidly enough to adapt to anthropogenic climate change, exacerbated by extensive loss; bird species will be lost at a far higher rate
than the rate of the evolution of new species.” Although tropical birds have longer life-spans on average than birds from temperate biomes, they have a lower tolerance for climatic variability. The longer life-span of these birds also results in them reproducing less often and not being able to evolve as quickly. An example of birds that show physiological adaptions in response to increase in temperature is the Scarlet-Chested Sunbird in Uganda. Ornithologists have found that open habitat sunbirds have “reduced thermal conductance, better insulation and greater ability to tolerate fluctuating temperatures than do forest sunbirds” (Şekercioğlu).

Even if birds can physiologically adapt to changes in global climate, a separate problem is posed by increase of temperature. Global warming increases the amount of energy and humidity in a climate system. This in turn increases climatic variability which “is likely to increase the magnitude and frequency of extreme weather events, such as heat waves, droughts floods, cold spells, ‘once-in-a-century’ storms and tropical cyclones” (Şekercioğlu). Extreme weather events destroy the homes of birds and health of rainforests. Even if birds can cope with 2°C of change in average temperature, increased numbers of extreme weather events will lead to the destruction of their habitats and reduction of food resources. Rainforests damaged by cyclones take many years to recover, especially if they depend heavily on birds for seed dispersal.

Birds play an integral role to ecosystems around the world. Whether anthropogenic or not, the rapid decline of bird species should serve as a signal that the earth is changing at a rate with which birds cannot cope. Their extinction would mean the disruption of biological communities across the globe. Climate change, coupled with industrialization and deforestation in developing countries, threatens bird populations in tropical rainforests including reserves. Global warming causes changes in patterns of precipitation, which results in mismatching of reproductive season with rainy seasons. Consequently, the number and size of offspring declines in bird populations that fail to adapt to changes in precipitation patterns. Extension of rainy seasons also causes an increase in breeding periods of mosquitoes; increased temperatures enable malaria pathogens to incubate easier and drive mosquitoes to higher elevations. Warming also drives lowland birds to higher altitudes where more competition with existing population exists. More animals will compete against one another for hollows or holes in trees to cope with increasing temperatures. This problem is further exacerbated by the fact that organisms in tropical biomes have smaller range sizes. Solid evidence points towards the truth that global warming poses a threat to the existence of birds. The question of whether we could or should do anything to save the earth is a separate question for us to answer.

Works Cited

“Boom!” I jerked up in bed, my heart racing and my palms moist. The sound of another tank firing cut through the black air followed by the rhythmic pounding of machine guns. I sat in the thick darkness of the loft trying to calm myself from the abrupt awakening. *They’re just practicing,* I told myself, taking a deep breath. *Yesterday we heard them practicing out in the fields.* . . . I tried to ignore the fact that yesterday the sound of artillery had been miles away, and this was the middle of the night. . . . “Boom!” This time the boards underneath me trembled. *Well, maybe I just didn’t feel it before?* But I knew the commotion was closing in, and I could feel the clammy sweat on my hands again. I sat still, listening to the guns, but I heard no screams, no cries of terror or pain. Everything was quiet, even sleepy, underneath the din of artillery.

My mind went back to the day before. I thought of the war that Yoel had described, and the devastation it had brought to the Golan Heights only forty-four years ago. Since then there had been peace in the sliver of Israel that was jammed up against the borders of Jordan and Syria. *And the part,* I thought, *that still holds so much of the simplistic beauty from thousands of years.* . . .

Footsteps echoed from the darkness below, and suddenly the front room light was flicked on. Warm light flooded the small cabin, poking its way up to the loft where I still sat on my makeshift bed. I knew Dad was trying to decide what to do. The curtain rings squeaked on the iron bar as Dad looked out the window into the dusty darkness of a dry Israeli night.

I thought again of the bomb shelter that stood twenty feet from our cabin, its impenetrable, concrete walls and its cold, firm metal door. I glanced out the small window, but all I could see was the dirt road in the lamplight. There was no movement. The grass by the side of the road stood tall and still, and I saw no forms darting past to the safety of the shelter.

Barbed wire and warning signs clogged my mind as I waited for Dad to tell me we had to evacuate. The day before, we had traveled through the Golan Heights in Ori’s car. *If you can call it that,* I thought, picturing the odd vehicle. His Jeep was old, rickety, and covered in a fresh layer of rust. On that “safari,” as Ori had called it with his usual exuberance, we had seen the barbed wire that surrounded miles of deceivingly lush fields. We had read the signs that stated in bold, white letters on bright red backgrounds, “Danger, Mines,” in Hebrew, Arabic, and English. Ori had told us how a child had died after getting caught in the barbed wire just the winter before. His happy and ironically carefree face had suddenly turned hard as he told the story and expressed his deeply rooted hatred for the army and fighting. His flying white curls had bounced energetically with every heartfelt gesture of emotion.

Another image of Ori came to mind, growing brighter and clearer as I remembered his words. We had been resting in the shade of the trees by the war memorial. He was smoking, and the smoke drifted lazily upwards, dispersing as it went until it finally vanished and blended with the blue of the sky. He had gotten up briskly and pointed to a man and his son walking along the path. “You see that man and that boy?” he asked in his thick Hebrew accent.

“Yes,” I affirmed glancing at the two striding side by side. “The father is telling his son of the battle that he fought in. You can see it in his face. He is serious.”

Ori shook his head. “War is hell,” he simply said before jumping into the waiting jeep.
And was I going to experience that right now? “Boom!” The window beside me quaked, and my heart nearly leapt out of my throat. Footsteps sounded from the front room again, and I wondered if I should go down. *No, Dad would call me if he thought we really needed to leave,* I told myself firmly. The light was flicked off, and I lay slowly back onto the mattress. “Boom!” The window behind me didn’t tremble this time. I lay there, listening to the clamor of artillery slowly fade, and the next thing I knew it was morning. Everything was silent.

We had a traditional Israeli breakfast that morning with Yoel and Nimrod, Ori’s son. We each sat with a piping hot cup of Turkish coffee with cardamom in front of us. The olives, thick yogurt, bread, finely cut cucumbers with parsley, and many spreads were neatly set in a basket on the table. The aroma of fresh food was caught on the slight breeze, and drifted enticingly over to where I sat at the table. “So, what was all the noise last night?” my dad asked his co-worker. “I wasn’t sure if we were under attack,” he added half-jokingly.

“Well, where do you want the army to practice, in Tel Aviv?” Yoel replied with a laugh, obviously surprised that anyone would have to ask such a question, and after a few more words on the subject Dad, Yoel, and Nimrod started talking about business. Listening for a while, I ate my breakfast but soon tuned them out. I thought of how normal last night was for the people of the Golan Heights, how used to waking up at 4:45 in the morning to the sound of raging artillery they must be, and how real war is for so many people.
The Unfairness of the Fair Trade Coffee System

What if someone told you that there was a lot of unfairness in the cup of fair trade coffee you drank this morning? Or that the cup of coffee of Arabica blend from Mexico actually had some fair trade certified coffee from Brazil mixed in? Or that the extra money you paid for your fair trade certified coffee beans will not end up in some poor coffee farmer’s pocket? “Alternative trade organizations in the North are creating the illusion of the fair-trade coffee improving completely the living conditions for producers,” states an expert on fair trade coffee Luis Martinez, continuing, “But fair trade is not an end to poverty—it simply prevents further deterioration. They’re still poor” (qtd. in Jaffee 238). With its explosion onto the conventional coffee market at the turn of the century, fair trade coffee has been heralded as the greatest way to equalize the global coffee trade. In the Northern hemisphere, an almost impeccable reputation precedes the fair trade label. Unfortunately, the integrity and fairness which consumers associate with the label is misinformed. The truth about fair trade coffee is that it is not so fair. Fair trade coffee from plantation to coffee cup is quite different than advertised; in fact, the system is a far cry from justice for poor farmers.

Latin American coffee farmers work extremely hard for little pay. They work their plots diligently and yet still struggle to even pay production costs let alone buy the things they need for daily living. The “coffee crisis” of the late 1980s has ensured they do not receive a good price per pound of coffee. In some cases, these coffee farmers are exploited and do not receive fair pay for their harvested coffee. Fair trade coffee was supposedly the answer to all our coffee problems, yet it is failing to prove as fair as first envisioned.

Of course, fair trade coffee has some positive benefits for certified farming cooperatives, but fair trade is in no way as “fair” as labeling companies like TransFair (the primary North American fair trade certifier) claim. TransFair asserts that they not only provide just prices and living wages, but “end rural poverty, foster sustainable farming, empower poor people and women, enhance food security and create a more equitable international marketplace” (Jaffee 3). However, if you ask coffee farmer Contreras Diaz what he thinks about fair trade, he will tell you there is a “lo injusto del comercio justo,” i.e., an unfairness within fair trade (qtd. in Jaffee 239). This unfairness begins at the producer stage of fair trade coffee and reaches all the way to the consumer who purchases fair trade certified coffee from Northern retailers in rich, developed nations. Even at fair trade’s beginning, one is able to see how unfairness is inevitable.

When the fair trade movement first started developing in the 1940 and 50s, it was intended to function as an “alternative trading system in which prices would be determined on the basis of social justice, not the vagaries of the international market” (Fridell 81). The fair trade network aimed to promote a new social economic order to support poor southern producers in developing countries. When the movement was adopted by other organizations such as the Fairtrade Labeling Organization (FLO), it strayed from its original vision and simply operated on the conventional markets.

With selling fair trade on the conventional market comes the consequence of dealing with a capital market, one that is vulnerable to supply and demand and constant fluctuation. For fair trade coffee, this meant dealing with a market already suffering heavily due to the plummet in the price per pound during the 1980s. Fair trade coffee was set at a minimum (or base) price per pound which allows for some relief from traditional market fluctuation and ensures fairness across the board. However, the base price currently set at $1.26 per pound and $1.42 for organic has not changed since 1992 (Jaffee 248), despite
inflation and the rising costs of production. An organization of small coffee farmers from Bolivia wrote to FLO stating that the certifier had “lost the essential value of supporting those who are really in need of help” (Jaffee 227).

Since fair trade certified coffee farmers have been receiving the same base price for years while the cost of living and rising production costs are constantly increasing, cooperatives choose between paying production costs and buying daily living necessities. Of course, another problem with the base price is that the farmers do not actually receive the full price per pound at which their coffee is sold. Consequently, most of the money one pays for one’s fair trade certified coffee does not actually end up in the pocket of poor coffee farmers, but in the pockets of labeling companies and coffee retailers.

Coffee farmers are organized into cooperatives or small organizations, so the money made from coffee sales first goes to the cooperative which must pay operating costs and labeling and inspection fees. The cost of production for one pound of coffee is ninety cents, meaning a thirty-six cents per pound profit is split among the co-op members. Christopher Bacon, an expert on the fair trade market, explains, “Declining real coffee prices and increasing costs for sustainable coffee production have caught farmer households in a dangerous price-cost squeeze” (270). Despite the rising costs facing farming cooperatives, FLO is considering reducing or even eliminating the base price (Jaffee 240).

It does not help that some fair trade coffee does not even sell at the base price. Fair trade coffee is in low demand and high supply, so this means that if cooperatives cannot find enough fair trade buyers, their coffee ends up being sold on the conventional market (Christmann 147). If coffee is sold at the regular market price, then farmers have to accept a lower price for their coffee that costs more to produce because of fair trade certification and regulation costs.

Beyond the problems with the base price and the market is the high cost of being fair trade certified. In order to make itself a viable candidate for fair trade certification, the cooperative must first land an export contract. Without the export contract, an organization’s chances of receiving certification plummet. Since fair trade coffee is currently in low demand, labeling companies can be selective and totally eliminate cooperatives without an export contract from consideration. Now, how fair is that? It is important to recognize that the fair trade coffee market is based on ethical consumerism, which, according to several studies and basic economic principle, can only create so much demand before it peaks and demand no longer increases.

Becoming fair trade certified is expensive for farming cooperatives. Just certification can cost as much as $3,200, not including other potential fees (Weber 14). To be organically certified costs even more—up to $1,000 per producer within the co-op—and the process can take up to three years. These prices may seem insignificant to Americans, but when the survival of your coffee farm depends on the difference of 20 cents per pound, the price looks quite steep. On top of paying initial certification fees, organic farming cooperatives must meet rigorous quality standards set by Northern companies, standards which are often hard for poor southern producers to meet (Jaffee 250).

The idea is that in order to make money these farming cooperatives will have to make an investment, but often the investment can be a difficult one. Once a cooperative invests the money to become fair trade certified and/or organic, there is no going back. The process is too timely and financially demanding. This means that if their coffee farm goes under, they are left with a large debt. “If the coffee income doesn’t cover [the loan], they’re screwed,” says Gomez Sanchez, a Mexican co-op leader (qtd. in Jaffee 110). The very serious financial struggle of coffee farmers is not the only thing contributing to the “unfairness within fair trade.”
When discussing fair trade, it is imperative that one considers who defines fair trade. Who exactly is it that monitors all the players of the game? Certainly the referee is not part of one of the teams, right? Wrong. Those who define and uphold fair trade standards and establish the base price are actually players in the game. Certification companies that hand out and approve certifications are holding double standards and ensuring that fair trade coffee stays unfair.

For example, Transfair USA, the only certifier of fair trade products in the United States recently (within the last decade), negotiated a contract with Starbucks that allows them to use the fair trade seal. Transfair’s original contracts with retailers required that at least 5% of their products purchased be fair trade certified, but in the deal with Starbucks Transfair negotiated no minimum percentage. Right now only about two or three percent of Starbucks coffee is fair trade and yet they still benefit grossly. Sociologist Mari-Christine Renard explains, “Even though only one coffee in the Starbucks range will carry the equity label, the company will nevertheless benefit from the image associated with the seal’s positive values.” Basically the company is using its size and huge advertising campaigns to promote fair trade coffee and thus enhance their image while “doing as little fair trading as possible.” Daniel Jaffee puts it well when he says, “The definition of fairness comes to depend on whom Transfair is negotiating with” (208).

If Transfair is the one defining fair and then deciding what coffee should or should not be labeled fair trade, where is the standard? Who is there to make sure Transfair is not violating its own claims of integrity and fairness? The answer is no one; the same company that certifies cooperatives as fair trade turns around and changes its terms and conditions just so a huge company can benefit from the fair trade label.

Unfairness exists, though, even beyond the certification companies. Of all the extra money that a North American consumer may pay for fair trade coffee, only a fraction of that is returned to the coffee farmer. True, fair trade coffee is sold at a base price per pound of coffee, but from there, any additional price increase is due to price raises from within the United States. Since the coffee is deemed “fair trade,” people are willing to pay more for it and so coffee shops looking to make a quick buck can hike the price up a little higher. “Fair Trade has not brought us a better income,” a Sarapiqui farmer reveals, explaining, “It is still the same: those who really make money from our coffee are those who sell it cup-by-cup in the coffee shops in the North” (qtd. in Sick 202).

The difference that fair trade coffee is making for poor coffee farmers in Southern countries has been completely exaggerated. Fair trade coffee has made a difference, but it has most definitely not started eliminating rural poverty like supporters of the Fair Trade movement claim. The emphasis of fair trade is to pay “livable wages” to farmers, but if farmers are having trouble buying basic necessities then something needs to change. The livable wages that fair trade guarantees are not actually livable (James 11). So basically, simply raising the price of a pound of coffee and ensuring the coffee arrived by honest means is not doing enough for families. In The Myth of Fair Prices, the authors state, “Although the motivation for fair pricing may be noble and intuitively appealing, fair pricing is inefficient for both the receiver and the donor and must be considered an inefficient device for the redistribution of wealth” (Yanchus and Vanssay 237). If we are to define the trade as fair, how about we let those on the other end define fair? What if we actually let farmers decide a fair price?

Daniel Jaffee’s book Brewing Justice contains interviews of coffee farmers from cooperatives in Oaxaca, Mexico. In it, Jaffee asks these farmers what they think would be a fair price for their coffee. Their responses are humbling: they simply want to make high enough wages to send their kids to school and buy some meat for their families. One Mexican family states a fair profit would be 10 pesos per kilogram, or 40 cents per pound. Right now, those families are receiving 2% back and their idea of fair would only be a 4% profit. Organic producers need to earn slightly more. One farmer explains, “By the
kilo it doesn’t pay. You spend more than you earn. We’d need to get at least 20-25 pesos per kilo ($0.80-$1.00 per pound). Another producer says a fair price would be $2.00 per pound and if he were to earn that much he “would start dancing” (241). When asked what they would do if they did receive this fairer price one family replied “we could buy the things we need . . . clothes, a pair of huaraches” (242). Others said they would invest in education for their children.

Are not these coffee farmers who are growing and selling fair trade supposed to be receiving fair prices and providing for their families? Obviously, fair trade has not achieved all the high ideals that it claims to have met. While some coffee farmers are slightly better off, many say there is no difference between them and their non-fair trade counterparts. Between the costs of production, fees, inspections, meeting strict regulations, and inflation, coffee cooperatives are the ones finding out that fair trade is not so fair. Labeling companies whose definition of “fair” is relative and who are losing sight of the grassroots idea of honest trade are only exacerabiting the unfairness that lurks behind the “Fair Trade Certified” label. Perhaps before we stamp our own moral seal of approval on a pound of fair trade coffee, we should examine the facts in order to derive the truth. Fair trade coffee has a long way to go before it can be considered fair.

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A Rock That Is Higher

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Eph. 5:15-20, NIV)

Music is poignant. Depending on the listener, music incites a range of emotions: Ella Fitzgerald’s scat singing may cause cheer or nostalgia; Tegan and Sara’s soft poetic songs may be a reminder of love found or love lost; and Deerhoof’s erratic compilations may cause fascinated curiosity or simple frustration. Regardless of the particular emotion music rouses, I have never met someone who would deny outright that music has the power to bring tears to your eyes, make you weak at the knees, or send your fist pumping like a well-oiled piston. Recently I was working at my desk and my sister Emily practically floated in to the room and then collapsed dreamy-eyed into her neighboring chair. Headphones clapping her ears revealed the source of her stupor: Balmorhea, a graceful piano based band, had just released their new album. Emily and I also recently attended a concert by the band Matt and Kim. We worked our way to the front of the crowd and then danced nonstop—overhead clapping, excessive jumping, the works—and left the concert panting, aching, and shivering in our sweat-soaked t-shirts.

The fact that music is such an influential medium for guiding a listener’s emotions means that it wields a subtle power. This power will often manifest in the form of simple absentmindedness; it is easier to sing something without considering the content of the lyrics than it is to say something without considering the content of the words. Singing, the act of creating music not just through an instrument, but as an instrument, has the potential to be incredibly satisfactory. Beyond this, a song offers you words to say rather than leaving you to formulate your own expressions, a provision which, however accommodating it may be, is among the reasons that I try to stay doubly accountable and aware when listening to music. A few years ago, riding shotgun on my way home from taekwondo practice, I was listening to a particularly energetic track and singing along, “all I want is a little of the good life, all I need is to have a good time” (Gontier) when suddenly I was silent. The lyrics, so incredibly shallow, were something that I would never simply say in conversation, and beyond that, simply weren’t true. Unfortunately, this shallowness is all-too-often evident in the context of the church and Christian music.

The conversation on music within the church is beyond complex. It is an Escher staircase of arguments where multiple paths appear legitimate, though each ends in opposing orientations. On one hand, I could argue that the most important goal of Christians is to be imitators of Christ. Taking this claim as axiomatic, I would conclude that every action should proceed towards this goal, and that Christians should only listen to music that directly contributes to this aim. On the other hand, I could contend that music should be used as a memory device to help with the memorization of scripture. Both of these, however, seem like the arguments of a reductionist, and when I read the Psalms, which document David’s range of emotions, from “I call as my heart grows faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I” (61:2) to “you are resplendent with light, more majestic than mountains rich with game” (76:4), I am inclined to believe that the issue of music in the church has no single right answer, though perhaps a few wrong answers.
I have experienced many Evangelical worship services that seem to be alternating between two emotional pulls. Slow songs featuring minor chords calm the listener into a state of reflection, and upbeat songs with memorable choruses and catchy guitar riffs set the mood for praise and glorification. Allowing the significance of lyrics to be amplified by the mood of the music seems, for the most part, appropriate (after all, I have occasionally experienced the far more uncomfortable situation of lyrics contradicting the mood, like the words of a eulogy being read against 80s synth pop). A worship leader attempts to bring a message to the congregation by presenting songs that offer meaning both through the lyrics and the medium. To be honest, however, I struggle with the implications of a worship service designed to lead me through a predestined path of emotions. One reason for my self-conflict is that for all the joy music has the potential to bring, it can also offer parallel constraints. Chris Tomlin’s song “We Fall Down” is played at about the pace that you would slow dance to with a chorus that is essentially a repetition of, “we cry holy, holy, holy.” These are the same words as cried out by seraphs in Isaiah 6:3, whose voices shake the doorposts and fill the temple with smoke. In Tomlin’s song, it would be difficult to derive this powerful image from the descending scale of which provides a mellow frame for the lyrics. As a comparison, the ability to frame words with an emotional context can also be found in intonation, and many of the implications of intonation carry over to music.

When the music itself overshadows a song’s lyrics, ambiguities often go unnoticed. Lyrical clichés greatly frustrate me, yet they show up frequently such as in Jared Anderson’s “Hear Us From Heaven.” The chorus, “open the blind eyes/unlock the deaf ears / come to your people / as we draw near / hear us in heaven / touch our generation / we are your people / crying out in desperation,” appears to be a succession of cliché phrases that gives the ambiguous overall impression of its singers appealing to God for signs and wonders. Even the imperative structure of the sentence puts us on somewhat unholy ground, as we say to God, “You, do this. You, do that,” as if our wants should take precedence over His will. A friend of mine pointed out another hazardous lyrical ambiguity: when a song takes on so many aspects of an intimate, personal relationship without offering a balance of awe that the singer takes more of the position of spouse or lover than child of God. My friend described her experience with lyrical ambiguity as arising in the confusion that occurs when she is in a worship service and suddenly realizes, “huh, I could be singing this song to my boyfriend.” Hymns, unlike some modern worship music, usually offer greater lyrical precision and cannot easily be misinterpreted regarding to whom the lyrics refer. In his article, “Thoughts on Contemporary Christian Worship Songs,” Reverend Joel H. Linton makes a similar point through comparing Andy Park’s song “In the Secret” to Madonna’s song “Secret.” He points out that they are essentially thematically identical, and depending on your frame of mind, either song could be directed at your deity of choice or at your significant other. Park’s lyrics are appealing as they convey an attractive intimacy, but as a song offered to God together as a congregation in a worship service, the ambiguity allows a less attentive singer to enjoy the song for its “feel-good” value and sense of unification as a body, rather than a genuine connection with God.

At some point in high school I began to get involved in playing with worship bands at church. Enthralled by the opportunity to play guitar and work with other musicians, I volunteered whenever the chance arose. In my experience, there was a certain status associated with the kid who got to stand up front on the stage and play with the band, the whole congregation facing us. At the beginning of the year we would usually do a one-time Bible study with all the musicians and talk about the importance of remembering that God is the focus of our worship time, but beyond that it was pretty easy to forget. My mom recently pointed out to me that even the term “band” connotes performance. Yet while I tend to react negatively to the idea of having a worship band performing and leading a service, my dad is the type of guy who will spend days laboring over sound effects on his keyboard and fine tuning the levels of gain and reverb, convicted that it is his role as a musician to offer the congregation a well-planned and practiced musical experience. Mistakes, after all, can be distracting.
Admittedly, I have a lot of personal conflict when it comes to modern worship music, but I am not trying to abandon it as a lost cause. I continue to mull over the topic because I recognize that constant conscientiousness can often handle what may seem like unsolvable problems. In the case of lyric writing, mindfulness and precision can seriously reduce confusing or meaningless ambiguities. French novelist Marcel Proust suggested, “the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes,” and as we struggle to understand an unchanging God through a two-thousand-year-old book, spiritual fruitfulness emerges from creativity rather than stale clichés.

As gifts from God, both the creation of and performance of music can foster spiritual characteristics, though human deficiency has an uncanny way of forcing us to accept that we will never be able to execute this perfectly. In my experience, the key to imperfection is understanding my flaws and doing everything with these in mind. Like any good-natured infinite regression, even my defenses against imperfection are imperfect, but I consider it akin to a colander: it doesn’t catch everything poured into it, but at least I end up with some spaghetti.

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The Bible. New International Version.
Mysteries of Luck and Blessing

He seemed to stare at me, his eyes wide and unblinking as he peered through the murky yellow water and his smooth brown cheeks distended with captured air. His face, projected on the glowing screen, took on a strange radiance in the dark auditorium.

As I watched intently, he began pulling himself upward with powerful, practiced strokes until his image gradually faded from the screen and was replaced by the words Not My Life. Shifting in my seat, I toyed with the idea of slipping out before this documentary started in earnest. If the first scene was already raising questions, I did not want to hear in more detail about the lives of modern day slaves. But I stayed. As I had anticipated, my questions increased and I spent most of the film half praying and half wondering, why? The skinny fishing boy from the opening scene, just a few years older than my younger brother, lives in slavery. Why, Lord? That beautiful, outspoken teenage girl survived years as a child soldier in a bloody conflict. Why, Lord? Those women, shrinking back fearfully from the camera, have undergone suffering I cannot imagine. Why, Lord?

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned...who exchanged the truth of God for the lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator....

But why them, Lord? Why not me? Am I blessed? Or maybe just plain lucky?

* * *

Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter V.
God the great Creator of all things
(Or the fishing boy and of the child soldier and of me.)
does uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least,
(Does dispose me to comfort and warmth and fullness? Does govern a slave trafficker in his unspeakable crimes? Does direct the painful life of an Indian “Untouchable”? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father’s will. . . . Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not!)
by His most wise and holy providence, according to His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will,
(He knew us before we were born. All of us. Each of us.)
to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.
(“It was not you who sent me here, but God.” Why does Joseph reach Egypt through betrayal and slavery and prison, and his brothers come easily and quietly? Is unacknowledged, unseen good the greater blessing? Or is suffering purified and redeemed a richer gift?)

* * *

Rachel Held Evans, an earnestly questioning Christian, writes on her blog, “For some reason, I feel like calling myself ‘blessed’ sends the message that I have somehow earned God’s special favor, that God is rewarding me for good behavior, and that the millions of people who suffer from war, famine,
poverty, and sickness because they weren’t lucky (or blessed or fortunate) enough to be born in the wealthiest nation in the world are simply not as loved by God” (Evans). Her qualm seems reasonable. Blessing can be a corollary of obedience, as when God told the Israelites to choose blessing by following his commands. Even more troubling, it can result from God’s inexplicable, freely made choice. I believe that the Bible clearly says God chose to redeem us through Christ. I cannot claim that God chose to benefit me, specifically, by giving me abundant food, a safe home, a healthy body, or a college education while other human beings are trapped in poverty and wracked by disease. Evans, in her blog post, takes her hesitance to arrogate blessing a step further. “In fact,” she explains, “I found myself using the word “luck” more often, simply because I would rather dumb, meaningless luck be the cause of such injustice than God”. Reflecting on her comment, I wonder if “dumb, meaningless luck” exists.

* * *

Emily Dickinson, in one of her strange, surprising poems, writes that

“Luck is not chance—
It’s Toil—
Fortune’s expensive smile
Is earned—
The Father of the Mine
Is that old-fashioned Coin
We spurned—

Her words subtly mock the view that luck is random or free. “The Mine of Fortune” must instead be purchased in a fair exchange. To claim luck is to claim devotion to the labor of acquiring it.

* * *

“For what it’s worth . . . I think in terms of Providence.” My aunt never feigns expertise. She might have wondered at the 180-character message on her phone: “Are you blessed or lucky? Love you tons!” She knows me well, though, and I doubt she was surprised. Over the years, she has many times
“strengthened my hand in the LORD,” both listening and sharing insights into this faith of ours. She seldom has answers—rather, she shares seekings and ponderings and brokenness and earnestness. For this question, she offers perspective. “We are to give and serve and when we fail in that God uses others. . . . [He] blesses them for being useful but He is not thwarted by me. . . .” In characteristic style, she finishes the sentence with an emphatic “praise God for that!” Bad luck, a phrase she encloses in quotation marks, is redeemable according to her. It can be discipline for the “unruly child,” or undeserved affliction like Joseph’s slavery in Egypt, but either way God can use it “providentially for the bigger good.” For my aunt, the choice between blessing and luck matters little. Whatever we call it, God is at work. We do not see as God sees; we cannot understand the scope of his plans.

* * *

During the Middle Ages, a legend grew concerning Saint Augustine and his endeavors to comprehend the Trinity. This wise and learned man was, according to the tale, determined to understand how one God could exist in the three persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and yet could make no progress in comprehending the concept. Frustrated and disheartened, he took to pacing along the sea shore as he contemplated the mystery. On a certain day, a little boy playing by the water attracted Saint Augustine’s attention and the old man paused beside the child, inquiring what he was doing.

“I am emptying the sea into this hole,” came the reply.

“But that is impossible! The mighty ocean will not fit in the tiny hole you have made,” Saint Augustine explained gently.

The child’s next words shocked him. “Neither can your mind hold all the mysteries of God.” Here the child—an angel in disguise, the story confides—disappeared, leaving Saint Augustine standing beside the great ocean.

* * *

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The Bible. New King James Version.


Moores, Virginia. Personal interview. 11 Nov. 2012.

Ethnic Cleansing

Imagine with me. Screams and crashes from the street echo through the small stone home in Osh, Kyrgyzstan. A nine-year-old Uzbek girl, let’s call her Nila, huddles under a stained plastic table and pulls her flowered khan-atlas tunic around her body. She prays she will somehow blend in with the dirt floor. Smoke and the smell of burning flesh waft in through the open window.

Imagine, as well, that our Nila’s Papa came home late last night. He picked her up in his lap, enveloped her in his arms and called her “Atirgul,” rose flower. Her mama and brother Furkat sat nearby on korpeshes, traditional handmade mattresses, and their eyes observed the mud and blood defiling Papa’s cotton pants.

Imagine that Mama spoke first. “What happened tonight, Papa?”

Papa looked up from the spot where his head nestled against Nila’s hair. “There was a riot tonight. At the Casino. It’s not safe for us Uzbeks anymore.”

“So the rumors are true?” Mama whispered.

Perhaps Papa stared deep into her eyes as he answered, “Yes. The Kyrgyz wish to be rid of us.” They claim we are stealing their business. They say this is their land and we are but filthy animals.”

A pall of silence settled in the room. Nila whimpered and snuggled into Papa’s chest. “Choose to live, Atirgul,” Papa told her, “and never give up hope.”

Huddled on the dirt floor, our imagined Nila remembers a few hours earlier when the national military arrived on the streets. Strong young men dressed in the olive brown uniform poured into the city, driving trucks and army tanks. The smells of sweat, dust, and day-old vodka permeated the crushed space Nila occupied among the mass of Uzbeks. The Uzbeks hoped the government would bring peace; instead, military men opened fire on the Uzbek crowd. Nila’s voice joined the multitude of screams, and her slender brown legs carried her across the crumbling streets. Our Nila shivers now as she remembers the screams, agonized faces, and shattered bodies.

Suddenly the door to her home bursts open and her brother Furkat storms in. “Papa and Mama are dead. We must leave NOW!” Nila’s wrenching shriek echoes against the bare walls.

Dodging shooting soldiers, burning districts, and piles of shattered Uzbek bones, Nila and Furkat join throngs of Uzbeks fleeing south toward Uzbekistan. Nila tastes her salty tears and clings to Furkat’s hand. All this—just because they are Uzbek. Perhaps they’ll be safe in Uzbekistan . . . if they make it there alive.

During the June 2010 uprisings in southern Kyrgyzstan, 100,000 Uzbeks, like fictional Nila and Furkat, fled to Uzbekistan, and 400,000 were displaced. Thousands of Uzbek children experienced the terror, genocide, and flight described in our imaginary story. The Kyrgyz Ministry of Health states that 418 people died; however, unofficial reports list the death of thousands (Jamestown). Acting on age-old ethnic tensions and alleged Uzbek disturbances, the Kyrgyz sought to rid southern Kyrgyzstan of the ethnic Uzbeks (Harding). This was ethnic cleansing.
The term “ethnic cleansing” originated from the Yugoslav wars in the 1990’s. Orthodox Serbians attacked Bosnian Muslims and Croatian Catholics (Jacobsen), and over 140,000 people died (“Transitional Justice in the Former Yugoslavia”). In October 1991, Croats attacked Serbs with sledgehammers, knives and guns, drenched the bodies in oil, and lit them on fire (“A Selective Silence”). A report from December 1992 declared that Serb soldiers raped over 20,000 Croatian women (Olujic), and war photographs reveal images of shattered faces and infants covered in bullet holes (“A Selective Silence”). In August 1991, the Washington Post declared, “The Croatian political and military leadership issued a statement Wednesday declaring that Serbia’s aim is obviously the ethnic cleansing of critical areas that are to be annexed to Serbia” (Martin). Reporters and journalists utilized the term, and the concept spread.

Following this political statement in 1991, “ethnic cleansing” was defined in The Oxford English Dictionary as “the mass expulsion or killing of members of an unwanted ethnic or religious group in a society.” Throughout the last 20 years, ethnic cleansing has taken place in Kuwait, former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Kyrgyzstan, and Burma, among many other places.

The word “cleansing” denotes a favorable cleaning process. It carries images of cleansing diets, purifying the body of toxins. It is good and even wonderful when your mom scrubbed the kitchen floor after you dropped a plate of spaghetti and meatballs, or when she washed out the grass stains from your football uniform. The body, floor and uniform come through pure and clean. Yet ethnic cleansing is death—a hideous truth lurking behind the mask of purity. If you are of the wrong race, in the wrong location, at the wrong time, you will die. Perhaps you are tortured or your home is destroyed. Perhaps, like the Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan, you witness shooting and the death of people you love. Grotesque memories flash through your mind as you relive the horrors. Perhaps you are still alive, yet you wish you were dead. This is ethnic cleansing.

The word “ethnic” embodies millions of individuals like fictional Nila and Furkat, each with an identity, each possessing hopes for their future. Ethnic groups integrate the individuals in a cultural heritage and provide a place of belonging and identity. They share a culture of art, dancing, stories, marriages and deaths, births and coming of age, traditions that make them who they are and make their people one. When ethnic cleansing occurs, these lives are lost, and the treasures of their culture and identity are buried in a heap of scorched flesh and shattered bones.

Although ethnic genocide occurred throughout history, the term “ethnic cleansing” was not used until the government and media propagated it during the Yugoslav wars. On July 9, 1991, Serbian building supervisor Zarko Cubrilo told London Times reporter Tim Judah that the Yugoslav conflict resulted from the national leaders seeking “an ethnically clean Croatia” (qtd. in Safire). For the Yugoslav political leaders, the term “ethnic cleansing” provided a gentler façade to the reality of genocide. By emphasizing the positive cleaning process, the term eliminated the opposition the political leaders would have experienced if they had promoted blatant mass murder. Thus, utilizing the term “ethnic cleansing” ensured political support from the masses.

Although the original misuse of the term occurred during the Yugoslav wars, I believe politicians, journalists, and broadcasters who propagate this term facilitate further misuse. In 1948, the United Nations declared “genocide” an international crime. Though “ethnic cleansing” is now outlawed by international law, during the 1990’s it was not, and the United Nations applied “ethnic cleansing,” not “genocide,” to the mass murders in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda (“Ethnic Cleansing”). The term “ethnic cleansing” has permeated media vocabulary; thus, journalists, reporters and media broadcasters perhaps unwittingly use the term to describe ethnic genocide. However, as these individuals in the media use the term “ethnic cleansing,” they promote the deception that results from the term’s positive connotations, and many average viewers fail to recognize the extent of the genocide.
I believe “ethnic genocide” should replace the now prevalent term “ethnic cleansing,” burdened as it is with connotations of positive purification. We must wrench off the mask and let our world see, taste, hear, touch, and smell the reality of genocide: the scars, the death, the pain, the piles of shattered bones, the broken families, the dreams crushed, the cruelty in the hearts of the perpetrators. William Safire of the New York Times calls ethnic cleansing “a terrible manifestation of ethnocentrism gone wild.” Perhaps we seek to conceal this reality, for the reality is harsh, frightening, real, and highly uncomfortable. Perhaps we feel that under “cleansing’s” protective cloak this “reality” can become acceptable, tenable. Yet the truth of genocide remains.

In this age of genocide we might seek to embrace a restored meaning of “ethnic cleansing.” Instead of genocide, “ethnic cleansing” could embody spiritual healing and the elimination of crimes against humanity. We could seek to facilitate movements combating hatred and massacre and strive instead for peace among ethnicities. Like an embrace or a compassionate word, healing could take place in the mortal wounds of those who experienced genocide or lost loved ones. This restored “ethnic cleansing” could combat issues of drug trafficking, enslavement, child labor, corruption, prostitution, and human trafficking. Through raising awareness and presenting the factual truth, we might become a people who take a bold and at times dangerous stand against injustice: against genocide but also so much more.

As I encounter stories of ethnic genocide in the lives of individuals like fictional Nila and Furkat in Kyrgyzstan, I feel an ache to change, to somehow prevent Nila’s terror, screams, and flight. Perhaps if enough of us raise but a whisper, that whisper could become a voice, then a shout, and finally a reverberating earthquake that leaves the world changed. Mother Teresa once said, “We know only too well that what we are doing is nothing more than a drop in the ocean. But if that drop were not there, the ocean would be missing something” (“Mother Teresa Quotes”). Let us add to the ocean and become a vast wave crashing upon the shores of injustice, eroding the rock and silt of cruelty and disclosing purity and hope.

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Two Tied Together Forever

“Sometimes you have no control over what will happen next.” So begins Lynn Joseph’s book *The Color of My Words*. As an eleven-year-old reading those words for the first time, I slid past them with the ease of childhood naïveté and continued to the rest of the story, the exciting parts, the action. I followed eagerly the adventures of Ana Rosa, a young girl living in the Dominican Republic. Ana Rosa was twelve years old, only a year older than I. And she loved to write, just as I did. She filled notebook upon notebook with descriptions of the world around her, “words about Mount Isabel de Torres, and about Sosua Beach, which [she] love[d]. [She] wrote about the *niños*, and about climbing [her] favorite *gri gri* tree.” I had my own notebooks, decorated with Lisa Frank ponies and Hello Kitty. The insides, with accompanying stickers, were filled with lists of my own: all the pets my family had ever owned, names for my future children, my favorite songs. Everything. Ana Rosa and I were just alike.

But sometimes you have no control over what will happen next, and as Ana Rosa’s story continued, her life became less and less like my own. She detailed her discovery that her *papi* was not her real father. She spoke of the day when she found out that the government was trying to buy her village’s land. She related her family’s and her neighbors’ outrage at the news that they would be removed from their homes and that their houses would be destroyed. She described protests, and rebellions, and the day when the bulldozers came and the townspeople revolted with paint cans and hammers and shovels. And on her thirteenth birthday, she wrote of the moments when, watching from her precious *gri gri* tree, she looked down to see her brother Guario shot and killed by a government official.

I set the book down and I sobbed.

The concept of potential energy was always difficult for me in high school. The idea that simply because an object—a rock at the top of a hill, a pencil on the edge of a table—had the *potential* to move meant that it had “energy.” However, this theory has always been easy for me to apply when it comes to human beings. I believe that every individual has, dormant within them, the potential to move, to act, to continue their life’s journey. Each step lies crouched, patiently waiting. Falling out of a tree, breaking up with a boyfriend, cooking lasagna for dinner—every event is preceded by its own possibility, established already within every person. Somehow *The Color of My Words* knew before I did that it would be special to me. The first time I read it, I reacted in a way stronger than I could explain; these were echoes from the future imprinting themselves through the words. I was experiencing remembered emotions, the reasons for which would not enter my life until much later.

“I wanted to be a writer,” said Ana Rosa, “with words for everything I saw.” There was not a single moment when I picked up pen and paper and decided that writing was what I would do with my life. I simply always wrote, just like Ana Rosa, and I knew that I always would write. This passion was, in part, fostered through reading. Growing up, my mother fed books to my brother and me like breakfast cereal. She read to us aloud for hours every night. We read picture books by Jan Brett, *Anne of Green Gables*, almost everything by Natalie Babbitt. We cycled through the entire *Little House on the Prairie* line-up. We pre-ordered each Harry Potter book before it was released, and when it arrived my brother and I fought to read it first. He always won. He could read lightning fast and rotate between two or three books at a time, keeping them all in order in his mind. *The Lord of the Rings*, the never-ending *Redwall* series, Calvin and Hobbes comic books. We were constant consumers of the written word. I followed my mother through grocery stores with my nose in the next *Boxcar Children* or *Babysitter’s Club*, keeping her path in my peripheral view, swaying in place when she paused. I had the same unchecked enthusiasm
for reading and writing as Ana Rosa and, barring those tragic details, could still imagine our passions as parallel, our love for our trade growing side by side.

Literature is about trying to capture the one or two moments in your life when your heart opened up. —Albert Camus

In order to be good at something, one must go beyond loving it. It must become personal. I loved writing, and I could sense the strength of Ana Rosa’s passion for writing and imagine my own to be as strong. Yet I failed to grasp the weight of what Ana Rosa was trying to tell me. In the years that followed, I read the book a second and third time, delighting in Ana Rosa’s similar obsession but still overlooking the book’s final chapters. I cried tears of sympathy, and then forgot about it.

I now believe that the test of whether or not one is truly meant to do something is one’s response to tragedy. How does your passion change when everything else is stripped away? As I faced tragic situations in my own life, the potential energy within the book gained heat; my future and Ana Rosa’s became more and more entangled until they were indistinguishable from each other. I lived through the events that led to my parent’s divorce. I experienced relocation and change. I witnessed turmoil within my town and my school. And on the eve of my nineteenth birthday, I received the news that my cousin Caleb was dead.

I had reached a place where language was, for the first time, not enough. But as it had always been, The Color of My Words was there to mirror my situation. It was then that I noticed what I hadn’t before: moments in the text when Ana Rosa herself lost faith in words. “I wished I could stay there forever” she lamented, “A place where words did not exist.” Sometimes you have no control over what will happen next. Ana Rosa and I had always shared the joy of writing; a bond I had cherished and now rejected. Why had I ignored her trials before? If our occupation had been one of light, what then were we to do when all that we had left was “a circle of darkness”?

“I didn’t write one word,” Ana Rosa said of the weeks after her brother passed, continuing, “But there were plenty of words swirling around and around in my head and although I couldn’t see what they were, I saw only a haze of color and the color of my words was red.” For weeks after our loved ones died, Ana Rosa and I saw red. It was an angry, bitter haze that hung low over my driving to work every day, hovered in tear-soaked air over attending the funeral, and swirled over curling up in sweaty sheets through tortured nights. His death made everything I did unimportant. Eating was trivial, talking was tiring, sleep took effort, and I had no words.

Yet as time passed, writing began to resurface and to grow in its importance. Living on fumes drained my energy and gave me a blank surface, masking the painful red lava rising within me and filming over my eyes. In speech I was dull, but in writing I could say whatever I wanted to say. While in real life I was emotionless and tired, on the page I was vicious. Ana Rosa wrote herself into forgiveness for sitting motionless as her brother died, and I could write myself into forgiveness for the hatred I felt toward other people. Toward classmates who talked behind Caleb’s back when he was alive but mourned at his funeral. Toward church ladies who claimed that God’s timing was always right and that everything happens for a reason. Toward anyone and everyone who seemed to be handling things better than I was. And I could finally see clearly: my pen was not glazed over, as my eyes were. My pen was sharp.

“Words flow like the ocean,” Ana Rosa reflected months later. “like Guario’s blood on my birthday, his death day, the same day, the same moment, two tied together forever.” I can’t turn twenty, or twenty-one, or thirty, or seventy-five, without thinking of that one instance when I picked up the phone on my birthday. But I also can’t grow older without thinking of words. When I feel pain, I remember that writing is the only thing I can do. And when I write, I remember where I started—long lists on legal pads.
(the hairstyles my brother went through in middle school, the best climbing trees, the most beautiful cities) and listening to the soft turn of pages and my mother’s voice and the happiness of opening a new book (*The Chronicles of Narnia*, the next Lemony Snicket, the latest Sharon Creech), and the moment I first met Ana Rosa (an afternoon on a sun-soaked couch). “I could make words into anything I wanted,” she realized, “I could rewrite everything.” When the words that expressed my hatred left my mind to join the page, the hatred itself followed close behind. And, with practice, I can clear the haze, I can lift the fog, I can forge ahead.

I can write my way through anything.

If you can see yourself as an artist, and you can see that your life is your own creation, then why not create the most beautiful story for yourself? —Don Miguel Ruiz

**Works Cited**

Ben Murphy
Professor Dashnau
WRIT 215 (Life Narratives), Second Place

The Wise Man Builds His House upon the Book(s)

In his novel, *The Marriage Plot*, Geoffrey Eugenides describes the character of Madeline in a way that only a true author could; he chronicles the collection of books that reared her—Bronte, Austen, James. The author offers no in-depth development of how the young woman worked through the texts. He makes no mention of fictional characters shaping her personality or plot developments conditioning her thought. After listing the writers, he simply and blithely states her temperament: “an incurable romantic.”\(^1\) As a reader, Eugenides understands the power and influence that books have on the development of those who spend time with them. And, as a writer, he uses a single character to remind us that, similar to the nagging nutrition adage, we are what we read.

Eugenides treats books not as esoteric, detached tools, but rather as tangible creations with lasting and real reverberations. Madeline’s library has shaped and nurtured her, one book after another. The constant presence and proximity of the prized texts matter in a concrete and affective way. They surround and enter her like a warm breeze gently issuing from her bookcase each night. The books—frayed, scribbled on, dirt-stained and tear-smudged—are watchful guardians and old, familiar friends that she can return to. The books are what have made her who she is. We are what we read and, quite often, we are sustained by the words with which we surround ourselves.

* * *

The entry hallway loses about a foot of clearance to the shelf that sits against the stairs; the polished wood whines under the weight of the volumes it is laden with. The glass-fronted case waits adjacent from the windows, patient, full, and reserved. The stone mantelpiece proudly displays all the prettiest publications. Corpulent art texts surround the leather chair corner in spiraling, towering stacks. Dog-eared novels litter the cushions in random ornamentation. This is the house that I have always known.

The books in my house are and always have been “just there.” This availability was, at times, defeating. I would complain to my parents in that childish whiny voice, “I’m bored!” and, in return, I would receive an index finger pointing to Dickens or Lewis. But at other times, when I needed a book for a school report or research, I would again be silently directed to *David Copperfield* or *The Screwtape Letters*. I can recall tripping over a colossal leather volume one morning only to spend the rest of the afternoon, still on the floor, poring over Michelangelo’s drawings. Over last Christmas break, while on my way to my lunch in the kitchen, I first noticed the Kierkegaard anthology. I feasted that day, but not on food. And still, even now, I return home to track down that copy of Virgil or Homer that I spotted months ago. The books are and always have been—whether I wanted them to be or not —“just there” waiting for me.

* * *

The chameleon is one of my favorite small beasts. I marvel with childlike glee at its ability to change color to match surroundings—a fantastic trick that, if I recall correctly, I first learned about from reading the *Ranger Rick Encyclopedia* that sits atop the small shelf by the door in the red-room. My mother reads like a chameleon; she becomes books. *The Perfect Storm* fills her with sea spray and New

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\(^1\) Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, pg. 3.
England dialect. *The Brothers K* puts baseball on her brain and family dynamics in her mind. Mary Oliver’s nature dances across her face like sunlight through water. But, perhaps, herein lies the chameleon contradiction. The lizard changes to hide, but my mother changes to exhibit. She animates the book as if to grant story and voice a body beyond sentence and page. The more she reads, the more she embodies and invigorates the lines beneath her gaze. Her reading takes on an insatiable enthusiasm as, pages ripping past, she increasingly shows forth the radiance that she reads. She has taught me a beauty of books.

My father is more like an elephant; he reads slowly and he never forgets. In *The Writing Life*, Annie Dillard writes, “The body of literature, with its limits and edges, exists outside some people and inside others.” My father is of the latter sort. Through some sort of readerly mastication he has internalized all he has ever read. He starts sentences with, “What Sartre says . . .” or “Tolstoy thought. . . .” And if it isn’t Tolstoy, it’s Roger Ebert. If it isn’t Ebert, it’s Wordsworth. Sometimes after a particularly wordy illumination from Dostoyevsky, I point out that, judging by the massive size of his books, there is probably little that that Russian didn’t cover; “We get it, Dad,” we say, “he was really smart and he wrote a lot.” But for my father, these literary tag lines are but the fruiting effects of a life spent reading. Through years of elephantine page combing he has transported the library on his wall directly into his head. Like Dillard, he understands that art must “enter the body.” He, too, has taught me a beauty of books.

* * *

Sometimes when people mention titles or writers, I can see, in my practiced mind’s eye, the location of the text in my house. One of my English professors is referencing *No Country for Old Men* that one is behind our family’s red couch in the living room, about three quarters of the way to the floor. Aunt Lorie is reading *Wolf Hall*—okay, that’s bottom right in the entryway. The names of these books are physically grounded in my experience, like a young child’s memory game. They stay with me as singularly vivid snapshots. “Excuse me,” I ask a professor, “are you referring to the Musa translation [on the white shelf in our back room] or Ciardi’s *Divine Comedy* translation [on top of our piano]?”

* * *

Lest you think me or my family snobbish, I should here assure you that the books in my house are not limited to “classics.” The bottom white shelf in the back room betrays my Stephen King sweet tooth, and there must be at least two hundred *X-Men* comics gathering dust by my bedroom door. But perhaps the largest of the less literary collections is the stack of cartoons that now repose under my older sister’s bed. I say repose because, at this point, those poor things deserve the rest. We read holes through poor *Garfield* and *Peanuts*. *Calvin and Hobbes* were fellow space explorers, fellow time-travelers, fellow Calvin-ballers, and, most of all, good friends. These authors act to continually remind me of the involuntary pleasure of reading: the laughter, the suspense, the tension, the poetically simple but perfect characterization so often accomplished in only a few black stenciled boxes. These authors, too, have taught me a beauty of books.

* * *

Sometimes, instead of doing anything productive, I simply stare at my books. In an essay on *Don Quixote*, Borges states that “Every novel is an ideal plane inserted into the realm of reality.” Although

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3 ibid.
4 For those not fortunate enough to know this most excellent sport, think of a mixture between croquet, volleyball, utter nonsense, and tag.
specifically addressing Cervantes’s craft, this observation communicates a wonderful truth of reading. I have spent hours marveling at the hundreds of lovingly crafted planes of alternate reality that literally—or perhaps I should say literarily—over the walls of my home: the titles, the authors, the ideas. They gesture to my past. My memories meet their shimmering spines and then, in seamless correspondence, their stories take on stories. I remember when I bought them. I remember where I read them. I recall twenty-year-old photos of my father holding that copy of *On the Road*. I beam at *The Catcher in the Rye* that has been almost completely read to pieces. The fictions take on facts and the stories overlap; they connect and they interact. And I, still and quiet, simply commune with the books of my house.

But the books do not only gesture to my past. The lovingly crafted alternative realities also point me in directions I have never been before. In silent worded ways they beckon me with “what ifs” and “or this. . . .” They challenge. They excite. They encourage. This house of books has blessed me but one day it will be time to leave. One day I will take precious pick of the shelves of my childhood home and I will go forth to meet the many, many words unread. I have been a book reader, a book watcher, and a book lover. But will I someday be a book writer? Will I one day, from a far off back-room library, mold others, just as those countless authors once molded me? Will I teach others a beauty of books?

* * *

Annie Dillard writes, “Who would call a day spent reading a good day? But a life spent reading—that is a good life.” It is this good life that has founded me, like the man upon the rock. It is this good life that has made me. It is a deep love of this good life that has prepared me. And it is in steadfast hope of this good life that I will one day continue on, books in hand.

Works Cited


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Starting Over

The carpet is red with black spots all over it like a cheetah. It covers the entire first floor except for the kitchen—warped linoleum turned an ugly yellowish green with time. The staircase winds around as it climbs, which I find fancy because our boring staircase at home just goes straight up.

Everything about this house is old except for my Grandma Jan. She is full of life, of vigor, and of jokes. She has an old Nintendo hooked up to the tiny TV stashed in the corner, and we play Tetris and Dr. Mario together. I think my grandma is so young, and cool, and hip because she plays video games.

Although I admire the staircase, we never go upstairs. Later I will learn it was because my grandma’s bad knees and back made it difficult. For now I think it is because there is something dark, something scary, some sort of ghost hidden away up there. I never sneak up there when she’s not paying attention because I am too afraid.

And I would much rather sit with Grandma. She has a rocking recliner the color of old socks. Although it is worn down from use (it sags in the middle and the edges started fraying before I was born) it is still comfortable. It must be; why else would she still be using it? All I know is that my spot is on her lap, curled up in the comfort that is Grandma. She is overweight, but I don’t mind. I like the extra padding. She is softer than any pillow I’ve ever slept on and I like it when her arms wrap around me and pull me in close.

It is there, nestled in her arms and watching the Chicago Cubs, safe from my fears of accidentally breaking something in this creaky house or of the monsters that live upstairs, that I love to spend all my time. She teaches me about baseball, its rules and its strategies. To her, it is the most beautiful game, and I feel special because she is sharing her favorite pastime with me.

Spending the night at her house makes me feel like a big girl on an adventure. I sleep, curled up in a tight little ball, in a sleeping bag on the floor, and Grandma sleeps in her recliner. As I lie there, I think it’s odd that she’s sleeping in a chair, but I don’t ask her about it, because I don’t want her to leave me alone in the dark with the monsters.

* * *

Grandma sits at the end of the table in the dining room, glasses sliding down her nose as she pores over the crossword from yesterday’s newspaper, like she does every day. She looks up, resets her glasses where they belong, and calls into the kitchen, where I’m making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. “Who was Vanzetti’s partner in anarchy? Three letters.”

“Ummm . . .” I try to come up with something, but absolutely nothing comes to mind. Who on earth is Vanzetti? I wonder. “I have no idea,” I finally confess.

“I thought you were an English major,” she jokes. “What are they teaching you over there?” She shakes her head and moves onto the next clue.

It happens almost every day when I’m on break from school. She has decided that studying literature should translate into being proficient at solving crossword puzzles, regardless of the topic. “I
know, right?” I say as I quickly finish making my lunch. If I stick around any longer, she’ll ask me another impossible question, to which I’ll admit I don’t know the answer, and she’ll reply in a serious tone, “Well, then, what good are ya?” And even though I know she’s joking, I’ll flinch.

Scripted. Our conversations seem to be part of a screenplay. Day after day we follow the directions mapped out for us and repeat the lines. She asks me if I’ve met the German professor yet. I say no. She tells me how wonderful a person she is and that I’d like her.

I ask Grandma how she’s feeling today. She responds with either, “I could be worse” or “I’ve been better.” I ask her how the Cubs are looking this season. She tells me about the fan in the outfield holding a sign on opening day that said “We’ll get ‘em next year.” She thinks it’s hilarious. I don’t remind her that that actually happened three seasons ago.

She asks if I’ve met any cute boys, by which she means, “Don’t you have a boyfriend yet?” I say no. She reminds me that “the clock is ticking.” I chuckle and say I’m not worried about it. Then I leave, because this question always comes up, and it always bothers me.

* * *

There is a library across the street from Grandma’s house. I visit this library with Grandma every time I stay over. It’s like a magical world and I wander through the aisles, awed by the seemingly never ending rows of books. I always find it hard to pick just one, and this time I end up grabbing three off the shelves. There’s the Bobsy Twins and the Boxcar Children and another book that has a picture of a boy playing soccer on the cover.

Grandma is smart, I think she knows everything. She is always reading—maybe that’s where she got all her knowledge from. I’ve determined that I’m going to be just like her one day, and I’ll know the capitals of all the states, and the noise a chickadee makes, and I’ll teach my granddaughter all sorts of fun things. So I read now, storing up little bits of information that I think might be useful someday.

* * *

I read fourteen novels last semester thanks to taking two English Literature classes at the same time. The Jane Austen novels were wonderful, and I savored every passage. The Asian Immigrant novels were harder to swallow. As they were full of heartbreak, frustration, and misery, I found myself dreading each new reading. By the end of the semester I was fried and second guessing my decision to be a book editor, since, at the moment, I feel no inclination to ever read again.

Grandma joins me at the table, where I sit attempting to finish the remaining crossword clues. I get the feeling she left them unanswered on purpose, so I do my best to answer all of them, to show her that I am learning something at college. After a couple minutes of the usual small talk, she asks me what I’ve been reading. I tell her about the beautiful love story in Pride and Prejudice and the awful scene in Obasan in which the main character’s mother dies in the bombing of Nagasaki. When my rant winds down, I ask her if she’s read any good books lately.

“No,” she replies, sighing. “I haven’t read in months... I just don’t feel like it, ya know?” I understand not wanting to read, but I can’t believe my Grandma, who used to read a book a week, is saying this. I try to encourage her to start something, but she tells me she found a version of Scrabble on her Kindle and that she prefers doing that.
I find it hard to believe that the woman who once never left her house without a book in hand is content watching *Judge Judy* and playing Scrabble with a computer all day. It makes me unexplainably sad, but I don’t know what to do about it, so I move on to the next crossword puzzle clue.

* * *

Our entire house is in chaos as my parents begin to turn our dark and scary basement into a living room, bedroom, and bathroom. They move the stairs, and put a cupboard where the door used to be in the bathroom. I’m very much confused. My mom tells me it’s because Grandma’s house is too big for her. I’m still confused.

Grandma Jan moves in to the newly renovated space on the first floor a couple of months later. I still don’t understand why, but I am very excited.

I have sleepovers at “her house” on Friday nights. I grab my pillow and some blankets off my bed and drag them downstairs. I sit on the arm of her new recliner and we watch movies and eat pizza. When my bed time comes, I sleep on the floor and she sleeps in her recliner, just like we used to at her old house.

As I lie on the floor, I can hear music and exploding sounds sneaking their way up through the floor from the basement, where my parents and older siblings are watching “grownup” movies. I like it here. I know the upstairs isn’t scary and there’s nothing to break, but I’m still camping at Grandma’s.

* * *

I clumsily stumble through the doorway with a huge bag hanging off each shoulder. Relieved to be done with the fall semester, I heave the bags onto the couch instead of dragging them upstairs to my room. Grandma opens her door and waddles out. “Hey there, Sprout!”

“Hi, Gram!” I greet her, smiling and give her a big hug. I squeeze her even tighter as she reminds me once again that she doesn’t get any hugs when I’m not home. Extra weight has come with age, and she’s even bigger now than when I was little. I can’t really put my arms around her, but I try, stretching as much as I can to hold onto this beautiful person.

“Want to go to the movies this weekend?” she asks when she finally lets go. “I just saw an ad for *The Muppets*, and it looks adorable.

“Sure, Gram,” I reply, smiling. “That sounds fun.” Going to the movies is a sort of tradition of ours and I am sincerely looking forward to it. I check the Carmike Cinema’s website to see what time the movie is playing on Friday, and Grandma and I agree on a time and decide that going to Applebee’s after the movie sounds wonderful.

But when Friday gets here, she comes out to tell me she’s changed her mind. She says something about her back bothering her, the shooting pain from a herniated disk.

I smile and tell her that I don’t mind, that I completely understand. And though it’s true that I realize she’s in a lot of pain and I would never ask her to do something she didn’t want to, I can’t help but be disappointed. This is the third time she has done this to me.

* * *
We’re driving back from the doctor’s office in Grandma Jan’s old maroon Buick, as the doctor wanted to make sure Grandma’s fake knee was working properly. Neither of us actually says the word “old”; instead, we spell it out. We wouldn’t want to hurt the lovely car’s feelings, especially since we’re still too far from home to walk.

I laugh as Grandma pats the dashboard reassuringly and tells me, “I’ll need to b-u-y a n-e-w car soon.” The song on the radio catches her attention and she turns it up loud and starts to sing along: “We’re going to the chapel and we’re gonna get married.” I’ve never heard this song before, but I remember that one line and jump in, squeaky and out of tune, whenever it’s repeated.

When the song ends she tells me that they don’t make music like they used to. She calls them “oldies but goodies.” I like the sound of this and repeat it to myself as I think my grandma has to be the funniest woman in the world.

* * *

“Sprout,” Grandma calls down the stairs. I check what page I’m on, set down The Hunger Games, and run to the stairs, waiting for whatever story she’s got now. “Did I tell you my new joke?”

“I don’t believe so.” I can tell by the huge grin on her face that she thinks it’s a good one. Here we go, I think to myself.

“Adam and Eve are in the garden, and Eve says, ‘Adam, do you love me?’ and Adam looks around and says, ‘Who else?’” She thrusts both arms into the air to emphasize the question, and then chuckles to herself. At least she appreciated the joke.

I give a hesitant laugh, trying to decide if I found the joke funny or just odd. “Ha, good one, Gram,” I tell her, not knowing what else to say.

“I thought it was hysterical and just had to share.” She pauses for another response from me and then continues, “Alright, I’ll let you get back to your work.” As I walk back to my chair, I hear her yodel. I roll my eyes and try to think of the jokes she used to tell me when I was little.

* * *

It’s June 17th and Grandma is still in Texas. Mom says Grandma won’t get home until the 20th. I run up to my room, jump on my bed, and start to cry. Surprised and worried by my reaction, my mom comes in and sits down next to me on the bed. She takes my hand and gently asks me what’s wrong.

“My birthday is on the 19th,” I explain, sobbing. “She’s going to miss it.” Tears stream down my face as I try to explain how much I miss her and was wishing that she could be here to celebrate with me.

My birthday arrives, but Grandma doesn’t. Throughout the day, I frequently run to the window, hoping her car will be in the driveway. I’ve given up by the time dinner rolls around. We’re having Kraft macaroni and cheese because it’s my favorite, and then comes the delicious ice cream cake, and I forget about everything else.

Until I hear a car horn blasting in the driveway. Hoping against hope that it’s who I think it is, I run as fast as I can to the door. I’m confused by the beige Buick that has replaced the maroon one, but when I see Grandma climb out of it, I take off toward her. I ignore my bare feet on the gravel stones as I run to hug her. Her homecoming is my favorite birthday present ever.
It’s February break, and I need it. These last couple months have practically been torture and I can’t explain how much I’m looking forward to doing absolutely nothing. As usual, Grandma comes out to greet me as soon as I walk through the door. As usual, I give her a hug. As I hold her tight and she reminds me that I give the best hugs, I decide I’m going to try harder this break. I resolve to spend more time with her and not become frustrated by her odd comments and nonsensical jokes. It’s going to be just like when I was little.

Then Grandma asks me if I’ve met any cute boys yet.
The annual summer reading program at our library has arrived, the time when I can try to ignore Virginia’s unbearable humidity by lounging near the air conditioner, a glass of sweet tea in my hand and a pile of good literature by my side. For me at five years old, the heat is of no distraction; I am completely engrossed in every single page. I have participated in the reading program every year since I learned to read and am thrilled to have an excuse to spend more time with beloved books and be rewarded for my passion.

Mom drives me to our library, where I jump out excitedly and push through the doors of this magical place. It has the highest ceilings of any building I know, as well as the wonderful smell of books, cleaner, and adventure. I quickly find my way to the kid’s section, filled with round tables and the best train set around. There, I stock up on books by choosing anything my hands come across, putting them all into our bag reserved for library books; after I have selected nineteen volumes, Mom tells me that’s enough, and I reluctantly follow her to the counter to check them out. Abby, who has worked here my whole life, smiles and greets us, simultaneously entering my library card number which she has memorized since I come here so often. After stopping at McDonald’s for a milkshake, Mom and I head home, where I lie on my bedroom floor poring of numerous books for the rest of the afternoon.

Think of our tunnel under the slates at home. It isn’t a room in any of the houses. In a way, it isn’t really part of any of the houses. But once you’re in the tunnel you can go along it and come out into any of the houses in the row. Mightn’t this wood be the same? —a place that isn’t in any of the worlds, but once you’ve found that place you can get into them all. —Digory, The Magician’s Nephew (30-31)

Throughout my life, I have always been quite imaginative, a theme of my more introverted personal life. One my favorite hobbies is entering new worlds and meeting new people by reading countless books. I have numerous memories from my travels: going to Florida and meeting a young girl and her scruffy yet affectionate dog, helping three orphans survive countless perils and escape from their wicked uncle and his henchmen, learning that the girlfriend of one of my best friends had been diagnosed with leukemia and trying to console him, looking on with terror as an innocent man was tortured and almost murdered by a dangling blade that threatened to sever him in two. West Point Library, with its infinite collection of bound treasures, is much like the wood between the worlds of C. S. Lewis’s work, being a springboard into different worlds where I can make many discoveries and journeys such as these.

Since I was younger than I can remember, the librarians have been my friends; the library, my home; books, my life. There is Martha, probably with as much imagination as me, apparent by striped socks that rise to her knees; she showed me the magic of the Chronicles of Narnia and the adventure of A Series of Unfortunate Events. Abby, another good friend of mine, ordered the entire Scooby Doo chapter book collection upon my request. Their suggestions helped to satisfy my intense hunger for these precious volumes.

6 *Because of Winn-Dixie* by Kate DiCamillo
7 *A Series of Unfortunate Events* by Lemony Snicket
8 *A Walk to Remember* by Nicholas Sparks
9 *The Pit and the Pendulum* by Edgar Allan Poe
Occasionally, I enjoyed reading biographical works about people, such as Amelia Earhart and David Livingstone, yet I preferred to read what I would have liked to have happened. In many ways, imagination is more potent than reality; anything at all can happen anywhere, and that’s all there is to it. Reading fiction is an escape not only from my life, but from social, physical, and all other constraints put on me by the planet on which I live. Why shouldn’t a rabbit wear a waistcoat and gloves? And who’s to say a mouse can’t fall in love with a princess?

However, fiction isn’t just about dragons, space travel, and murder mysteries. In addition, there is what could have happened but didn’t. In The Last Song by Nicholas Sparks, for example, the plot is realistic and believable, and therefore, I can simply delete Will as the main character and insert myself; then I can have the love and happiness I always wanted. This is one of the many beauties of this kind of fiction. These books make me think about life, perhaps my own life. What aspirations do I have and how am I going to go about them? What would I have done in this situation? Am I happy with my life? The reflection that is more prominent in this kind of fiction literature distinguishes it from the other.

Personally, I love both and am currently pondering which volumes I will add to my collection next.

Mouse said again, “What have you been doing?”
Max considered. “Nothing much. Just coming home. To my friends.”
“You’ve been a long time at it.”
“Yes. But here I am.”
“That’s what counts,” said Mouse contentedly. —Cat Walk (120)

In our library over the years, I discovered treasures that quickly become my favorite books. Cat Walk by Mary Stolz, a timeless story of a kitten who searches for his place in the world, touched me, and to this day remains a good friend of mine. It is even more special since it is out of print and virtually can’t be found outside of libraries. I remember the leather bound copy of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland with a green ribbon for place-marking and gold-edged pages; I have always wished I could own this copy but settle to go a visit it now and again, being the first edition to introduce me to Carroll’s fantastic realm. Collections of Amelia Bedelia, Horrible Harry, and Cam Jansen remind me of the times when Mom would read to me, and my sister, Heather, delighted when I found Wayside Stories, one of our favorite book series, so we could talk and laugh about the thirty-story school with no nineteenth floor. The library gave me all of these books, be it for only a month, that still make me smile and giggle with excitement over memories forgotten and joyfully remembered. Here is where I learned to read and love words.

“And what is the use of a book,” thought Alice, “without pictures or conversations? —Alice, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1-2)

I suppose age brings with it a better appreciation for nonfiction, and in some unfortunate cases, a kind of scorn for fiction itself. I once knew a man who said of his reading habits, “I don’t read fiction, just nonfiction.” He seemed to think of it as a sort of childish pastime, reading works from the imagination. I disagree. Recalling Chris Van Allsburg’s breath-taking illustrations in The Polar Express and Aslan’s unforgettable dialogue at the end of The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, I believe these books have merit in their relevancy to life, imagery, and pure escape. And yet, I soon found myself browsing the library for a different sort of literature, thoroughly enjoying How the States Got their Shapes by Mark Stein, At Home in France by Ann Barry, and a book about the country of Iceland. I hadn’t forsaken my beloved novels and fantasies but realized the value of nonfiction for revealing valuable knowledge. At present, I have found that reading one work of nonfiction for every two of fiction is a very healthy reading diet for me, keeping me grounded in reality, but with enough escape to make it worthwhile.

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10 Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll
11 Tale of Despereaux by Kate DiCamillo
“I think I’ll have just one more of those candy bars. The same kind as before, please.”

“Why not?” the fat shopkeeper said, reaching behind him again and taking another Whipple-Scrumptious Fudgemallow Delight from the shelf. He laid it on the counter.

Charlie picked it up and tore off the wrapper . . . and suddenly . . . from underneath the wrapper . . . there came a brilliant flash of gold.

—Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (44)

Due to my profound admiration for literature, I started to collect books from an early age; selecting volumes from Books-a-Million or Barnes & Noble, two of my favorite haunts, and placing them on my wooden bookcase is one of my greatest successes. Every book I buy is like a flash of gold, exciting and magical. I search the store for hours until I find just the right one; the satisfaction is immense. I am proud to build up my own library so I can enjoy its knowledge and later bequeath it to my children, who had better receive my book-loving genes.

However, with the increased buying of books comes the decreased checking out of books, and hence, fewer trips to the library where my passion was first kindled. I adore the library for the part it has had in my life, perhaps even contributing to my desire to pursue my English/writing double major, so I can study and produce good literature myself. It is an unfortunate paradox to go to the library less because my love of books has increased, the bookstore now holding the library’s former place in my life. But I still respect this sacred place, and I go there every now and then to see what new titles I may find among its shelves.

In a sense, I am a son of the small-town library. I came to see her each week, and she welcomed me every time. She gave me her prized possessions and sparked in me a love I hadn’t known. I have grown up now but haven’t forgotten what I have learned; she will always be with me. Her gifts are never far away, gracing the shelves of a new library, my own.

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I saw Death for the first time when I was seven years old. Mummy met him first, but my daddy was the one who introduced us. Twenty years have passed since that night, and I have only just begun to forgive him for that.

It began on an evening rather like this one. The sky was heavy and sullen, for it had been raining all day. With the sunset came a penetrating chill, turning the rain to a faint, frozen gray fog, and I remember feeling a sense of dread creep over me as the minutes ticked by and Mummy’s car did not emerge from that fog. Daddy’s behavior didn’t help. If he had stayed up in his studio all night I wouldn’t have thought twice about my uneasiness. But after midnight he came downstairs to join me by the bay window, and it wasn’t even to scold me for being up so late. Instead, he patted his knee and helped me climb up into his lap, which was something he hadn’t done since I was very little. We sat like that for a long time. All the while he didn’t say a word.

At last I grew tired of the silence. I leaned back and looked up at the bearded, paint-stained face I knew and loved so well. “Daddy, when is Mummy coming home?” I asked.

His eyes followed a tendril of fog as it brushed the dark bushes outside. “Soon.”

I snuggled closer to his heartbeat, feeling the need to keep his arm between me and the darkness and asking, “Why is she so late?”

“I dunno, sweetheart.” He looked down and smiled as he untangled me from his embrace. “Do me a favor and get me a glass of water, will you?” With a reluctance I couldn’t explain then, I slipped down from the window seat and did as he said.

“Hello?”

I spun around, dropped the cup of water in the sink and prepared to jump into Mummy’s arms. But Mummy was not there. Daddy had his phone out and pressed against his ear, his knuckles white and his eyes wide as he stared out the window. I crept close to the wall and tried to hear what Mummy—because of course, it had to be Mummy—was saying.

“You’re sure?” Daddy said. His voice sounded funny, and the lump in his throat moved up and down in a peculiar way. “Thank you.” He lowered the phone and stood slowly.

“Daddy, was that Mummy?” He stared at the wall, not answering me, not looking at anything in particular. “Daddy?”

The phone slipped out of his grasp. By the time it hit the floor, he had crossed the front room in three long strides and seized my hand. There was a terrible look in his eye, and I followed him without question. We fairly ran up the stairs to his loft and the forbidden studio. To be honest, I think I was too surprised to make much of a fuss. Our family has one absolute rule, and only one: don’t disturb Daddy while he’s working. For seven years I’ve obeyed that rule, only going up to his studio at his invitation and only for a very short time. But this time was different.
I knew my daddy, or at least I thought I did. I could tell that he did not have paint on his mind when he sat me down on an overturned gesso bucket and pulled a blank, door-sized canvas down from the shelf. Then he turned to me. I noticed his eyes were wet beneath wrinkles that I was sure had not been there that morning. He put one hand on my shoulder and gently tipped my chin up with the other.

“Sophie, sweetheart, listen carefully,” he said. “I’m going to paint a picture. I want you to sit here until I tell you otherwise, and whatever happens, don’t be afraid. Understand?”

I nodded. “Is it for Mummy?”

Daddy’s jaw tightened and that bump in his throat moved up and down again, faster than before. “Yes.” He began uncovering his paint pots and collecting his brushes, setting them before the canvas like a row of little idols before an altar. I crossed my legs and folded my hands in my lap to wait. If Daddy had asked it of me, and if it would help bring Mummy back to us, I would have sat there for a week.

He set to work. Gray was the first color he chose, tossing the contents of the entire can toward the top of the canvas and letting it drip downwards. I wondered what he had in mind for Mummy’s picture. She didn’t usually like gray. It was too depressing, she said, because gray was the color of indifference. “If you’re going to paint life then paint life,” I had heard her tease him once as he showed her his new collection. “None of this nihilist nonsense.” Daddy had said that nihilism was in fashion just then and Mummy laughed. I forgot to listen to the rest of their conversation, since the word nihilism meant nothing to me and my favorite program was about to come on the telly. But I do remember that the next morning Daddy scrapped his gray series and started afresh.

That night he did not stop with gray. Red, then violet, then yellow, then a deeper shade of gray . . . then yellow and red again. . . . I lost count of how many times he repeated this process. It was more than long enough to send both my legs fast asleep, but I dared not move. Daddy was beginning to frighten me. I was quite sure he had never painted like this before, and I knew he never painted with an expression like that on his face. Beneath the spatters of paint and drops of sweat trickling down from his forehead, his look was frenzied. Savage, really. It was only then that my mind (as I was only seven years old) began to sense the truth: something terrible had happened to Mummy. Nothing less could result in a look like that.

When he had finished the final coat of black paint, Daddy pulled another empty bucket next to mine. He sat, breathing hard and staring at the canvas with something akin to loathing. I’m not sure how long we sat there in silence before I ventured to ask him what it was. Tears sprang to his eyes as he met mine. “It’s a door, sweetheart,” he said at last.

“To where?”

“To Death.”

The word held just enough meaning for me to fear it, though not enough to make sense of it. If Death was a place I didn’t like it, but at least Daddy said there was a way out. “Is that where Mummy is?”

“Yes.”

“Are we going to get her, then?” Slowly, sadly, he nodded. “How?”

Daddy took my hand. “Sophie, do you remember what I told you when we visited the gallery last year?”
I did, but only because there had been some paintings there that frightened me. Twisting bodies
and great dark voids and faces with too many eyes and mouths in the wrong positions. . . . I had cried, so
Daddy picked me up and told me about the people behind the paintings. “See that, Soph? Tilt your head
this way a bit. See? It’s just a picture of an old lady. No need to be afraid.”

I had made a face through my tears. “What’s wrong with her?”

“Nothing, sweetheart. Mr. Bacon was a great artist. Sometimes artists just see things differently,
especially the great ones. He certainly did.”

“Do you?” I asked. As far as I was concerned, Daddy was the greatest artist in the world.

“Once in a while. Do you remember what Mummy says about my muse?”

I had thought hard about that one, just to be sure I got her words right. “She says . . . you
shouldn’t swear at it so often or you’ll scare it off.”

Daddy had laughed at that. “Touché. Mummy does say that, doesn’t she? I guess she’s right.
Muses are temperamental creatures. They can open doors to places you’ve never imagined, but they can
be stubborn. You have to treat them carefully or else they’ll scamper off and you won’t see them again for
months at a time.”

“Really? Where do muses go?”

He thought for a second. “Mount Helicon, I suppose.”

I had no idea where that was, so I decided to look it up in the atlas when we got home. “Daddy,
what do muses eat?” I asked instead.

“What do they eat? Goodness, why do you want to know?”

I had put my head on his shoulder. “If you kept a bowl of their favorite food in your studio you
might not have to go chasing them so often.”

He had smiled, hefted me in his arms and moved on to the next painting. It was much nicer than
the other one, all greens and purples with a little brown dog in the corner. “Well, I suppose you have a
point. Muses feed on emotion. Strong feelings, imagination, curiosity. Life itself, in fact.”

That was not as easy to put in a bowl as I had hoped. “How do you feed it life?”

“Very deliberately, sweetheart. It takes a great deal of will. Every time I create a painting, some
part of me goes into it. It’s the sort of sacrifice every artist has to make. A bit of life and energy and
creativity in exchange for a bit of a window into beauty. The more I put into it—the more food I give my
muse—the bigger the window. Does that make sense, Soph?”

It hadn’t at the time. Naturally I said it did, because I loved listening to Daddy explain this great
and mysterious thing that was his life’s work and I didn’t want him to stop. But then, sitting side by side
on those gesso buckets, with that great black canvas in front of us, I began to understand. “You said your
muse could open a window to beauty.”

“Yes. Beauty . . . and other things.”
“Like Death?”

“Like Death.”

I felt like crying for fear and sheer bewilderment. “What did your muse eat this time?”

He stood and answered very solemnly: “My soul.”

“Can you get it back?” My seven-year-old brain had only a vague notion of the soul, but even though I didn’t understand what it was, I knew that it was somehow tremendously important. If Daddy had given his soul to his muse, we would have to find a way to return it to him.

“Yes, but to do it I need you to come with me. Will you do that?” He should have known that my little feet would have followed him anywhere. I jumped off the gesso bucket, kicking it over in my hurry to show Daddy how brave I could be for him. My legs stung and tingled as the blood began to flow through them again. I ignored the feeling and took Daddy’s hand. “That’s my girl,” he said, and then together we made for the canvas.

It seemed to have grown larger and blacker, more like a presence than a painting. Daddy took a putty knife in his hand and slashed once—twice—three times, slicing through the still-tacky layers of paint. Black peeled to yellow and yellow to violet, then to red. Red gave way to a thick gray gash running down the center of the canvas. Gray as dense as the fog outside our windows, and then . . . Daddy reached into the painting. No—it was not a painting anymore. It was a door. Giving my hand one last squeeze, he stepped through the door and pulled me in with him.

We found ourselves on a sidewalk. A cracked sidewalk of no particular interest, bordering an empty street in what looked like an empty city. There was fog here too. I shivered and stepped closer to Daddy. He put his arm around me, raised his other hand to his lips and whistled. The sound fell flat and dead, but a moment later a cab drove up from out of the fog to our right and parked next to the curb. The window rolled down slowly. A wrinkled man with a long, greasy mustache peered up at Daddy.

“Wot do you want?” he said.

“An audience with Death,” Daddy answered. “I have business with him.”

The driver snorted and began rolling up the window. “You en’t got an appointment and I en’t the cabman of the living. Go back.”

“No.” Daddy caught the edge of the window and forced it down again. “I don’t care what other appointments he has. He will see us.”

The cabman frowned and stuck his head out to see better. “Us? Wot kinda fool. . . .” His voice trailed off as he caught sight of me.

“My daughter,” Daddy answered the stranger’s unspoken question. “Death took her mother before it was time. I want her back.”

For a few moments the cabman was silent, staring first at me, then at my daddy, then at me again. “That girl shouldn’t ha’ seen me for a long while yet. You are a right fool, bringin’ her this way,” he said at last.
“Will you take us to Death?”

The old man sighed. “Aye, I’ll take you, but that’s only ‘cause I’m tickled by your stupidity. And I’ll take the girl because I en’t leavin’ her alone out here. Get in.” Daddy did as the cabman said, and I followed him. We sat in silence as the cabman pulled away from the sidewalk and began to drive. The ride was not long. After passing a few more equally deserted streets, the car stopped. “Out,” was all the cabman said.

“Was that it?” Daddy asked.

“Time and distance en’t got no bearing in this city. I may’ve just driven you to the other end of eternity fer all you know. Now get out. You’ll find Death in that building there.”

“Thank you . . . Charon,” Daddy said as he shut the car door.

“Wot’d you say?” the cabman called after us through his closed window, sounding genuinely surprised. “Oi! You! How’d you know my name?” But Daddy did not answer. The building was an old theater, and by the time the cabman had lowered the window we were already through the revolving doors.

There was no foyer, no atrium, no chance to prepare ourselves for our audience with Death. Daddy and I walked straight onto the stage. Before us spread row upon row of red velvet theater seats, stretching back into darkness. Death sat in the center of the front row, the only figure in the vast room. He was dressed in flawless evening dress, down to the black carnation in his buttonhole. That might not have been so terrible, but over his face was a white mask smeared with bright theatrical paint, as if a toddler had tried to fashion his own Guy Fawkes’ mask in Mummy’s lipstick and magic marker. The effect was infinitely disturbing. Death held up his hand when he saw us—not in greeting, but to silence the orchestra that I then realized had been playing under the stage. I had not noticed them at first because their ghostly instruments made exactly no noise.

Even holding Daddy’s hand I was terrified, waiting for something I didn’t understand in that silence-within-silence. At last Death spoke. His voice from behind his mask was soft and rich and rotten. “Why are you here, O man? You cannot hear my orchestra yet. Your part above is not over.”

Daddy’s voice was thin and stringy in comparison, but I clung to it and to him with all the strength I had. “You took my wife, Death. Her part wasn’t over either. I want you to return her to me.”

“Why?” Death asked again.

“Because I love her.”

Death laughed. “Many have come this way for the sake of love, O man. A good beginning has not brought them to a better end, though it does make their final act a bit more entertaining. Is your love the only line you came to barter with? I generally require at least a soliloquy before I cast you in your last role.”

“No, it’s not all I came with.”

“Then get on with it. There are others waiting for their audition, and while I might be eternally patient, I don’t think they are. Say your peace.”
“This is my piece, Death.”

Daddy released my hand and pushed me forward.

It was as if a physical barrier had been shattered, that wall of Daddy’s presence that shielded me from the worst of the horror and terror and senselessness of Death. I could not move for fear. Was he giving me to Death? I truly didn’t know, and so I did what any child would do whose trust has been broken at the hands of the one they love most. Standing alone in the presence of that painted monster, missing Mummy and wondering what I had done to make my father abandon me like that, I wept.

I might have cried for a minute; I might have cried for a thousand years. It made no difference.

At long last, Death spoke again. “It has been many ages since such rain was seen in my halls. I name you Orpheus, O man. Your instrument is different now, but your song has not changed. This child should not have seen this stage for a very long time yet, and now she will never be the same. You have dared much for the sake of your Eurydice. I will return her to you.”

Daddy took my hand. It was not as comforting as it had been before. “That’s all I want.”

“I have one condition. The parts in my play must all be filled, but I am not choosy. I do not care who plays what part; I only care that they are played. If you or your daughter will stay with me, I will release your wife. It will be no great loss to me. She has only just arrived.”

For a long moment, Daddy said nothing. I think that frightened me more than anything else.

“What is your decision? Will you stay, and give your child her mother? Or will you leave her to see your wife again? Or will you give up your Eurydice for the sake of your daughter? Choose quickly; my stage was not built for living beings. The wood is already beginning to groan under the weight of your guilt.”

Daddy scooped me into his arms and turned from Death without a word. I buried my head in his shoulder and willed myself to forget everything I had seen and heard as he carried me out of Death’s theater and into the waiting cab. Daddy sat in silence as the cabman drove, cradling me in his arms. He did not let go until we reached the rent in the air on the curb of that empty gray street. The cabman left us there without a goodbye, and neither Daddy nor I looked back as we stepped through the painted door and into his studio.

That night, for the last time in my life, I cried myself to sleep. There was no more Mummy, and Daddy had forgotten to tuck me into bed.
Late May—Chapter 1: The Golden Locket

It was late in the month of May, about the time of year when the children begin to get restless for the faintly visible summer break that lies ahead, but not yet soon enough for the June bugs to begin to appear sluggishly creeping across the front porch. However, on that day Lennon woke up with the tickling of butterflies in her stomach. Unlike the rest of the kids in Lennon’s class, today would be her last day of 4th grade. She was being taken out of school early again, as she had been every year since she began kindergarten, to make what felt like the never-ending trip to the childhood home of her mother. Mommy and Daddy would be homeschooling Lennon for the last month of school, as they did each year.

It didn’t matter how much love she held in her heart for the destination of the trip to Prince Edward Island, Canada. It didn’t even matter how much she loved to visit Grandma and Poppy’s house, she absolutely hated the journey. Lennon was a very daring little girl who was full of adventure. The idea of sitting in a car for two days reminded her of the caged monkeys that she saw at the Buffalo zoo on her field trip last month. She liked seeing them swinging from branch to branch, but couldn’t help but wonder if they desired to swing past the walls that kept them in and over to greet the polar bears. If so, she understood the feeling. After all, Daddy did call her his little monkey because of her ability to climb almost anything with ease. Being locked in the car for that long felt just as unnatural as seeing the monkeys locked up in that cage.

The long list of activities saved for the car ride included the alphabet game, the reading of a hefty stack of adventure books, the 50 state license plate game, lots of Lennon’s choice movies, and of course listening to Mommy and Daddy tell tales about when they were little while watching the trees whiz by for hours. These activities in themselves wouldn’t be so bad, except for when she finished all of the activities, the sitting in silence seems to last for all of eternity. Sometimes to break the silence, Lennon would ask Mommy to talk about the things she enjoyed as a child. Lennon loved and admired Mommy; however, her mother’s stories lacked the imagination that Lennon’s had. For this reason, Lennon would use Mommy’s stories as nothing more than a prompt for her own imagination to begin to create a fantastic new world. Lennon couldn’t wait to arrive at Grandma’s house, though, because Grandma would tell stories the way that Lennon thought they should be told, and then take the fantastic journey along with Lennon.

“Tell about the Lupins,” said Lennon to Mommy. So Mommy did.

“It was late in the month of May,” began Mommy, “about the time of year when the children begin to get restless for summer break, but not yet soon enough for the June bugs to begin to appear on the front porch...”

As soon as she tells of her most beloved place to be on earth, Lennon can’t help but close her eyes and imagine her very self in that ever so familiar Lupin field running barefoot and feeling the crunch of each of the thick stems of the flowers under her feet. Lennon can almost feel the warm island breeze flowing through her white blonde hair. Her imagination runs as wild as a pack of stallions across the western frontier as her vision of the Lupins closes in around her. On average, each flower is about up to the tip of Lennon’s nose, with some of the greatest ones even towering over her head. The experience of standing in the Lupin field for a girl of Lennon’s height is comparable to an adult sized person running through a field of corn. Easily lost, yet strangely fantastic. Sometimes in the Lupins, Lennon even catches herself never wanting to find her way out.
Lennon looks a lot like Mommy did when she was in fourth grade and can’t help but to be proud of that. One of Lennon’s favorite parts about going to P.E.I. was to go to church on the warm summer mornings with Grandma to meet all of the powdery-smelling, droopy-skinned old ladies with the extravagant hats on. They always tell her that she looks just like her mommy did when she was a little girl.

“Oh, Rose!” they would exclaim to Grandma, “she looks so much like her mother!”

Grandma would smile, agree, and look down at me with pride welling up in her bright blue eyes.

Lennon had never really been able to sleep in the car before because the excitement of the thoughts of what was to come after the two-day expedition was just too tremendous. With each word that mommy spoke, the Lupin field felt closer and closer to reality and caused Lennon’s excitement level to grow just a bit more.

Lennon has always felt a little bit different from the rest of the boys and girls in her class. She is always hearing their fantastic stories about the dreams they would experience each night when their eyelids start to feel heavy and they fall into a deep slumber, but Lennon has never needed the sleep they describe to experience dreams. Her imagination runs wild each time she simply closes her eyes. This has been a gift that she has held close to her heart and thanked God for each night—a gift that has provided her with escape. Escape from boredom, threats, and a gift that has provided an open door into fantastical unexplored worlds when this life has lacked the excitement and stimulation she is craving. Now, sitting in the car, she couldn’t help but to close her eyes and visualize a more fanciful world awaiting her on the other side of her journey to the Lupins.

* * *

Even though the drive felt like it would last an eternity, it didn’t, and soon Lennon, Mommy, and Daddy crossed the bridge from the mainland to the island. The island that represented memories past and new adventures to come, and that Lennon would forever consider the most fantastic land on earth.

This summer seemed like it would be different, though. Lennon had a strange feeling in the pit of her stomach that something unusual and maybe even incredible would happen. Something that would make the days spent in the Lupin field across from Grandma’s house even more exciting and mysterious. Something exquisite that Lennon would never forget. And although she wasn’t quite sure what this adventure would be, each year as Lennon has changed the Lupin field has changed along with her. It has offered new, undiscovered, and unforgettable memories and each venture into the rolling field of the tall textured stalks of deep purples, creams, and pinks has proved to be completely different from the last.

When the car finally turned onto pine drive, Grandma’s street, Lennon sat erect in her seat and scanned the scene with her small blue-green eyes. It wasn’t long before she spotted it. There before her shone her favorite place on the earth, showered in sunlight, each of their colors glimmering and almost glowing. Each one of their petals seemed saturated with more bright unnatural color than she could have ever recalled in her own mind.

After what seemed like the longest stretch of the entire trip, Daddy pulled the car into the black asphalt driveway of Grandma and Poppy’s house. “We’ve arrived!” exclaimed Daddy, and almost as if it had been rehearsed, Lennon’s car door swung open in perfect unison with Grandma’s front door. The two dashed to greet each other in the lush green grass of the ever-so-familiar slightly sloped front lawn.
Grandma had barely made it two steps when Lennon leaped into her soft and adoring arms, crying, “Grandmaaaa!” while grinning from ear to ear.

The embrace was one of many things that Lennon had most looked forward to while watching the cars on the highway pass during the drive, and it had happened almost exactly how Lennon had imagined it would. This meant that each of the other things about Grandma’s house that she was most looking forward to, namely spending her afternoons in the field of Lupins, was growing farther and farther away from the vision in her mind and closer to actuality. At this thought, Lennon was nearly overwrought with delight.

After warmly greeting Grandma, her attention shifted its focus to finding poppy so she could receive her favorite kiss on the forehead. Once Poppy had warmly and sweetly greeted her as he had done so many times before, Lennon found herself skipping back to the car in order to retrieve her bags and carry them inside to get settled into the familiar bedroom in the basement. She remembered it as the one with the starchy white comforters covered in ivy leaves of deep green. Everything about the welcome was happening just the way Lennon had run through it so many times in her head during the trip, but also just has it had happened so many times in the years past. Everything about the arrival had been perfect. Next, it was time for Lennon to make her way upstairs to indulge in the feast that Grandma annually prepared upon the arrival of her family.

When Lennon entered the dining room, she couldn’t keep her mouth from watering at the aroma and spectacle of Grandma’s extravagant meal. And of course, Lennon’s immediate attention was drawn to the centerpiece—a perfect construction of three extraordinarily-colored Lupins in Grandma’s old crystal vase. The dinner set looked fit for a king. And maybe it was, since after all, Grandma did often tell Lennon she was as pretty as a princess, which had sparked dreams of Lennon in the most soft and simple white gown, imagining herself dancing through the field across the street with a crown of Lupins resting softly on her head. Maybe Grandma had set the table with that thought in mind.

“It’s time to eat!” hollered Grandma as she rushed around to put the last-minute finishing touches on the spread.

Dinner passed in what seemed like a blur of laughter, love, and the strange sounds that Daddy made to ensure to each of us that he was indeed enjoying Grandma’s delicious creations. For Lennon, though, dinner had had an entirely different focus. Because of her placement next to Poppy at the head of the table, she had a clear view of the window to the outside world. More specifically, she was staring right into the incarnation of her daydreams. As she sat and looked at the Lupins, she began to think about how lovely it would be to get lost on her own in the field tomorrow. She thought of the adventures she would have, the characters she would meet, and of course how the enchanted field would come dancing to life in the perfect warmth and swiftness of the summer breeze. She couldn’t help but smile and giggle to herself as she thought about how wonderful it would be. As she gazed, she recalled the adventures of her past in the field, and how each afternoon seemed to last an eternity. Each day Lennon would acquire new imaginary creature friends to spend her time with and as each summer day floated away, she would wrap that chapter up, only to open a new one the next day when she crossed the street to enter the Lupins once again.

“Lennon . . . Lennon . . . LENNON,” shouted Grandma, in order to get Lennon’s attention.

Lennon, divorcing herself from her fantasies, looked up. “Yes?”

“Would you like some dessert?” asked Grandma.
“Of course,” stated Lennon, matter of factly. She cannot remember a time where she had ever turned down a dessert made by Grandma.

“Lennon! What do you say?” exclaimed Mommy crossly.

“Sorry. Of course, pleeeeeease,” said Lennon.

Grandma gave Lennon’s favorite smile again accompanied by a brief wink this time, while handing over the tasty-looking morsel of strawberry shortcake, which was, of course, served on Grandma’s best china.

“Fit for my little princess?” Grandma asked Lennon with a loving look, with those same bright blue eyes Lennon had noticed so many times before.

Lennon responded only with a grin.

When she had finished her treat, still glancing out at the Lupins once every few bites, of course, Lennon handed her dishes to Grandma, who began to run them under warm water. As Lennon watched the steam rise off of the china, she looked up at Grandma and noticed a glimmer in her eye that she hadn’t seen before. Grandma was staring out the window in the same manner Lennon had been. Like Lennon’s dinner window, this one also framed the field of Lupins. Lennon was suddenly struck with curiosity and began to wonder what Grandma could be looking at. It didn’t seem possible that she could be looking at the Lupins in the same way Lennon had, because Lennon was quite sure that she was the only one in the whole world that could feel the draw to the Lupin field that she did—although, when she thought about it, Grandma had been the person in her life that understood her best.

This train of thought had lasted only a few seconds when Grandma caught Lennon looking at her in wonder, and looked back down continuing her chore.

Lennon soon dismissed her thoughts and turned to walk down the stairs.

“Lennon?” said Grandma, a faint hint of a question in her voice.

“Yes, Grandma?” replied Lennon. “Will you go into my room and bring me my jewelry box, please?”

“For what?”

“I have something that I’d like to share with you,” stated Grandma in a cryptic tone.

Without question, Lennon turned once again and headed toward Grandma and Poppy’s giant master bedroom. This room had a distinctly different smell than the other rooms in the house. It had a faint scent of Grandma’s old perfume mixed with freshly cut grass from Poppy’s work clothes, a comforting and familiar fragrance. Lennon continued into the room where she spotted Grandma’s jewelry box resting in a lonely manner on the dresser. She sauntered over, and picked it up with ease.

Although it filled her arms, the box seemed lighter than she had remembered it being, so carrying it back to Grandma who was sitting at the kitchen table proved to be a far less arduous task than she had predicted it would be.
Lennon set the box down on the table in front of Grandma. It was at such an angle so that its plain golden exterior shone in the moonlight streaming in from the Lupin window. It almost seemed as if it had been set aglow like a piece of metal left in a fire. She had never noticed it appearing in such a dreamlike way before this very moment. Lennon watched in awe and wonder as Grandma slowly reached for the latch of the box, unlatched, and opened it. Lennon sat, eyes fixed on the open box, but saw nothing unusual. Grandma had promised her a remarkable gold ring with a large deep blue sapphire surrounded by a diamond on either side, but she wasn’t to receive that until her sixteenth birthday—a day that seemed to be an eternity away. Grandma couldn’t be giving it to her now, could she?

Grandma sat and looked at the open box for a few moments until Lennon looked up at her and asked, “Grandma . . . what . . . what are you doing?”

Grandma continued to gaze at the box. “Patience,” she answered.

Just then, Grandma reached for the bottom of the box, which was lined in deep blue velvet. Lennon perceived the color to be almost as bottomless as the hue of the water on her deep-sea fishing trips taken with Daddy off the coast of P.E.I. each summer.

Grandma closed her eyes and ran her fingers across the bottom of the box until she abruptly stopped it near the right hand corner. At first, it seemed to Lennon that Grandma had just liked to run her fingers across the soft velvet because she liked the smoothness of it. Maybe it had reminded her of the texture of an important item from her past that she associated with fond memories. However, after the unexpectedness of the brisk stop, it was clear to Lennon that the stroking of the box had been intentional, and that Grandma had found exactly that for which she had been feeling. Just then, Grandma grabbed a small flap on the bottom that Lennon had never noticed before this very moment, and Lennon pulled up on it. She watched in astonishment as Grandma revealed a small trap door with which Lennon was unacquainted. This seemed unusual to her because the box itself had been so familiar. She waited in sheer wonder as Grandma reached with her thumb and pointer finger, which had been disfigured by years of suffering from arthritis, and strained to pull out some sort of shiny metal object from the small black hole.

At this point, Lennon couldn’t quite make out the object that Grandma was raising from the box, but she kept her small blue-green eyes glued to Grandma’s hand. Slowly, she began to realize that Grandma was holding a small golden locket.

Curious thoughts flooded Lennon’s head, but no words would come out of her mouth. Before she could muster any questions, Grandma began to speak.

“Lennon, there is a story I need to tell you,” began Grandma. “I should begin by explaining why I waited until now. Even just since you have arrived at my house, I have noticed a difference in you. You have grown physically, but you have also grown in the awareness of your surroundings. I can observe that you adore and cherish your time spent in the Lupin field. You have loved it for a very long time, but this year it has become clear to me that you feel a certain draw to the field. I know how you feel, sweetie, because I felt the same way.” Grandma paused for a moment to observe Lennon’s reaction, and then continued when she noticed that Lennon held her eye contact and maintained her look of wonder. “The house that we are in now was my grandmother’s house and I remember the summer like it was yesterday. I wanted nothing more than to spend my afternoons adventuring in the field. One day during my adventure, I looked down at the ground and noticed an unnatural gold glint in the soil. I bent down to examine it more closely and discovered that I had come across a small golden locket.” Grandma held up the locket close to her face as Lennon nodded her head as a signal for Grandma to continue the story. “I dusted it off, opened it up, and found that a small dried Lupin petal had been placed in the locket. Disappointed that the locket hadn’t held an interesting picture into the past, I removed the dried petal and
filled the locket with a new petal—one of a brilliant lavender color. I was shocked at how marvelous I found the petal to look in the glistening gold locket, but the truly shocking occurrence was yet to come.” By this time, Lennon was leaning so far forward that she was almost falling out of her chair. Grandma continued, “I snapped the locket shut and it happened. Something marvelous and magical, and something that I cannot and do not want to describe. Something that you must experience on your own. Something tremendous that will open your eyes in a way you have never experienced and catapult you into a whole new world. I tell you this, Lennon, because it’s your time to make your own magic in the Lupins. You know your way around well enough. You have grown to be strong, fast, and observant, and I know that you will be successful in whatever the Lupin field will throw your way.” She looked at Lennon straight in the eye and spoke more slowly now. “It’s your turn to take the magical locket of the Lupins. And once you do, each time you step foot into the field, you will experience a whole new and fantastic world—one of new creatures, some friendly, some not so friendly, and one of new adventures. It’s your choice, Lennon dear, but let me inform you that you are ready, and this is an opportunity to learn lessons that this earthly life doesn’t have the creative capacity to teach you without the help of magic. This is your time.”

Lennon had no words. She knew that this year’s adventures in the Lupin field would be far wilder than before, but this was something entirely different. Her emotions were indescribable as her head began to spin with a bizarre combination of excitement and confusion. She has always secretly hoped that magic is real, but she had never actually had reason to trust this instinct—before this. She would be taking on bigger and more marvelous quests, which seemed exciting, but she couldn’t help but think about her peaceful memories of just sitting in the Lupin field soaking in the summer sun. It seemed bittersweet for only moments though, as she was an audacious little girl, and could never feel too upset to leave the past behind and embark on a new pursuit into the strange and magical world of the Lupins.

Grandma held out the locket for Lennon to take. After a moment or two of contemplation Lennon reached out to take the locket and froze. She knew that if she took Grandma’s magic locket, she would ever again be able to go back to her simple memories of afternoons relaxing in the Lupin field. This doubt lasted only a second, though, as her inner-adventurer took over her senses once again, and she reached out to grasp the locket once and for all. As she made her first contact with the ornament, she felt a surge of energy enter her body, traveling into her fingertips and continuing up through the length of her arm. Once this happened, she knew. This strange prickly feeling was just enough to confirm what Grandma had already assured her of, that it was her time now.
Everyone has another. For every person in the world, there is someone else who knows everything about them. Everything. There are no exceptions. Every deep, dark secret, every disgusting desire, you have to share that with someone else. Because there is no choice; there are no exceptions. At least, not one of which I’ve ever heard.

It would be nice, to say the least, if everyone existed in pairs. A few get lucky; sometimes I see people so happy to be together, couples, brothers, sisters, dearest friends, because, if given the choice, that is the person they would have chosen to share themselves with anyway. Those are the fortunate ones; they are called Matches. The unfortunate ones are more common. Entire institutions exist for the care and maintenance of the “identity infirmed.” Most just call them crazy, or lost. Because when someone else’s life events, experiences, and feelings are always running through your head, it gets awfully difficult to separate what is you from what is not.

And during the times when we should feel most alive, most like ourselves, that is when we are most aware of the Other. Whoever and wherever they are, they become so much more real to us, they become an actual part of us, when we do that which is exhilarating and that which we love most. It is as if the adrenaline rush of a skydive or the emotional release of an act of passion pushes you closer to that person’s personality. Usually, you can drown out all the extra thoughts, feelings, and images, but the more that you feel you, the more you understand them.

This is what drives most of the crazies crazy. Some girls run around kissing anything with lips and sleeping with whomever they can, just to catch a glimpse of who they really are amidst the Other. People jump off cliffs on a daily basis to discover themselves, but often they leave not only the edge of a great rock, but also the edge of their sanity.

* * *

I didn’t want to watch, but she made me. My own mother, in the kitchen, with the paring knife, made me watch her scrape away bits of skin while she closed her eyes and waited. Smiles would flit across her face at times, but usually they were shorter-lived than the thought-wrinkles and subtle tears that always followed the smiles. She was frustrated, I knew that. She always got frustrated. No matter how hard she tried, or how many times, my mother could never pin down exactly what part of herself she was searching for. I pitied her, and my pity made her bitter.

Her bitterness didn’t end with me. She was bitter at my father, at the man before him, at the many men before him, and at her father. My mother’s lot in life was no easy one, and I could have helped by reporting her to the services earlier than I did. The men in the white suits certainly tried to help her, but I always thought that she was beyond saving. She was far too lost on the road to herself to come back, and when she finally started to lose sight of all she had cut her skin and smashed her fingers and toes for, I considered it a blessing to her existence.

I should say their existence; after all, there was always more than just one person involved. I wouldn’t be surprised if her Follower, the person who considered my mother his Other, had not also had to experience the self-inflicted pain she thought could save her. After all she did to herself, I would not be
at all shocked to know they are neighbors at the local institution. Pain was my mother’s way of trying to find herself, but pain never works; every guidance counselor, pastor, public official, and psychologist says the same things. The only way to separate yourself is either to find that person, or to learn to tune him out: easier said than done.

* * *

Because people cannot spend their whole lives traveling around the world looking for the person whose thoughts, feelings, and experiences also fill their minds, most simply learn to deal. Some days are more difficult than others, but most are generally happy. It’s the ones who have to listen to the fantasies of pedophiles and rapists that really struggle. Or the people connected to government officials. I’ve never met one of those. They usually aren’t allowed out.

At least most people are listening to someone their own age; it’s very rare for people more than five years apart to be connected. Those that don’t have the privilege of conforming to that “rule” are some of the saddest. Before birth, most people sound like silk sliding on stone; their Follower enjoys a constant “swishing” noise that is the background for everyday life. I’ve heard it results in a lot of headaches. And after death, there is nothing. And for some, they hear nothing for almost their entire lives.

And even though one might assume that that nothing is bliss, peace, and the chance to listen exclusively to oneself, it is not. It is an active nothing. It slowly creeps into all the places of the berefts’ minds until they have lost not only their Other, but also themselves. That’s why there are institutions specially designed for the “Young and Lost.” This is what makes the Other so challenging: he or she is not you, but without your Other, you are nothing.

* * *

I don’t plan on joining my mother in her new home. And because I’m eighteen, my father doesn’t have to come collect me, which is fortunate, since I’m not sure who or where he might be at the moment. So life will go on much the same as normal, for now. School, soccer, sleep. My friend Daniel asked his parents if I could move in with his family. They said maybe; I took it as a no. I like being alone sometimes anyway, and most people avoid whoever one of the Crazies has left behind. As if insanity was contagious. I really hope it’s not.

I have not yet resorted to the grievous tendencies of my mom, and I don’t ever plan to. I think I’m far too strong for that to happen, and my Other isn’t all that bad to listen to sometimes. Following her is not the worst thing that could ever happen to me. It’s a girl. A girl just a little younger than me, I think. Or at least she feels a little younger. I’m not sure what she looks like, but I would know if we had ever met. No one really knows why or how, but everyone says that “you just know” when you finally see him face to face. Some never get that chance, but those that do say it is one of the most satisfying, jarring, and intense experiences.

She’s quiet; that’s what people tell her. And pretty. She hears that sometimes too. I don’t really know what she looks like; the only time I can see her is if she’s picturing herself, and even then it takes a lot of concentration. I think she’s blonde.

* * *

The closer someone gets to his or her Other, the louder the Other comes through. Both geographically and emotionally speaking. No one is sure why, except that really just makes sense. It’s as if the mind opens itself up, blooms like a lily in the sun, when it knows that the Other is close. If people
are fortunate enough to find their Others, talking with them, getting to know them the old fashioned way, from the inside out, usually helps calm the noise. That is why many hope desperately that one day they will get that chance.

It doesn’t happen for many, and those that do meet are not always satisfied. Sometimes the person is not as pretty or successful as people expect, and that can be disappointing. Everyone wants to be associated with the gorgeous, wealthy, and intelligent, so those that find their Other homeless or working the checkout at a gas station are usually less than overwhelmed. You see, the external is not visible to us. We can only know what our Other knows inside of herself. So it’s extremely difficult to create an image in the mind of who we should be looking for. When we say we know everything about our Others, we really just mean that we know their mind and heart. Their looks, their job, the kind of car they drive, all that is unavailable to us, unless they are constantly thinking about it.

There are no “rules” for all this. Plenty of scientists, doctors, and counselors have posited theories about how it all must work, but then, eventually, there is always an exception. There will always be some story in the news about the little boy whose Other is a dog, or about a man who thinks he has two Others. That’s not something I’d want to feel. Three personalities, all vying for the time and attention of one mind. I think that’s the worst part. All we really know is that this is the way we are, and the way we are is not always joy-inducing and rollicking fun.

* * *

It’s hardest to shut her out when great things are happening to me. Last year I scored the game-winner in our state championship. It happened to be one of the best and most confusing moments of my life. I knew that I had to be feeling great about it, but that exhilaration opened me up to her, and she was not very happy at all the time. And I felt it. All the more so because my mind was stretching, spreading so that it could reach hers better. It almost hurt. I felt like I could actually feel the space inside my skull getting filled with double the amount of emotion. I had to sit down for a while.

I’m not sure if I’ve ever been so deep inside the one who calls me Other. I don’t think it’s as obvious when it goes the other way. I’ve never had the chance to talk with her, and I never expect to. With over 7 billion people in the world, it’s nearly impossible to find the one you need.

She’s usually really quiet; I don’t have trouble ignoring the stream of events, plans, concerns, excitements on an average day. Her mind is definitely busy, though, much busier than mine. I think she must live in another country. I imagine she would be louder if we were both from the States.

I do sometimes wonder if we are Matches. Everybody wonders that, though. Especially if your Other is the opposite gender. My junior high soccer coach was one of the lucky ones; his wife and he are Matches. Those are usually the happiest people, because each knows exactly what the other needs, all the time. My coach’s wife explained it to me one time, the best she could. She said, “it’s as if there are no walls, no boundaries between your self and the other self you are meant to love most. All the barriers are gone, and there is no comparison, no metaphor for the level of intimacy you feel at all times. Many people fear or hate their Other, but I could never imagine fearing a force so warmly consuming.” I imagine it’s difficult to put words to, but even so, it’d be nice to have that.

* * *

There is the possibility of knowing all about your Other, but for one exception: who their Other is, the person they follow. If that weren’t true, the world would be even more chaotic and vexing than it is now, because then we would know all about our Other’s Other, and our Other’s Other’s Other, until we
were all just swimming in a mass of nameless traits and unaccounted-for tendencies. People struggle enough as it is with recognizing their identities; a world like that would be just worthless.

There is pain here, and longing. It is not unbearable, though. Still, this is not a happy world, not usually. There are those who commit crimes saying that their Other was controlling their mind. And because there are no rules, how can anyone prove them wrong? There have been rumors of Followers doing just that: reaching in and taking hold of the mind they listen to, and not letting go.

I’m not sure I believe that, though. Some people will say anything to get rid of responsibility, including inducing further fear into the population which they have just recently terrorized with some crime or another. One thing people never joke or lie about is their Other. It’s simply insensitive to make things up or pretend as if you are breaking the rules, even though there are none. Unless someone really is an exception, he keeps his mouth shut. There is no quicker way to send the world into a panic than to spread stories about how your Follower-Other relationship is different than everyone else’s, especially if it is not.

The thing is, I think most people understand that though they may be desperately unhappy or scared out of their minds because of the thoughts they Follow, they still know that there is no other way. The only alternative is the nothing, and no one should have to live knowing that eventually all they might know about themselves will be lost forever, and they are fated to live their life in a home, going for walks with a nurse and staring at walls until they cannot name what color the sky is, or who they loved in life.

* * *

Today is my nineteenth birthday. I graduate from high school in 3 months. And then it’s off to college, or at least that was what my mother had envisioned for me, in her more lucid moments. I don’t know if I really feel like going, though, and I’m not sure what I really even feel like doing instead, but I feel like there is something.

I don’t want to end up like my mother. And I won’t. Watching her waste away as she searched for herself in all the wrong sensations was far too painful for me even to consider doing it to myself. Just the memories of the nights she would send me to my friends’ homes so she could have the house to herself for a night with a random stranger, or the unassuming metal objects which would become her personal torture device of choice, give me shivers. There, I’ve said it. The only thing that scares me more than becoming a Crazy is doing it the same way mother did.

So I guess I had better find her.

* * *

Pennie and Gloria hurried up the steps of the columned building. They were about to be late for Calculus. “I think something really sad has happened to him recently,” Pennie said thoughtfully. “He has just felt different recently; normally he is a bit more positive feeling.”

Gloria expected most of her conversations with Pennie to start with something she had recently discovered about her Other. She was intrigued and beguiled by it all, and she plans to go into Identity Science when she graduates in the spring.

“Well, maybe positive is not the best word; he’s not actually ever a very positive person. But he’s just . . . less. Yes, that’s it. Less than usual.”
“That’s how you’re going to describe it? That doesn’t help me understand. But I think I might know what you mean.”

Gloria didn’t really; she just wanted to get to class on time, and once Pennie started on Followers, Others, and all that comes with it, she didn’t stop easily. Gloria had, at times, actually pushed her into walls to get her to stop talking. Without making it obvious, of course.

“He also doesn’t think very hard about himself, which is frustrating.”

Gloria rolled her eyes. Pennie spoke sometimes as if she expected her Other to cater to her wishes to discover the truth behind why humans are the way they are. As if he knew that she needed him to be more clear so that Pennie could continue her self-research.

“How about we just get to Calc? I promise to listen to you over lunch, okay?” Gloria hoped Pennie would drop the subject for now. Gloria’s father was not pleased with her Calculus exam scores thus far, and she couldn’t give both Pennie and her notes adequate attention. It was entirely inappropriate to refuse someone’s need or desire to talk about his Others, and Gloria knew that her friend’s interest was not only scientifically but also emotionally based.

“Would you want to, really? That would be fantastic! I just woke up feeling different this morning, and I think it’s because he’s feeling different, like something unfortunate has happened, but it was necessary all the same. And now he thinks maybe he’s going to change his mind about something very important, or at least it used to be important. I can’t tell, really. He’s not being very decisive, and he’s probably really far away.”

“Sure,” answered Gloria. “We can talk. Later.” And they walked into class.

* * *

Reflection on My Writing Process

The writing process is always a bit frustrating for me. I love to write, and I have found that it is through writing that I best express myself, but I often have to wait for the right time. It really does sound cheesy, but I can tell when I will be able to write to the level of which I can be proud and when I will not. And even when I am in that right mood and mindset, it doesn’t always come out the way I want it to. I have found that this is particularly true when I attempt creative pieces, but it also applies to research papers and shorter essays as well, regardless of the topic.

That being said, I wanted to write this. I have wanted to write this and many, many other things for some time, but I have a fear of being inadequate and of realizing that my ideas are not really all that good anyway. Any time I have an idea for a piece of fiction come to my mind, I jot down the idea, but I know that I will most likely never be able to actually write it, because I am ruled by a fear of venturing into a territory of what I would like to consider one of my strengths and not only failing miserably in the public eye, but also failing to do myself justice.

So once I realized that I had to get over myself and write the darn thing, I talked. A lot. To all of my friends and anyone else who would listen. Because I am an annoyingly human girl, I wanted to get as much validation as possible before actually going forth to write. I figured that if my friends told me it was a cool idea and that they would read it if it were a book, I was probably safe in at least attempting to get it out on paper for once.
The larger struggles of this task were a little diverse. First, I needed a word for the person whose thoughts to which another is always listening. And then I needed a word for the listener. I wanted it to mean more than just someone who hears or pays attention, though, and that’s where Follower came from. And then I needed a plot. This is just a small part of a hopefully someday larger work, and eight pages are not nearly enough to provide enough expository information and also to fit in the edges or beginnings of a plot. I tried, but if you need a little bit more to work with as far as grading purposes, I do plan on having Jack and Pennie meet. I’m not sure yet if they will be Matches, though the last page is meant to suggest that they are. Pennie lives in England; Jack is from Colorado, maybe. Probably somewhere on the western half of the United States, but, then again, I would not be able to write as easily about that portion of the country, since I am not from there. I also really had no idea where the story was going to go. I know that stories need events and happenings, but I didn’t know what I wanted to happen that would give my story more meaning than just an explanation of some predominantly unhappy humans.

I also struggled with the question of science fiction versus fantasy, and if what I was writing could really be considered fantasy. I think it can, though the evidence would point more in the direction of sci-fi. I’m ok with that, but I also don’t really know yet what the rest of the story will be, and the more classic elements of fantasy might appear later on, when hopefully I get enough courage and get over myself enough to do something I’ve always wanted to do: write a good story.
A Character Analysis of Elisa in John Steinbeck’s “The Chrysanthemums”

“The Chrysanthemums,” written by John Steinbeck, is a short story about a rancher, Henry Allen, and his wife, Elisa. Both are hardworking and appear to conform to societal norms. Elisa is a talented gardener whose skills are complimented by both her husband and a tinker who is passing through the area. Henry keeps himself occupied with the business of running the ranch. However, despite their seemingly external stability, all is not well between Elisa and Henry in their life on the ranch. Societal norms leave Elisa feeling unsatisfied and unfulfilled with her life; nevertheless, her strength of character allows her to endure despite her confined feminine role.

The story is told in the third person from Elisa’s point of view. Because the world is depicted solely through Elisa’s eyes, the reader is keenly aware of her frustrations and feelings. To the casual outside observer, Elisa leads an ideal life for a woman of her time. She has an industrious husband, stable home, and comfortable lifestyle. Yet through Elisa’s verbal and nonverbal interactions with two men, her husband and a stranger, it becomes apparent that she is dissatisfied with her life. Elisa possesses strong character traits, but society does not allow her to act on her inclinations for a more fulfilling, independent life.

“The Chrysanthemums” is set in the 1930s, when there is a marked distinction between men’s and women’s worlds. As the story opens, Elisa works in her flower garden and looks from afar at her husband, Henry, who is across the yard conducting business with two men dressed in suits. The men stand beside a tractor-shed, smoke cigarettes, and study a machine. Elisa “watched them for a moment and then went back to her work” (438). The worlds of men and women are portrayed as being very separate in the story. Henry is solely responsible for managing the ranch’s affairs, leaving Elisa to tend the flower garden. The physical separation between Elisa in her flower garden and those conducting the business affairs of the ranch emphasizes the distance between Elisa and the practical business of running the ranch. There is a sense of removal not only between her lack of involvement with the ranch, but also her emotional connection with her husband. This is the first instance in the story where the reader senses Elisa’s frustration with her lot in life.

Elisa’s physical appearance when the story begins lends her masculine-looking features. These features suggest her desire to be viewed as a strong character to be taken seriously. While working in her garden, Elisa is described as “lean and strong,” with a figure that “looked blocked and heavy” (438). She wears a man’s black hat pulled down low, heavy shoes, leather gloves, and a big apron (438). Although she cannot be received as a man in society, her wardrobe suggests that she wishes she could take on a man’s role as easily as she can take on masculine attire.

Throughout the short story, the reader senses how Elisa Allen feels confined. One instance of this feeling of confinement is portrayed when Henry pays her a visit in the flower garden. He compliments Elisa’s flowers, saying, “You’ve got a strong new crop coming” (439). Hearing the fruits of her labor described as “strong” brightens Elisa’s disposition and she replies with “a little smugness” (439). Henry then tells her she has a gift with the flowers, saying, “I wish you’d work out in the orchard and raise some apples that big” (439). When Elisa responds affirmatively, enthusiastically daring to hope that he might be serious in his offer for her to help with the orchard, Henry responds dismissively. He appears to believe it is well and good for Elisa to garden in the flowerbeds, but not practical for her to apply her gardening talents to any plants outside the confines of the garden. While Henry has the entire ranch to display his agricultural prowess, Elisa has only her garden.
When the tinker pays a visit to the ranch, Elisa is immediately drawn to him. In her eyes, he leads the ideal life. Talking with the tinker about his lifestyle, Elisa states, “It must be nice. It must be very nice. I wish women could do such things” (445). The tinker replies, “It ain’t the right kind of a life for a woman” (445). When she questions why that is, he simply replies that he doesn’t know. Elisa dares to question why roles are the way they are, and, as the tinker admits, there is no particularly obvious answer. Elisa admires the tinker because he has the freedom to go wherever he desires. Unlike him, Elisa is trapped on the ranch, within the walls of her house and wire fences of her garden.

The tinker later tells Elisa that his life would be lonely for her: “It would be a lonely life for a woman, ma’am, and a scary life, too, with animals creeping under the wagon all night” (445). He does not realize the extent of Elisa’s loneliness on the ranch. Her husband interacts with her, but only superficially, with small talk. Elisa longs for the sort of friendly banter she had between her and the tinker rather than the trivial talk that takes place between her and her husband. As is evidenced by her easy conversation with the tinker, Elisa craves conversation and genuine human interaction. If she were a nomadic tinker, Elisa would at least have the opportunity to interact freely with others, even if not on a deeper level.

Elisa watches wistfully as the tinker leaves, taking with him her hopes. She quietly reflects, “That’s a bright direction. There’s a glowing there” (446). Her eyes are half-closed as she whispers this, and she seems to be imagining herself in his position. The tinker’s world is attractive, but out of her reach. Elisa checks to ensure that no one heard her longing words, and then returns to her own house and her own way of life.

Elisa is visibly affected by the tinker’s visit to the ranch. After he leaves, taking with him her ideal lifestyle, she undergoes an external transformation. Having realized that she cannot take on a man’s role, she resigns herself to once again take on a feminine appearance. She goes indoors, where she draws a bath and sheds her bulky gardening clothes. Elisa scrubs herself and then “stood in front of a mirror in her bedroom and looked at her body” (446). She then dresses in her best clothing, does her hair, and puts on make-up (446). When Henry sees her, he tells her that she looks nice and then remarks, “I mean you look different, strong and happy” (447). Elisa replies, “I am strong? Yes, strong. What do you mean ‘strong’?” (447). Henry does not reply to her satisfaction and she simply tells him, “I never knew before how strong” (447). Elisa can indeed be strong; her strength comes from within herself.

The fact that Elisa neglects to mention the tinker’s visit to the ranch to her husband is striking. A stranger’s visit to their ranch could not have been a common occurrence, yet Elisa does not remark on it, even in passing. She likely does not want her husband to be aware of the brief joy, but lingering disappointment that the tinker’s visit gave her. By keeping it to herself, Elisa can treasure the memory of her brief connection with the tinker, while still mourning the lost opportunity for his lifestyle.

During their interactions, Elisa had given the tinker a pot of chrysanthemums with detailed instructions regarding their care. As Elisa and her husband drive into town later that night, Elisa sees the chrysanthemums she gave the tinker laying on the road. She realizes that the tinker discarded his gift from her and kept only the pot. His interest in her flowers was feigned and Elisa feels deceived. A man with whom she had briefly felt an affinity did not take her seriously. She is crushed and finally retreats back into herself, entirely resigned to her feminine role. Her ambitions, talents, and potential for success are quashed simply on account of her gender.

As the story closes, Elisa sits limply beside her husband in the car. She weeps silently, knowing that she must endure despite her desolation. Her husband seems oblivious to her pain and Elisa wishes to keep her tears from him. Elisa is described as “an old woman” (448) who can do no more than weep. She is powerless to change her fate in life, but realizes that she must persevere. Elisa recognizes that she lives
in a male-dominated world and must continue to appear passive, aided by her internal strength of character.

Work Cited

Digging Beneath the Surface: The Effectiveness of Extended Metaphor in Whitman’s “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer”

When I heard the learn’d astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and the diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander’d off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look’d up in perfect silence at the stars.

Walt Whitman’s poem “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” is a seemingly short and simple piece. The speaker, presumably a man, is recalling a time when he sat through a lecture by an educated astronomer. The astronomer explained scientific and mathematical concepts—such as proofs and diagrams—pertaining to the study of stars. Everyone else hearing the lecture was very impressed, having applauded him. Conversely, our speaker felt sick and tired of the lecture, and, a lone wanderer, escaped the scene. Once he was outside, he looked up at the sky and noted how perfect the stars looked. It is important to notice that there is much more to the meaning behind Whitman’s words. Through the use of astronomy as an extended metaphor, combined with careful word choice, tone and structure, he is showing a general flaw in society: when one tries too hard to find the answers in life, one loses the natural wonder and beauty the world can offer.

Whitman’s first three lines are structured in such a way that the reader can feel the lecture dragging on, annoying the speaker. “When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,” the second line of this poem begins. He continues on the next line, “When I was shown the charts and the diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them.” Although the first and second lines are already broken with a comma, the pause is more significant as a direct result of splitting the thought into two separate lines. This structural decision immediately allows the reader to understand that too much is being done—not just adding, but also measuring; not only proofs, but figures, too. The speaker is essentially listing off the many things the astronomer is teaching, thus successfully expressing his feeling that the astronomer is therefore over complicating things.

This eight line piece is crafted with a careful understanding of structure and tone; after four lines, the plot of the poem shifts dramatically. No longer is our speaker sitting and listening, nor can he dote on what the astronomer did any longer. For at the midway point of line five, the speaker refers to himself as the main subject. He becomes “tired and sick” as a result of the astronomer’s talk and needs to escape the lecture-room. Shifting the focus onto himself is a method used for the speaker to pull the reader out of the moment and into the meaning, giving birth to realization of metaphorical power. The point is not that the lecture was boring and complex; rather, the point is drawn from personal reflection on the speaker’s part. What has sitting through the learn’d astronomer’s lecture taught him?

Word choice is particularly notable after the shift in tone, as the speaker uses the word “mystical” to describe the “night-air.” In a piece that has, until this point, used concrete words (he “heard;” he sat. He saw “diagrams” and equations), a word of a completely different nature stands out. “Mystical” is defined on Dictionary.com as “obscure in meaning; mysterious.” The contrast emphasizes the idea that the
speaker disagrees with the Astronomer; he would rather use a word that highlights what is unknown and will never—perhaps should never—be.

The speaker states that he “Look’d up in perfect silence at the stars.” Again, one can clearly see how Whitman’s choice in structure comes into play: the last line, standing out on its own at the end of poem, is the epitome of the poem’s meaning and the answer to our metaphorical riddle. Finally, a metaphor born in the first line—“the learn’d astronomer”—comes full circle. Society, with its continuing need for more understanding, more advancement, and less unknown, is represented by the astronomer’s lecture and the response of the audience. This has taken away from the natural beauty that the world offers (or, rather, the “perfect silence of the stars”). If one can break him or herself away from the need to know how everything works, to over intellectualize what could be simple, as our fearless speaker did, then one is able to fully appreciate the natural wonders of the world for what they are. A desire to control or comprehend why and how something works is not always necessary, though many get caught up in such desire. However, as Whitman proves, all it takes it a pause in the chaos, like a moment of silence under the night sky, to enjoy and appreciate the mysteries of the world.

Works Cited


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Racial Discrimination and the Individual in *Fences*

August Wilson, in his play *Fences*, writes against the racial division and discrimination in a society. The setting, an important influence on the attitudes and actions of the characters, models a 1950s’ USA in which African Americans are mistreated and disrespected. The character of Troy embodies the negative effects of discrimination; his personality, desires, and actions all display his corruption by the label society has placed on him. Wilson utilizes these two major elements, setting and characterization, to develop his theme of the issues that arise in the individual when race determines his or her value. The three main categories of issues that Wilson focuses on include emotional, socio-economic, and psychological issues.

*Fences* opens with Troy, the main character, speaking to his best friend, Bono, about the racial discrimination in his workplace. It quickly becomes clear that Troy’s character is dishonest and conniving, as he is trapped in his own lies. However, he is also described as a strong, sturdy man who provides for his family with hard work and keeps his friends close. Throughout the play, Troy struggles to develop healthy relationships with his sons, his wife, his brother, and his best friend, who all feel slighted by him at various points. Eventually all of his relationships crumble around him due to his lying, cheating, and abusive nature, culminating with a physical fight with his son Cory. The play ends on a quiet note, with Troy’s funeral. The story’s tragedy lies in the character’s struggle with discrimination and its effects.

The setting presents a realistic portrait of African-American culture in a typical American city in the 1950s; the significance of this realism lies in the ethical “flaws” of the time period evident in the setting, “flaws” which are noticeable to the reader and support the overarching theme. The first major “flaw” to stand out arises in Troy’s workplace and its favor towards white people. This first aspect, a plot element in the play that is presented in the opening scene and develops throughout the first act, represents the unfair treatment of African Americans. Its effects can be seen on Troy in various ways: he fears the judgment of the union, worried that he may be fired for asking too many questions about why blacks aren’t allowed to drive the trucks; it also spurs him to lie about his driver’s license in order to feel more equal in the workplace, stating: “He ain’t got to know. The man ain’t got to know my business” (552). Both of these reactions, fear and dishonesty, are caused by the discrimination Troy feels in the workplace. This situation represents the position of many colored people in the USA at the time; racism didn’t allow them to hold “middle class” jobs, and as a result, their economic status was low. This racial discrimination caused emotional issues in individuals.

The second major “flaw” in the setting that stands appears in the dialect of the characters. It attests to the level of education and intellect that they have been given the opportunity to attain (as does Cory’s struggle to go to university). Not only that, but the level of corruption and mistreatment that the characters have been exposed to leads them to refer to themselves with racial slurs: “Hell, nigger . . .” (562), etc. The socio-economic issues that arise out of discrimination show in the characters’ mistreatment of each other and of themselves, a clear indication of issues with self-respect and respect for their race. These two major flaws in the setting exemplify issues, emotional and socio-economic, when racial status becomes the method by which to measure an individual’s worth in society, and therefore what they are deserving of.

The second major literary technique utilized by Wilson to develop theme is characterization. While evidence of the effects of racial discrimination can be seen in all of the characters, the one most
clearly affected is Troy. Three major examples include his personality, his desires, and his actions. In Troy’s personality, evidence of his family history shows. His father, trapped in poverty and darkly abusive, was Troy’s only role model for his life. Poverty and abuse were passed from father to son, and Troy became enslaved to the example his father showed him. Because of discrimination faced by his father, Troy too faces socio-economic issues for the entirety of his life; Wilson presents the circularity of the issues as one reason that one’s value should not be determined by race. Because Troy is unable to escape the racial inferiority that society deals him, he is economically of lower status; because of his lower economic status, society maltreats him. It poses a difficult and ensnaring cycle, and one passed down through generations. The characters in *Fences* all embody the way that this cycle corrupts them, dividing them from the rest of society.

Wilson also presents further reasoning against discrimination in Troy’s desires. He describes the reasoning behind his affair to Rose this way: “I can step out of this house and . . . be a different man. . . . I can just be a part of myself that I ain’t never been” (II. i. 566-67). He talks about feeling trapped, and about being “born with two strikes on you” (567). In Troy’s desperation, Wilson develops a third effect of discrimination: psychological issues. The feeling of desperation displayed by the individual in this scene comes from his inability to escape from racial discrimination, a feeling that drives him to have an affair in the hopes it will give him brief moments of escape, thus ruining his relationship with his wife. Discrimination gives rise to these types of issues in individuals ostracized by their society; Troy’s desires exemplify the kinds of psychological issues that can be caused by racial discrimination.

The final aspect of characterization Wilson uses to develop theme is in Troy’s actions. It can be seen in two of his most important relationships: that with his son, Cory, and that with his wife, Rose. The climax of the play occurs when Troy physically fights with his son; throughout earlier scenes in the play, he tears away Cory’s dreams, repeatedly reacts in anger towards the boy, and even at one point states that he does not even care for his son: “A man got to take care of his family. . . . Not ‘cause I like you! ‘Cause it’s my duty to take care of you” (547). In this broken and corrupted relationship, the psychological effects of racial discrimination again come to light. Troy’s relationship with his father, an abusive relationship devoid of love, was heavily influenced by the racial discrimination Troy’s father felt: “No, he was trapped and I think he knew it” (555). Because of an upbringing heavily pervaded by discrimination, psychological effects such as abusive and unhealthy relationships were carried over into another life, in another discriminatory social setting.

Also in question throughout the play is Troy’s definition of love. He claims to love Rose, his wife, yet he cheats on her, hurts her, and erupts in anger at her. Again, the psychological effects are clear: Troy is unable to love because he has never been shown love. Troy’s family history does play into this situation, but perhaps more importantly, in a society that discriminates based on race, love cannot move freely. If an individual has never been given love, is it possible to pour out love to others? The answer seems to be no. Wilson points this out in the play, portraying Troy as a loveless character living in a racist society.

There are many layers to *Fences*. Deep within rhetorical strategies lie strong arguments against racism and examples of the effects that they have on individuals; dishonesty, mistrust, abuse, poverty, and desperation are just a few of the examples Wilson highlights through his setting and characterization. While some such details may seem minute, it is important to grasp the play fully, both its big picture and its small frames. A play about racism in its entirety, *Fences* also dwells on the variety of struggles caused by discrimination, creating a fuller understanding of the moral and ethical reasoning against racial discrimination.

Work Cited

My honors project aimed to look at poet Joy Harjo’s work in relation to an ethic of reciprocity, which illustrates how American Indian writers conceive of human relationships with the earth. I began the project by defining this ethic through the words of other American Indian writers. The excerpt below comes from the third chapter titled “Harjo and the Ethic of Reciprocity.”

* * *

Ceremony: the Meeting of Physical and Spiritual Reciprocation

The ethic of reciprocity emphasizes both physical and spiritual acts of reciprocation—physical offerings of tobacco, food, self-mutilation, and dance and spiritual offerings of prayer. A ceremony brings together both elements, making it the ultimate place for reciprocation where participants maintain their familial relationships with the other things of the earth. Besides “Wolf Warrior,” a good example of how Harjo weaves together the physical and spiritual elements of reciprocation into a ceremony is the tale, “ceremony,” from A Map to the Next World. Written in prose, this two-page piece describes the day, which has the potential to be a kind of ceremony. Harjo writes, “It has a spirit, this creature called day, and will go on without us, dragging us behind it. Or, we can take part in the ceremony and walk (or run!) with grace into the momentum” (58). The spirit of day goes ever onward, but when the human decides to walk into the day with purpose and intent, the day becomes a ceremony. Or perhaps the day is inevitably a ceremony, and instead of being dragged, a person can decide to participate, thereby honoring the day. Whether human participation actively transforms the day into a ceremony or the day is always a ceremony, Harjo sees the potential for interaction between people and the cycle of days. Her metaphor of day as a creature that has a spirit immediately conjures an image of day as both a physical and spiritual force; therefore, the ceremony of day is also both a spiritual and a physical force. The day extends physical spirituality and spiritual physicality and expects the same from participants. To take part in the ceremony, a person must act physically and spiritually.

As discussed above and in Chapter One, everything of the earth, because of familial relationship, should be in an active cycle of reciprocity with everything else of the earth. For example, when the river offers fish and the fish offer themselves, fishermen reciprocate with a ceremony in which they offer prayers and tobacco. In the tale of “ceremony,” the entire day becomes a sort of ceremony. The day interacts with the human and the human should interact with the day on all levels of being, spiritually and physically. Harjo characterizes the day not only as a creature that trudges onward but as a participatory creature that dwells in a place of reciprocity with other beings. When preparing for the day, the speaker, in this case Harjo, discusses the role of the sun. The sun, the reason that the day is the day, plays an essential role in the “act of preparation,” which is “most crucial” when “considering ceremony” (58). A part of the ceremony, the sun, acts as an agent for preparation in the other parts of the ceremony. This image creates a confusing layering, a ceremony within a ceremony. The sun is both inside the ceremony of day, making the day distinct from the night, and outside the day, preparing Harjo for the rest of the day.

After spending a paragraph describing the days “doomed to give us a rough ride” (58), Harjo says this about the sun:

After these long nights involving ghosts, or the betrayal of the father, I would get up and go out into the dawn. I would let the sun touch me, clean me, prepare me for the day. It was always astounding to me that the sun could be so intimate though it was light-years
away from Tulsa. I could see the energy as it sparkled, fed the plants, entered and left my spirit refreshed. The other creatures, too, made this preparation and they would make all manner of acknowledgement in songs to the maker of the day. (59)

Harjo packs this paragraph with ideas sympathetic to an ethic of reciprocity. First, the reader sees Harjo letting the sun clean and prepare her for the day. She allows the sun to serve her. Neither Harjo nor the sun is passive in this statement. Harjo must initiate the interaction by walking out into the dawn and “letting” the sun touch her. This initiation corresponds to the passage quoted earlier about walking into the momentum of the day to be part of the ceremony. The sun is in the sky, waiting to clean and prepare, but to actualize this gift, Harjo must open herself up to its possibility. When Harjo walks out into the dawn, she both allows the sun to fulfill its desire to cleanse and refresh and gives back to the sun by acknowledging its intentions. Her recognition of the sun as an intimate participator in her life demonstrates the familial relationship between sun and person.

The sun prepares Harjo for the day by refreshing her spirit, which is an act of spiritual reciprocation, natural for maintaining the sun’s relationship with a relative. But in the same sentence that Harjo mentions the sun refreshing her spirit, she speaks of the sun feeding the plants; therefore, the reader sees the sun offering both physical and spiritual gifts that exist within a relationship based on reciprocity. Yet the sun is not the only thing of the earth offering gifts. The “other creatures . . . make all manner of acknowledgement in songs to the maker of the day” (59). The creatures benefitting from the sun’s refreshing power reciprocate with songs of acknowledgement. They recognize their relationship with the sun and give thanks. The “maker of the day” could refer to some higher power that created the earth, or it could simply refer to that which makes the day distinct, the sun. Through songs, or physical reciprocation, the creatures acknowledge the physical and spiritual importance of the sun, which physically feeds the plants and makes the day distinct, and which spiritually refreshes and cleanses in acts of preparation.

Harjo ends “Ceremony” with another, more blatant reference to an ethic of reciprocity through the ceremony of day. She writes: “It’s crucial we participate for the sun needs our songs, prayers, acknowledgements. Too often the weight of humans has been carried by others who have not lost their original instructions on how to live with integrity in this system” (59). “This system” is essentially an ethic of reciprocity that involves all the things of the earth in familial relationship. To realize fully the “original instructions” on how to live within this ethic, humans must participate, must give back to and take from all the other things of the earth. In the case of this quotation, the sun is the thing of the earth. The sun needs reciprocation from the creatures that it cleans, refreshes, and feeds. According to this quotation and earlier quotations, the plants and creatures seem to reciprocate well, while the humans do not carry their own “weight.” Because humans fail to carry their weight, the day often drags them along behind itself. Thus enters the image from the beginning of the tale of day as creature, which gives continuity to “ceremony.” Those humans who pick themselves up and walk into the momentum of the day thereby honor the “original instructions” of “this system.” The interaction between sun and human and the celebration of familial relationship through “songs, prayers, [and] acknowledgements” (59) demonstrate how essential participatory ceremonies are to the maintenance of the ethic, or system, or reciprocity. These ceremonies both exist as and involve acts of physical and spiritual reciprocation. When humans reciprocate, they live with integrity according to “original instructions” (59).

The Physical, the Spiritual, and the Concept of Spatiality

The importance of ceremony cannot be overstated. Ceremony provides a tangible way for Harjo and many American Indians to honor and actualize an ethic of reciprocity. In ceremonies and much American Indian thought, the distinctions between what is spiritual and what is physical blur. For example, a prayer may be a physical action, but it also serves as an act of spiritual reciprocation. On the typical Western division of the material and the spiritual, or the body and the soul, Paula Gunn Allen writes that
American Indian thought makes no such dualistic division, nor does it draw a hard and fast line between what is material and what is spiritual, for it regards the two as different expressions of the same reality, as though life has twin manifestations that are mutually interchangeable and, in many instances, virtually identical aspects of a reality that is essentially more spirit than matter, or, more correctly, that manifests its spirit in a tangible way. (246)

In this one lengthy sentence, Allen layers ideas so much that the reader must slow down and carefully decipher. Allen describes the vague phrase, “different expressions of the same reality,” as “twin manifestations” or “identical aspects” of a reality that “manifests its spirit in a tangible way.” In other words, physical and spiritual manifestations of thought are like two bottles of brown paint. They might be slightly different shades but are still the same kind of paint. Allen further claims that reality essentially dwells more in a spiritual realm than in a physical realm. Spirit then manifests itself in physical, tangible ways. Although it might seem as if Allen downplays the physical world by claiming it as a manifestation of the spiritual, she essentially says the distinctions do not matter. The things of the earth are of one substance, which Allen calls “spirit.”

Allen’s claims about material and spiritual expression draw power from American Indian ideas of God. Allen explains that “[i]n American Indian thought, God is known as the All Spirit, and other beings are also spirit—more spirit than body, more spirit than intellect, more spirit than mind” (247). Allen suggests that typical distinctions between what is physical and what is spiritual need questioning and redefinition. So perhaps making the argument that ceremony includes both physical and spiritual reciprocation is a moot claim to an American Indian. Their ideology implies what most Euramericans might call physical and spiritual action but what many American Indians simply call action, reciprocation through ceremony.

Clara Sue Kidwell, in her chapter “Creation” from A Native American Theology, frames the discussion of the physical and the spiritual differently. While Allen argues that the beings of the earth are more spirit than physical body, Kidwell emphasizes a symbiotic dualism whereby physical and spiritual exist interdependently. She writes, “Spirit without matter is motion without substance; matter without spirit is motionless and meaningless. Once again we see reciprocity in a symbiotic dualism, this time clearly configured spatially” (46). Clarifying her use of the word “dualism,” she then explains that “American Indian duality is a necessary reciprocity, not oppositional” (46). To Kidwell, spirit acts as an engine for matter. Without the moving force of spirit, matter sits idle. Without matter to fill, spirit drifts aimlessly. Spirit and matter must exist together, but they do exist distinct from one another.

This assertion comes during Kidwell’s longer discussion on how American Indian cultures center on spatiality, an important term for understanding American Indian culture and specifically Harjo’s poetry. Next to an ethic of reciprocity, the concept of spatiality demonstrates most clearly the ways in which many American Indian cultures view the land. Kidwell contrasts Euramericans’ orientation around time with American Indians’ orientation around space, writing,

In contrast, cultural values, social and political structures in Indian communities are rooted in a creation worldview shaped by reciprocity and spatiality. Indian ceremonial existence, for instance, is inevitably spatially configured with place taking precedence over the question of when a ceremony will happen. (45)

The earlier discussion of reciprocation within ceremony and Kidwell’s comments on ceremonies here exhibit the dependency of and interaction between reciprocity and spatiality in an American Indian worldview. Traditionally, European cultures have categorized and structured life around the passage of time, but American Indian cultures have always concentrated more on place and their relationship with that place. Their relationship with that place speaks to the ethic of reciprocity.

Kidwell explains it this way, in terms of non-hierarchical responsibility:
Each nation has some understanding that they were placed into a relationship with a particular territory by spiritual forces outside of themselves and thus have an enduring responsibility for that territory just as the earth, especially the earth in that particular place, has a filial responsibility toward the people who live there. Likewise, the Two-Legged people in that place also have a spatially related responsibility toward all people who share that place with them, including animals, birds, plants, rocks, rivers, mountains and the like. (45)

In this example, Kidwell articulates American Indian conceptions of the landscape succinctly, explaining the concepts of both reciprocity and spatiality. The first part of this quote refers more to spatiality, American Indians being called by spiritual forces to dwell in a certain location. The second part speaks more to reciprocity with the language of “spatially related responsibility,” which means that humans should treat the land on which they live in certain ways and the earth should respond similarly.

This conversation of spatiality and reciprocity may seem abstract, but Kidwell also relates these concepts to the concrete, day-to-day ways in which American Indians lead their lives. She explains that these ways include “our ceremonial structures, our symbols, our architecture, and . . . the symbolic parameters of a tribe’s universe. Hence, the land and spatiality constitute much of a community’s life” (45). Situation in the landscape determines how a tribe functions. But appropriate acts of reciprocation, which grow out of a mindset of respect for and equality with the earth, occur regardless of how a tribe specifically determines its “community’s life” (45). The ethic of reciprocity provides a foundation for determining those day-to-day actions within a tribe. Spatiality and reciprocity dialogue to create a view of the world as dynamic, balanced whole where the physical and the spiritual, the rock and the tree, the human and the land depend on one another within relationship. Paula Gunn Allen phrases the concept of spatiality and reciprocity this way: “Every tribe has a responsibility to the workings of the universe; today as yesterday, human beings play an intrinsic role in the ongoing creation. This role is largely determined by the place where the tribe lives, and the role changes when the tribe moves” (260). Specific responsibilities to the earth define the roles of humans within creation, and place determines those roles. An American Indian worldview encourages humans to act within an ethic of reciprocity, but how people act depends on where the individual person and his/her tribe are in the world.

Joy Harjo writes from these foundations of reciprocity and spatiality. Discussion of two poems above, including “Wolf Warrior,” already demonstrates Harjo’s involvement in an ethic of reciprocity. The question of how she interacts with the concept of spatiality is more complicated and perhaps not as obvious. Yet the separation of reciprocity and spatiality exists somewhat as a false dichotomy, since the two interact and dwell so closely together as to be almost one idea. Generally, Harjo approaches land in her poetry through a consideration of subject matter and metaphor, treating the concept of spatiality, with its emphasis on a specific spirit-given territory, somewhat loosely. She does not write solely from a position that her place on earth should be back in Alabama and Mississippi where her people once lived. But much of her poetry connects to a place or places, not one place. Harjo writes in a vein of spatiality in that she remains conscious of space, location, and earth in her poetry. Later chapters will further discuss this claim.

In many of her poems, Harjo does not explicitly write of the land, instead covering a wide gamut of themes including survival, music, women, and daily events. Many titles of her poems do suggest that the main subject matter is a place, for example, “Anchorage,” “New Orleans,” “Santa Fe,” and “Climbing the Streets of Worcester, Mass.” but there are many titles, like “Grace,” that do not immediately suggest a connection to place. Part of her In Mad Love and War collection, Harjo wrote the four-stanza prose poem “Grace” after a morning at a truck stop. The poem speaks of the restlessness, or homelessness, that the speaker, in this case Harjo herself, feels regularly in her life but also the moments of grace, or peace, that can happen unexpectedly; therefore, the poem communicates most readily on the themes of survival and hope. But the poem grows out of place. Finding grace in the poem depends on where Harjo is, not when
she is. Time is not absent from the poem, but place takes precedence. In the second stanza, Harjo writes, “And one morning as the sun struggled to break ice, and our dreams had found us with coffee and pancakes in a truck stop along Highway 80, we found grace” (1). The time of day, morning, adds imagery and atmosphere, but Harjo does not predominately find grace in the morning; she finds grace at the truck stop. She also finds grace with others, as seen through the first-person plural pronouns throughout the poem.

Harjo also writes of reciprocity in “Grace.” During that morning at the truck stop, grace took the form of “a promise of balance” where “We once again understood the talk of animals, and spring was lean and hungry with the hope of children and corn” (1). This moment of grace, which is rooted in the space of a truck stop, is a hope for healed relationships within an ethic of reciprocity. Harjo continues in the poem, saying that this moment of grace does not fix all of their trials and problems, but it does provide some hope. The poem ends with these sentences: “I know there is something larger than the memory of a dispossessed people. We have seen it” (1). They have seen that “something larger” in the moment of grace at the truck stop. Again these sentences imply a restlessness caused by dispossession. Harjo and her people do not have their original home to which to return. Oklahoma exists as a new home, but the memory of her tribe’s removal from the Southeast will always haunt her. Harjo communicates her awareness of and attention to place throughout “Grace.”

Works Cited

Wet with the Father’s Blood (Excerpt)

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Vlatko’s arm was scaly, like the little lizards that wriggled on the hot stones in the summertime near the coast. The shanties he slept in outside of town provided little protection against the wind that blew over the snow in the winter and into the camp, swirling around the camp until it reeked of ashes and excrement. Now the spring was coming, and it could be hot in the fields. There was no soap for a Roma. He spoke to another Roma—Moša—about there being no way to wash themselves as they sat in front of the shack they had been assigned outside the camp. Cockroaches scurried along the edges of the four bare walls, but there were no mice. The last one had been caught about a month ago.

“There is no soap, not a damn bit of it here. We touch the dead, we sleep in the wind, and we are given no food. How is a man supposed to survive? Even a gypsy needs more than air to live.”

Moša was busy scratching his teeth with a chipped fingernail. Semi-circles of black filth were embedded along his cuticles and underneath their slightly rounded tips. The creases in his fingers were a darker brown than his skin, and Moša’s face, which had been thin, but bold and smooth, when he first came to Jasenovac, now looked like a hollowed-out gourd. Many of the Roma looked similarly. It was as if the Ustaše had scooped the plump flesh from inside the solid gypsies and tossed it out, leaving nothing but thin, dry shells. Many had even stopped singing.

“You haven’t noticed, Vlatko? The gypsies aren’t supposed to live here,” Moša replied. A small, sharp noise sounded out. One of Moša’s black teeth had come loose, and he held it in his hand. It looked like a grey pebble. Moša’s face fell, but then he laughed. “Well, I suppose I won’t get a toothache in that one anymore.”

Vlatko spit at the ground. “A person doesn’t need their teeth here anyway. If there is nothing to eat and no women to fuck, we don’t need to care about our teeth falling out. We’re all turning ugly anyway. But soap . . . if I just had some soap, I could live longer than any of you bastards.”

Moša scratched his head and muttered. “Some powder for the lice is what I need. I don’t mind the dirt everywhere else—God knows I never was much for all the fussing about my looks—but the lice is killing me.”
“Do you know where I could find some soap?” Vlatko scratched at his pubic hair. Every time he walked into the sunlight he could feel the buggers crawling over him, scurrying for the darker, more pungent recesses beneath his clothing. Occasionally he would take off his clothes and shake his trousers and shirt outside to rid himself of the extra louse eggs, but it never seemed to do a thing for more than fifteen minutes—after that he would start itching again, but by then he couldn’t take off his clothes because he would be marching to dig a new grave or stuff the Sava River with corpses.

“I heard that one of the Ustaša bitches gave the boys soap yesterday.” Moša rubbed the back of his neck, which was leathery from the sun, before resuming care of his teeth with his fingernails.

“The boys? You mean the brats running around?”

“Da.”

“Why did she do that?” Vlatko asked.

Moša snorted. “Maybe she likes little boys.”

“I don’t have anything to trade a boy for soap.” Vlatko scratched at his testicles. The lice were worse in the warmth.

“Don’t trade with boys. Take it from a sick one. Soap won’t help a sick child. They’re in hell here anyway.” Moša was always one for practicality. Vlatko had known him outside the camp. Survival meant a blindness to all others’ needs, in Moša’s mind.

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“Boys need soap. They can’t live without it. It’s what kept me healthy all these years. The nuns told me so.”

“You’re a Catholic?” Moša asked. Vlatko could hear the unspoken question. How could he be a Catholic when the Ustaše were Catholics?

“Yes.”

“And you still believe in God?” Moša stopped scraping his teeth for a moment.

“I think so.”

“I can’t believe in God here. I believed like the Serbs did, before I came here. I prayed to the Holy Mother every day for a year before they came for us. I wasn’t like the others. I saw the signs, and prayed that we would be spared. That my family would be spared if I was faithful.”

“Where is your family?” Vlatko was sure he knew the answer—it would be the same place every family in Jasenovac had gone.

“My wife and daughter were sent to the tower. I heard from a Roma that came with me here that they died. He said he saw them, and buried them outside the camp. He said they were covered in shit. Thin as skeletons. They don’t feed Roma here. Shitting killed a lot of them. My son caught typhus soon after coming in with me. They brought them to the Savathe sick ones. Killed them there. Didn’t even bury them. Just left them to rot in the water on their way to Belgrade.” Moša picked his ear.
Vlatko remained silent. Every time he shoved a body into the Sava he thanked God it was not him. For all he knew he could have been there when Moša’s son was killed. Vlatko may have been the one to leave the son’s body to rot in the water. Moša knew this, but neither would mention it. They couldn’t help who discarded whose dead in Jasenovac, and a gypsy’s dead mattered the least of all to the rest of the world.

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The next morning Vlatko woke coughing and sneezing. Early morning always brought with it new anxieties. Living through another day of hunger was a war itself, but Vlatko had other reasons to worry. A bad coughing fit could mean death in the camp, where a pale face or a sneeze could send a man to a field to be shot by the afternoon or to be burnt alive across camp. He heard rumors of the sick being buried alive—the Ustaše figured that if they were almost dead, a burial would simply quicken the dying process. After what Vlatko had seen in the camp, there was little he doubted about Croat cruelty.

The morning was warm, a spring day. A few children scurried around the camp, but not children in the way he had always thought of children. These children were not simply mischievous, they were animals—small, wild things always on the hunt for scraps of food and things to steal. Pieces of cloth to wrap around their feet, crumbs of bread or rotten vegetables, strings to tie their shirts closer to their browned skin. The older ones screamed curses at Ustaša and Roma alike. In a camp-child’s eyes, it was not color of skin or religion that determined the enemy, but their relationship to your food.

The camp was still this early in the morning, when the guards were groggy and the prisoners were hopeful for food. Vlatko walked a little around the houses, which were Serb homes before the Ustaše claimed Jasenovac for their own and killed the Serbs living in the surrounding villages. Killed them, or interned them. Vlatko walked towards the edge of the village, where it was dusty from foot traffic and the sun beat most heavily during the day. A small child of the camps squatted there, in the dust. He looked like a five-year old on the outside, but Vlatko guessed he was seven. He had large, accusing eyes and a head smooth and bulbous. His tunic opened at a V, revealing the geography of a chest covered in ridges and valleys of thin skin and bones. The sleeve of his shirt was torn at the shoulder and hung limply over his delicate upper arm. The cuffs were soiled and dark brown. Several little things were piled at his feet, as if he were a small bird collecting straw for a nest. Vlatko could distinguish a bit of blackened bread, as dark and hard as a pebble, a sharpened stick, half a turnip, string, and a piece of soap. The soap was grey and knobby. The child clearly did not know how to use it—smudges of dirt on his face and legs gave the child a grotesque appearance, like a small black demon with large, suspicious eyes.

“Boy!” Vlatko called out. The child turned. His eyes burned in his face and his mouth—perhaps the smallest two lips Vlatko had ever seen—were pulled together into a thin line, like an adult preparing to scold a misbehaving child. Vlatko wondered if he had underestimated the boy’s age. “Do you speak?” Vlatko asked. He changed to the Serb’s language. “What do you have in your pile, boy?” The boy continued to stare with his burning eyes, his head slightly bowed as he gazed up into the grown gypsy’s eyes. “Is that your soap?” The child gazed at him mutely as he squatted on the ground, his legs propped beneath him like a small frog ready to spring away.

Vlatko walked slowly closer to the boy’s pile. “I want to look at what you have there,” Vlatko assured him. The boy wrapped his arms around his ankles and began rocking slightly forwards and backwards. Vlatko stood a few inches from the boy. He reached out a hand to take the soap—the child was a survivor, Vlatko could tell. He didn’t know what to do with soap. Better for it to go to someone whose life was endangered by sickness, someone who knew what it meant to be clean. The warm, grainy texture of the soap was nearly in Vlatko’s fingers when he felt a sharp pressure on his hand and arm. Teeth, crooked, grey, and full of gaps, were clamped into Vlatko’s brown hand. The child’s tongue
wriggled in its mouth and against Vlatko’s skin, leaving a filmy saliva on his fingers. The child’s arms pumped from side to side, hitting Vlatko at every point within reach. Growls, fierce and naïve, emanated from the child’s mouth and were muffled by the flesh trapped between his teeth.

The surprise and pain of the child’s bite startled Vlatko, and his body wanted to retreat. He was not strong enough for violence. But the pile of small goods remained in the dust—bread, soap, the withered half of a turnip—within reach. Vlatko’s belly was empty. They had not fed the Roma like the other prisoners, and anything he ate he took from someone else. A brief cracking sound came from the boy’s mouth. One of his teeth must have broken. Vlatko yelped. The boy kept staring at him, even as he bit deeper into Vlatko’s fingers and sucked at the thin blood welling up from the punctured skin as if it was milk from a breast.

Vlatko took a deep breath and kicked the child in the stomach.

The little gypsy flew like a bug flicked by a finger, rolling three times in the camp dust before his body slowed and stopped. Vlatko scooped up the bread, turnip, string, and soap and wrapped them to his chest as he ran back to the camp. He glanced backwards as he neared the barracks. The child was lying on the ground in the same place as Vlatko had left him, but his head had turned and he was staring at the camp, at Vlatko. The only thing left in the boy’s pile was his stick, for which Vlatko had no need.

The soap Vlatko had stolen smelled terrible. It was full of ashes and grainy, and left a greasy film on his skin when he used it with a little water from a bowl he left out for rain. But his skin was lighter and brighter, and his cough subsided slightly that day. The turnip was chewy and rotten, and Vlatko soaked the bread in some water to soften it enough for eating, but his stomach felt heavy and full for the first time in weeks.

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Near midday Moša approached Vlatko. They were working in a field. The soil was so dark and rich Vlatko wanted to lower himself to the ground and press his face into it, to soak up the health of the earth.

“Did you hear what happened this morning?” Moša asked him. It was their break for food. For those prisoners who had food, anyway. Moša and Vlatko just shared half a cigarette one of the Ustaša had thrown on the ground a few days ago. Moša had scooped it up and stored it by tying it into the waist of his trousers. Vlatko had promised Moša a favor in return for the shared cigarette. One never knew what the Ustaše would become angry about, and it was simply better to hide everything than to make them angry at a prisoner, for any reasons, because it might not be the prisoner at fault who was blamed or punished.

“No.” Vlatko inhaled on the end of the cigarette. The wind blew the smoke into his eyes. It stung.

“They caught a boy stealing some soap from one of the guard’s wash tables.” Moša scuffed the ground with his foot. The dirt sprayed into the air like spittle.

Vlatko squinted, and looked into the sky. “What did they do to him?”

“The sons-of-bitches tortured the little thing. Cut him up a little, and then hung him in front of the tannery. He didn’t make a sound, the whole time. They think he might have been a mute.”
Vlatko looked at his arms. They were dirty from the morning’s work in the soil. His cough had subsided, but the soap was already gone. “A mute.”

“Da. Poor little bastard.”

“Poor little bastard,” Vlatko repeated slowly, squinting into the sun.