

LIVE UNDERGRADUATE *IDEAS* PRIMARY TEXTS JOURNAL

DECEMBER 2019

*"She cannot see the world
around
Her as she sways in the gentle
breeze,
But she is seen by the world"*
Madison Leirer, pg. 47

*"It's almost as if there are two
levels of morality:
one that applies to the general
society and a code of ethics that
leaders follow."*

Olivia Rogers, pg. 19

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—Jakob Hanschu & Laurie Johnson



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ACADEMIC SUBLIMITY

Alissa Rehmert
senior | english

Imagine with me, if you will, that you are standing on the edge of a cliff side. You look out and can see for miles and miles. There are colorful trees blooming as far as your eyes can see. You look down and the drop is so far, you can just barely see the ground. You feel a deep sense of awe from the beauty, but also of fear of the danger of falling. This piece was inspired by this complicated emotional experience: sublimity.

The semester before I set out to write this, I took a British Literature course where we talked a lot about the Romantic’s concept of the sublime. Their obsession with the concept and its relation to nature is apparent in their literature. I too was interested in this and wanted to explore it and see how it relates to me. The next semester, when I took a Creative Non-Fiction course, I wrote the first form of “Academic Sublimity.” This piece explores the feeling I get when I crack open the masterpieces of those who came before me. I am faced with a feeling of great awe paired with the crippling fear of inadequacy. This is my own sense of sublimity.

Thin pages slip
through my trembling fingers
as a familiar odor
stings my nostrils
and bursts into an aroma
sweeter than fine chocolate.
My mind’s mouth waters profusely
as I split the pages
and reveal an entire world
where the inquiries of life are examined
and I lie,
Miniscule,
in the dim moonlight of another soul’s creation.
Plato, Rousseau,
Cummings, Poe.
My curious eye drags across the paper
as I long to grasp
a mere inkling
an iota
of their daunting and boundless wisdom.
I read
and I read till the
Acquainted dread of inadequacy
settles in
as if peering up at the starry midnight sky
and realizing just how
Insignificant
I
am.
Within the intricate works of this finitely infinite universe,
I am but a stroke,
A pigment,
in the grand painting of thought.

LIVING IN TENSION

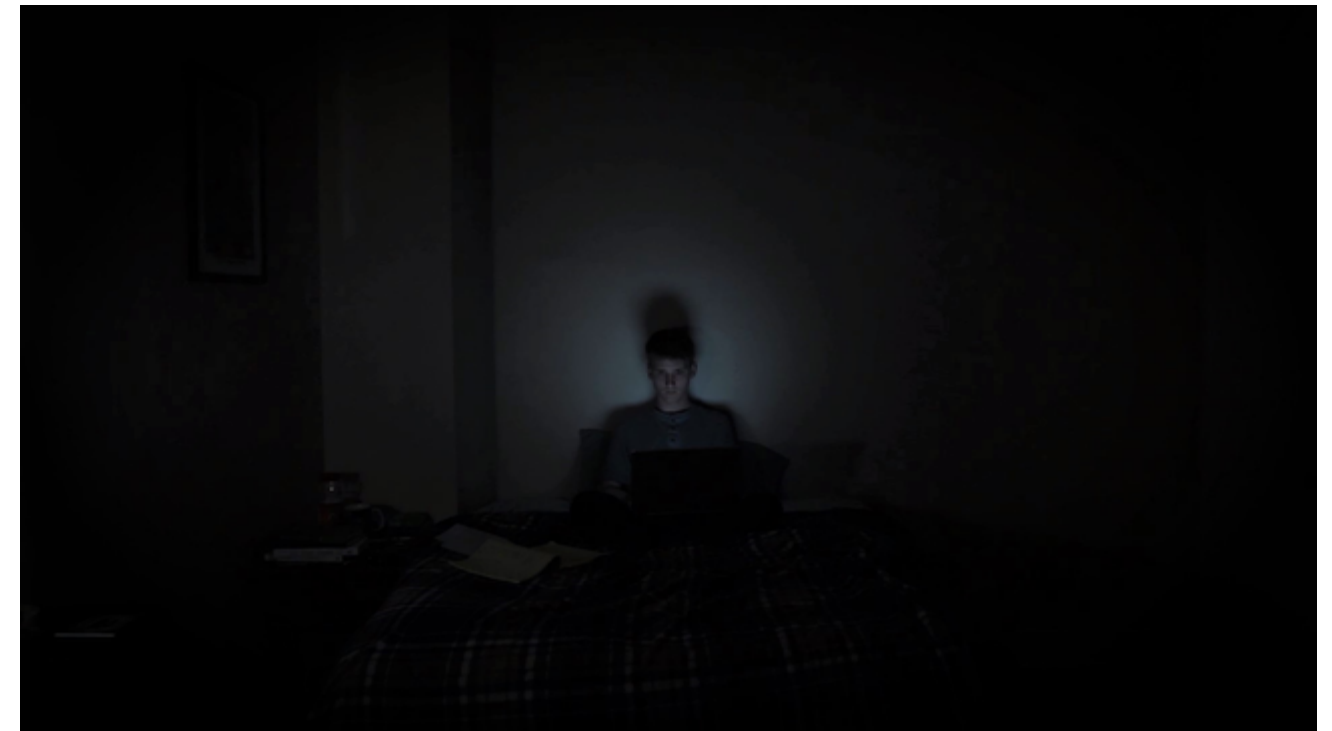
Clayton Jarrard

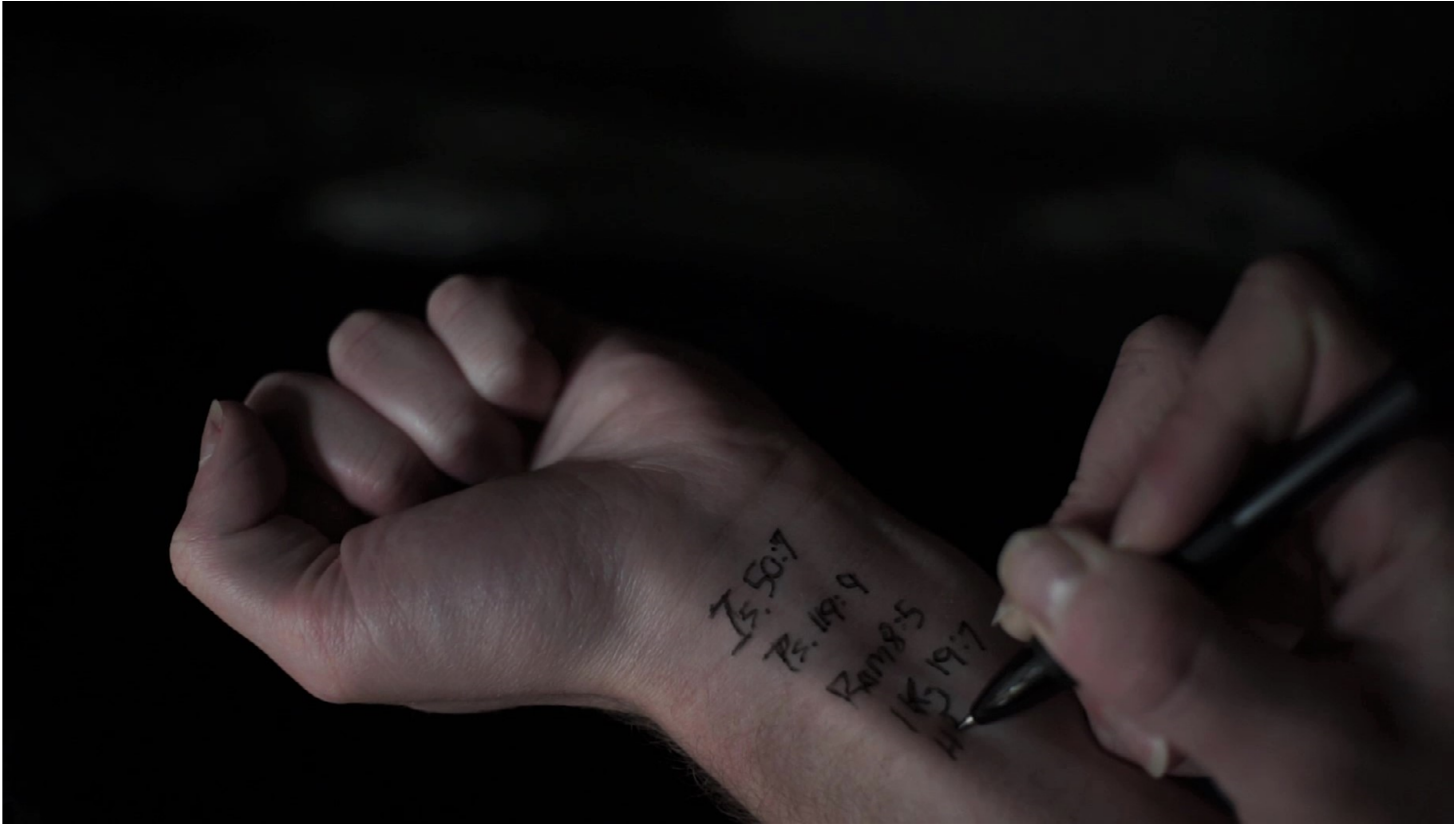
junior | anthropology

There can be a disconcerting silence surrounding LGBTQ+ topics in many Christian spaces, and for LGBTQ+ individuals that grow up within such settings, the silence can be damning, manifesting in shame, self-hatred, anxiety and depression, self harm, and even suicide. Within our culture, queerness and Christianity often seem to be at odds, and LGBTQ+ Christians exist at this point of tension, having to grapple with their faith and their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Through a series of interviews, this short film explores the stories of seven LGBTQ+ Christians from diverse backgrounds that have labored to reconcile their faith and their identities. The struggle of questioning certain Christian teachings and presumptions, internalized oppressions, and social expectations in order to approach a place of self acceptance are characteristic of these accounts, and where there was not support in their physical lives, internet resources were able to provide opportunities for community and belonging. Yet the mission of these individuals has not stopped at personal reconciliation. In sharing their stories and creating digital content for other LGBTQ+ people of faith like them, they are part of a movement to create and reform spaces for queer inclusion within Christianity.

Keywords: Christianity, LGBTQ+, Culture

Watch Clayton's documentary by visiting the Live Ideas website at liveideasjournal.org







Artist's Reflection

The process for creating this film ended up being much longer and more arduous than I had originally expected. It started as a project for a research methods class I took this past spring, Digital Ethnography, and I had planned on interviewing just one person, a queer Christian podcaster, and creating a film around their story. But I quickly came to realize the story needed to be told in a more expansive way, as it is not just one person creating digital content but an entire community cultivating an online space for connection and belonging.

From the beginning, I wanted to create a film about LGBTQ+ Christians. If you listen to people's stories, you can see that there is more at stake than simply "right" or "wrong," but LGBTQ+ topics can often be reduced to theological debates in Christian settings. Because of this, it can be difficult in our culture for someone to claim both an LGBTQ+ identity and a Christian faith, which can be seen in the interviews. As I was doing research, I came across a term that Thomas Bohache, in "Embodiment as Incarnation" (2003) uses: "Christophobia," which is meant to capture the fear that LGBTQ+ people can often face, a fear that Jesus and Christianity are not viable options for them based on their sexual orientation or gender. This, coupled with the homophobia and transphobia that can be prevalent within Christian communities, can make it difficult for LGBTQ+ individuals to navigate faith spaces.

My goal for this film was to side-step the theological exchange and capture more of the experiences of LGBTQ+ Christians, existing within this tension and trying to reconcile their faith and their identity. All of the individuals I interviewed for this film had powerful personal stories, and all are also actively creating podcasts, blogs, vlogs, websites, music, and engaged in other forms of activism. The film not only shows this process of integrating faith and identity, but it incorporates ways in which people have gone forward from this struggle and the community that is being built as a result.



RACHEL LORD
graduated | fine art

Artist’s Reflection

I have lived in Kansas all of my life. Growing up in Willard, a town of about eighty people, I spent hours along the banks of the Kansas River, the historic Oregon Trail, and the harvesting crops and fields. With so many forms of nature just outside my front door, it was easy to become invested in and connected to the land. This relationship has had a tremendous effect on the art I create.

Taking artistic inspiration through the art movements of Post-Impressionism and Contemporary Art, I begin my oil paintings on canvas with a vision / memory or a reference photo of where I have been and what I remember. I anticipate each mark, each color, each layer of paint, reinforcing both macro and micro findings, while subconsciously placing bold and strong marks across the canvas to reflect my interpretation of the place and atmosphere.

Being a musician as well as an artist, there are plenty of similarities between music and my art. For example, jazz music is based off improvisation and how you are free to do what you want but still be within the set parameters of the music. I use that same concept as a part of my process. While painting from memory and experiences, the artwork paints itself, and I respond to it accordingly, being conscious about aspects, such as direction of light or placement of objects.

My land and sky paintings capture a place, memory, and atmosphere. Each painting has a sense of movement, showing how landscapes are never truly static. Some feel fast paced because of how fast the memory flows, and others feel delicate and slow because of how hard I’m trying to recall the place and all its details. In my paintings, I have a desire to express how I see the land around me. Prioritizing the characteristics of place, memory, and atmosphere within rural America with an emphasis on Kansas - my home. Painting the land and sky is important to me because our connection to nature is important and a part of who we are as inhabitants of this Earth.

Page 10: Burn Season is in the Air

I have a desire to express how I see the land around me. Prioritizing the characteristics of place, memory, and atmosphere within rural America with an emphasis on Kansas - my home. Burn Season is in the Air represents my memory and vision of prairie and field burns across Kansas. With oil paint on canvas I create a prairie burn fire out in Kansas during the burning season. During Kansas there is a distinct fell and smell of prairie burn season and I capture that with the use of strong colors and a foggy haze in the field. Growing up and living in Kansas all my life, I have become accustomed to burn season. I have a personal connection to field burns due to my mother’s involvement in the local fire department and issuing burn permits to residents and farmers.

Keywords: *Prairie burn, Kansas, landscape, oil paint, fire*

Page 14: Snow Geese

In this oil painting done on canvas, I capture a flock of snow geese grazing the fields of the Kansas plains. During the winter months snow geese migrate through Kansas in an abundance. As they make their journey south they make stops across the various farming fields across Kansas. As an artist, living in Kansas my entire life, it was easy to become invested in and connected to the land. Painting the land and sky is important to me because our connection to nature is important and a part of who we are as inhabitants of this Earth. By using various mark making, application and hues, I present an authenticity of how I see the land and what I recall. Capturing the simple beauties and everyday life in the Kansas plains is what I seek to accomplish in not only this work but all of my works.

Keywords: *Oil paint, landscape, painting, snow geese, Kansas*



BEGINNING WITH A PORCH SWING, ON A COOL EVENING

Natalie Wolf
senior | english & spanish

When I think back on this poem and the memories behind it, I am immediately flooded with the joy of being in those moments, with dear friends, exploring the world one quirky destination at a time. I know that that sounds cheesy, but it's true. I wrote this poem based on a prompt that said to write about trips I had taken that were all connected in one way or another, and I decided to focus on the ones I had taken with my best friend. Travelling together has become sort of our thing, packing up and heading off with other friends to various destinations within our reach. The Midwest is full of some fantastically strange places. This poem is made up of those uniquely personal moments that no one who wasn't there can ever fully understand, that those who were there can always call upon as lasting connections between ourselves. "Remember that time when...?" I'd like to think that these are some of the moments that will cause me to look back, years in the future, and smile.

Of all of the poems that I have written and had to write, this one is probably my favorite simply because it brings back these happy memories, these dear personal connections. It feels, as my best friend would say, "cozy," like a warm hug from memories gone by, but also brings with it the rush of those moments, the thrill of being young and happy and surrounded by friends, out on an adventure that you know will stick in your mind, living completely for that second in time. Walking through a field at night in the middle of nowhere. Sticking your car back together with duct tape. Freezing your butt off because your Airbnb doesn't have heating. In Chicago. In January. They may not sound glorious, but these are the moments you will remember.

So thank you so much to all of my friends for coming. It was so wonderful just to be able to spend time with you and to now have these wonderful memories to cherish and laugh at. I look forward to creating more awesome, quirky, fantastic memories with you in the future.

It's strange to think that it ever had a beginning, that this wasn't always a part of our essence, sitting around a table in the viewing car, uncertainty ahead, Hamilton on the speakers both there and back, far too close to a mouse desiring to eat our souls, Braum's and IHOP and Mexican and Cajun, so much trail mix, huddled in comforters watching HGTV, no heating in Chicago in January, with the glory that is Peach Nehi, touring the Garden of Eden, its owner dead, and far too many of us imposing on that kind uncle, taking a taxi, the loop, the subway, stopping, of course, in a house full of pigs, a house where dolls and sparkles scream at us from every surface, strewn about with our sleeping bags and pillows, eating crepes larger than our faces as the cold rushes in, then the wallet's tragic tumble into the poo, the early morning rejection of a Bed and Breakfast, exploring Target (where do you go on vacation?), munching fresh French fries to Shakespearean improv, chased by an alpaca (llama?), down the yellow brick road, experiencing the marvels of space, giant mosaic toilet, painted plate, car made out of pop tabs, too late for the Arch, watching cute bats lap up fresh blood, swinging by Paradise (be sure to get a pic), almost out of gas, fixing the car with duct tape, down along the beach in January, stopping before the soft golden glow of a mountain of twine, so cringey, climbing and sliding like three little children, searching for a hole (historic) in a field in the dark, fighting through the traffic, to McDonald's at 11 p.m. to eat our own sandwiches, watching a pendulum demonstrate the slow rotation of the Earth, and knowing that no cold will ever feel the same, playing M.A.S.H. like thirteen-year-olds, Gin Rummy and a bucket list while the Amish sing in their soft German, laughing at the memories and then the dreams, New Orleans, New York, and El Camino, looking out over those cliffs like Martin Sheen and knowing that we've made it all the way.

LEADERSHIP LESSONS WITH AQUINAS AND MACHIABELLI

Olivia Rogers
senior | political science



With a presidential election approaching, Americans are reflecting more than ever on what “American” leadership means. Two Italian philosophers, Aquinas and Machiavelli, seem to embody the dichotomous view of leadership held by America. Their beliefs exhibit the tension between effective leadership and virtuous leadership. This paper explores those differences and asks the question -- are effectiveness and virtue always at odds, or is there something we are missing?

Keywords: Machiavelli, Aquinas, Leadership, America, Politics, Political Theory

Thomas Aquinas and Niccolo Machiavelli couldn't seem more different. Aquinas is an emblem of justice, natural law, and Christianity. Just the mention of Machiavelli's name denotes cunning and scheming, especially in the political realm. Yet there are striking similarities between these two men: both were Italian philosophers and political theorists. They lived only two hundred years apart. Both were somehow associated with the church (Thomas was a Dominican, Machiavelli closely involved with the ruling class of Florence). Both wrote versions of “mirror” documents that discussed methods of ruling and provided examples of good leadership. Despite these similarities, the two hundred years that passed between Aquinas' On Kingship and Machiavelli's The Prince brought a shift in political ideology. What was the cause of the shift, and, perhaps more importantly, how does this shift manifest itself in modern day America?

Interestingly, the United States seems to be batting for both teams when it comes to the ideology of Aquinas and Machiavelli. On one hand, we hold our leaders to the same high moral standard of Aquinas. We want them to be stable, morally pure, fair-minded, and treat all people with respect. On the other hand, we recognize the need for effective government, and are often willing to let moral issues go unnoticed if they don't interfere with a leader's ability to carry out his mission. It's almost as if there are two levels of morality: one that applies to the general society of individuals, and a code of ethics that leaders follow. Leaders can cut corners that individuals couldn't, because their ultimate goal is different.

This distinction wasn't drawn for

Aquinas and other medieval thinkers. Political philosopher Charles Taylor explains this through the words of Francis Oakley: “Kingship...emerged from an ‘archaic’ mentality that appears to have been thoroughly monistic, to have perceived no impermeable barrier between the human and divine, to have intuited the divine as immanent in the cyclic rhythms of the natural world and civil society as somehow enmeshed in these natural processes, and to have viewed its primary function, therefore, as a fundamentally religious one, involving the preservation of the cosmic order and the ‘harmonious integration’ of human

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beings with the natural world” (Taylor 151). Leadership was a function of the natural order; good leadership was an inevitable practice of leaders, just like citizens were expected to be virtuous.

Machiavelli writes “How laudable it is for a prince to keep good faith and live with integrity, and not with astuteness, everyone knows. Still the experience of our times shows those princes to have done great things who have had little regard for good faith, and have been able to by astuteness to confuse men's brains, and who have ultimately overcome those who have made loyalty their foundation” (Machiavelli 72). A good prince, in Machiavelli's eyes, knows how and when to be

cunning and utilize “astuteness” to his advantage. Somehow, Americans hold these two views in tandem. Contrasting the definitions of virtuous leadership in the writings of Aquinas and Machiavelli exposes the roots of this paradoxical view, and causes us to ask: can the paradox be resolved?

Thomas Aquinas was born in what is now France to a land-owning family. He joined religious life as a Dominican, dedicated to serving the poor and living in austerity. He was university educated, first at Naples and later in Paris. There, he learned Greek and Arabic so that he could read ancient thinkers such as Aristotle, Al Farabi, Averroes and Maimonides. It was at this time that he absorbed the ideals of independent reason and logic, both of which were foundational to his theological and political works.

Aquinas paired the rational logic of the Greeks with the theology and spirituality of the Church, paving a middle road between two seemingly opposed ideas. His writings parallel the style and logic of Aristotle, if Aristotle compulsively quoted Bible verses. His most famous work is Summa Theologica. It deals with basic philosophical questions like natural law and where moral order comes from. It’s comparable to Aristotle’s Ethics.

Another of his other notable works, On Kingship, is Aquinas’ version of The Politics. It begins with Aquinas noting that people are naturally drawn to society, and need some sort of order to guide them. “Human beings have an end to which their entire life and actions are ordered...Humans, however, adopt different methods to proceed towards their intended end...therefore humans need some

directive principle to guide them towards their end” (Aquinas 99). That directive principle, he decides, is reason (Aquinas 99).

Reason directs people to the understanding that in order to fulfil their ultimate telos, purpose, it is better that they be in society than alone. Aquinas quotes Proverbs, “When there is no governor, the people shall be scattered” (Aquinas 100). A society is best ruled by one person, as this allows for the greatest amount of unity and a clear direction toward the intended telos of a city. “The aim of any ruler should be directed so that he secures the welfare of those whose government he undertakes” (Aquinas 102). He describes the analogy of a ship, noting that “many men could not pull a ship in one direction unless joined together in some manner” (Aquinas 103). In order to be unified, a single leader is better than many.

However, a single leader is a dangerous thing. There’s no grey area: a ruler is either a king (the best form of government) or a tyrant (the worst form). Aquinas draws a direct link between worldly kingship and divine approval. A good ruler “looks to God for a reward” (Aquinas 107). He doesn’t search for approval from men, or attempt to gain more worldly power than he is given. Kings must live virtuously themselves in order that their subjects might do the same.

For Aquinas, virtue for the common, individual person was indistinguishable from that applicable to the king. The relationship between an individual’s body and soul, between God and his people, and between king and subjects were all parallel. The moral code, the natural law, that was applicable to one segment was applicable to all. The telos of Aquinas’ king was outward-facing:

toward the people and their needs, helping to orient them toward their telos to obtain happiness through virtue. “The king ought to recognize that such is the duty he undertakes that he exists in his kingdom in just the same way as the soul exists in the body and God exists in the world” (Aquinas 113).

This is where tyrants differ from kings: “tyrants err when they desert justice for a few earthly advantages; for they are deprived of the great reward which they are able to obtain by ruling justly” (Aquinas 110). A government becomes unjust when the king begins to seek his personal advantage, “rejecting the common good of the multitude” (Aquinas 104). In other words, the telos of the ruler turns inward, instead of outward towards the people.

“A TYRANT FOLLOWS HIS OWN PASSIONS, AND IN DOING SO OPPRESSES THE PEOPLE.”

A tyrant follows his own passions, and in doing so oppresses the people. The negative effects of a tyrant are not only seen in this world but eternally, as a bad king “hinders [the people’s] spiritual good, since those who try to be in charge rather than to be beneficial prevent all progress of their subjects, suspecting all excellence on the part of their subjects to be prejudicial to their harmful lordship” (Aquinas 105). In other words, a tyrant cannot tolerate virtue and excellence in his subjects, because that would hinder him from carrying out his unjust ideas. Virtuous people will not tolerate injustice, and therefore cannot exist in

a tyrannical regime.

Aquinas notes that a government of tyrants is not stable or long-lasting. It is “hateful to the multitude,” and “sustained by fear alone,” which is a frail foundation (Aquinas 111). A ruler who is not fulfilling his proper telos is harmful to the people spiritually and physically. In Aquinas’ eyes, he’s not an effective ruler, either. Fear and hatred are no foundations upon which a king can succeed. No ruler, Aquinas says, can steal more from a fearful people than a loving people would freely give up (Aquinas 112). A ruler should strive to be loved by his people by acting virtuously, and in accordance with the divine laws.

Machiavelli’s ideal ruler is in direct opposition with Aquinas. He holds princes to a different set of rules than the common people, in effect arguing that the telos was different. The king wasn’t supposed to bring his people to virtue; he was supposed to rule effectively, keep his people safe, and manage the country.

Machiavelli’s example of an ideal prince is Cesare Borgia. Borgia was a nobleman with excellent political connections, as the son of a pope. He mobilized armies, made alliances, and undermined cities in order to maintain power. During one episode, he appoints a “cruel and able man” (Machiavelli 31) to render the “fullest authority” on an unruly people through means of punishment and justice. After a short time, the people were sufficiently subdued and Borgia removed the man from office, having used him to the degree necessary. Removing the man from power both satiated the people so that they wouldn’t rebel and placed Borgia in a favorable light, as he was seen as the one to save them from

a harsh overlord. Machiavelli praises the actions of Borgia, touting them as great foundations for a stable administration. Machiavelli’s code for leaders was dependent only upon what would keep him in power and provide stability, not a divine code of ethics as Aquinas used. Sometimes, this meant that leaders should act – or at least seem to act – in a moral manner, to appeal to the people. However, Machiavelli wasn’t troubled by whether this is a sincere act of virtue; in fact, he states that a leader need only “seem” to be virtuous, and not actually be virtuous. Machiavelli’s ideal government was an amoral entity, its purpose being a vehicle for the ambitions of a ruler. Machiavelli redefined “virtue” to mean excellence, cunning, shrewdness. Virtue was removed from the religious context it had in the writings of Aquinas. It now denoted the level of effectiveness of a prince: can he keep his principality under control? Can he ward off threats? There is no inherent purpose in the state; it is simply a means to an end, to use the famous Machiavellian terminology. Indeed, with this black-and-white view of government, Machiavelli hints that the existence of an “ecclesiastical state” and by extension, a church, only stands in the way of a unified Italy. The church is constantly interfering in efforts to gain power and unity, even sabotaging the “perfectly” laid plans of his hero Cesare Borgia. The fact that Borgia was unscrupulous and cruel does not diminish him in Machiavelli’s eyes; he is interested only in power. Today, American government is a constant balancing act between the practical realism of Machiavelli and Aquinas’ telos. There’s an inherent

tension between the ideals of a virtuous society and rulers and effective government. Are both goals able to be pursued? Is there a middle ground between Machiavelli and Aquinas? Perhaps the answer can be found by venturing outside of the political realm. Jim Collins, author of Good to Great, has studied business leadership for years, finding a range of great leaders. In a podcast with entrepreneur and personal development guru Tim Ferriss, he described how a company might be led by a genius – someone who had the ideas, the passion, and the knack for running an excellent business. But that leadership alone didn’t guarantee the lasting success of the company. A transcription of the interview with Collins

“GREAT LEADERS WEREN’T JUST HUMBLE. THEY WEREN’T JUST PASSIONATE ABOUT A CAUSE EXTERNAL TO THEMSELVES. THEY WERE BOTH.”

describes this further: “what’s the difference between these leaders? It wasn’t leadership, because they were both leaders who did leadership. There was something different about the leaders. So there was this signature of their humility, and then their fierce will on behalf of something that’s not about them” (“Tim Ferriss”). Collins observed how leaders who left legacies “were able to subsume their ego into the company...there’s something about this duality” (“Tim Ferriss”). The great leaders weren’t just humble. They weren’t just passionate about a cause external to themselves. They were both, and that

combination looks a lot like Aquinas’ concept of a virtuous king – while also valuing effectiveness and success, like Machiavellian leadership. Unlike the times of Machiavelli and Aquinas, we are not a nation under a kingship. The American government is divided between three branches, fifty states and thousands of legislators spread across the country. Aquinas and Machiavelli wrote to rulers, imploring and guiding them to act as they directed. But the power to decide what rulership looks like today lies in the hands of the citizens, not kings. Ethics and effectiveness need not be at odds. The pluralism of the American government allows now more than ever for ethics like that of Jim Collins’ business leadership to be applied. It’s up to the communities, states, and the nation as a whole to decide how the “paradox” is resolved.

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A DAY IN THE SUN
Trace Henderson
freshman | psychology

Keywords: Motivation, hope, laziness, addiction

Kept away from going to bed,
Grinding and filing the space in my head.
I just may wake with a new-found drive,
A long-lost worker away from the hive.
Locked behind these bends and bars,
I fear my anchor has slipped to the dark.
Cheer up, chap! I'll show you the way!
With me you'll beam and grin all day!
Lace up your shoes, we'll go for a run,
It'll always be your day in the sun!
A sunny disposition, that doesn't sound so bad,
I'd gladly trade it for my iron barred bed.
A breath of cool air, a ray of sunlight,
Maybe I don't need any sleep tonight.
But what if it rains or people don't smile?
Surely my luck can't last all the while.
Stick with me, we'll saw through these bars!
Soon you'll be free of this sticky, black tar.
You'll bounce all around,
we'll go out on the town.
I'll give you the strength to carry that frown.
I feel awfully blue,
At least I have you,
Whatever you say, I feel I can do.
You've given me strength,
Why do I feel so ashamed?
Is it really me who has accomplished such things?
Well of course it was you.

Your complexion's improved.
You can't stop now you've got mountains to move!

I'm free from my cell,
The suns on my back,
I still don't feel well,
It's care that I lack.

My body's escaped
But my smile is faked.

I work and I work
Yet I can't concentrate.

Who was I before?
Where's all the light?

There are bars on my door
And I can't sleep through the night!

Don't be so dramatic,
Its anticlimactic.

You asked me for help and I've just about had it.
Is it not enough? Your haze has been ended.

What part of you is broken and can't be mended?

I don't know can't you see?
I'm all alone amidst this great sea!

I struggle for air, I feel I can't breathe.
It's easy for you, you can pack up and leave!

I've got to get out, my cell is submerging.
I can't see the other, but I know we are merging.

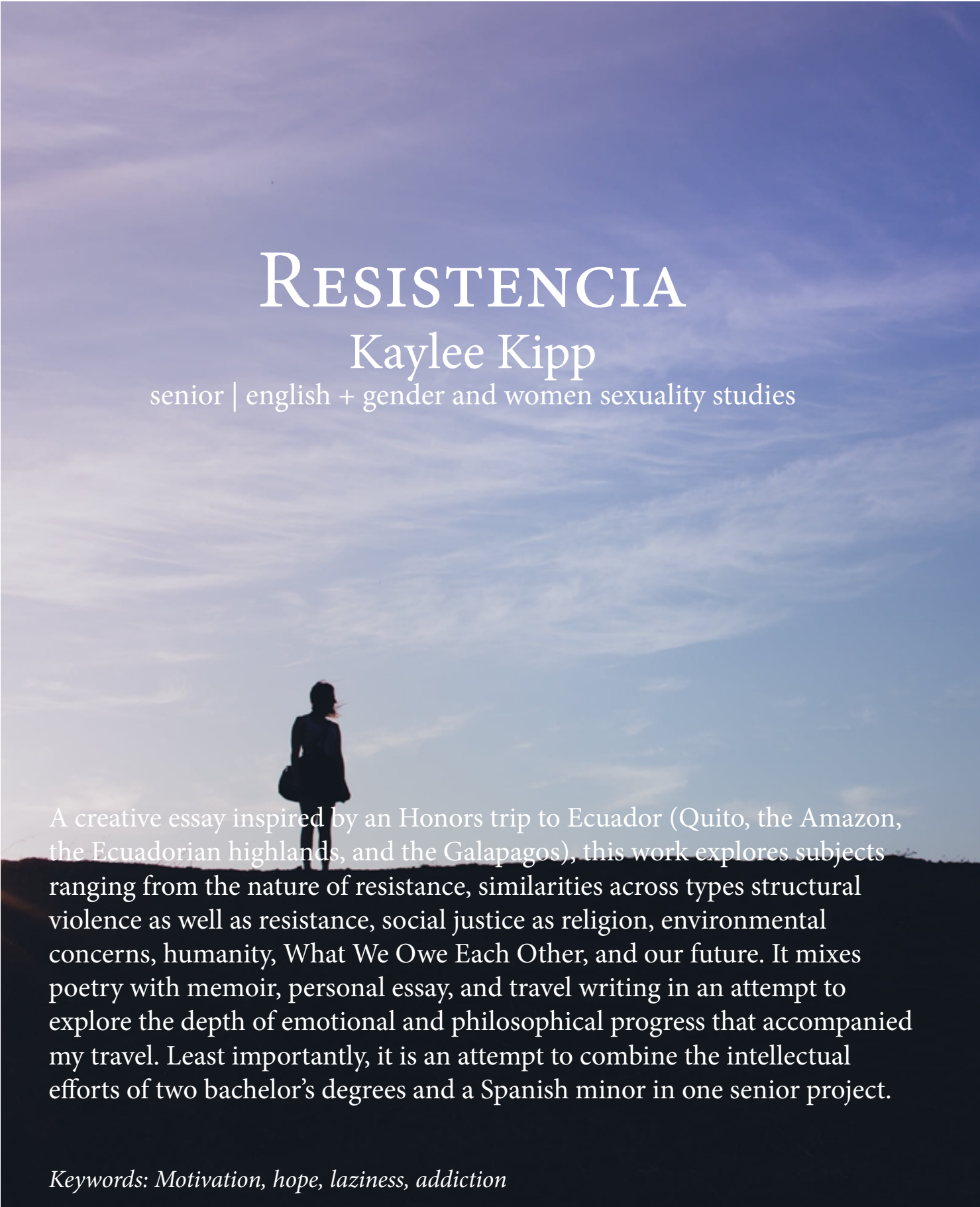
Water up to my neck and it seems I was wrong,
The sea was not blue,
It was black all along.

Author's Reflection

I have shown this work to several people in my life and they all seem to have a different outlook on it. A few have found it hopeful in comparison to the challenges faced in their lives and others see it as something you wouldn't want to show someone who has had a bad day.

I wrote it at 3:00 a.m. after 36 hours without sleep and decided to try my hand at poetry. I don't know a thing about the art except it is helpful in expressing emotions that are difficult to speak about.

One of the subjects I touch on is the disparity one can come to when treating the symptoms of an ailment as opposed to their source. It might be a reason to keep going and it might be a reason to stop. It depends on how your day was.



RESISTENCIA

Kaylee Kipp

senior | english + gender and women sexuality studies

A creative essay inspired by an Honors trip to Ecuador (Quito, the Amazon, the Ecuadorian highlands, and the Galapagos), this work explores subjects ranging from the nature of resistance, similarities across types structural violence as well as resistance, social justice as religion, environmental concerns, humanity, What We Owe Each Other, and our future. It mixes poetry with memoir, personal essay, and travel writing in an attempt to explore the depth of emotional and philosophical progress that accompanied my travel. Least importantly, it is an attempt to combine the intellectual efforts of two bachelor's degrees and a Spanish minor in one senior project.

Keywords: Motivation, hope, laziness, addiction

The Basilica and the Brick

The architecture, the architecture! Look at how this building towers over the tight streets. The people look like mice, like ants. We came here¹ to see the architecture, and the guide tells us to run in, check out the basilica, but check the phones,² the privilege. Except she doesn't actually say this last bit, and it's hard to keep our thumbs from tapping / snapping / taking it with us, away and back home. Glazed in gold foil, the old basilica warns us "si no hicierais penitencia, así mismo perecéis".³

The cameras can't tell,
but from outside the church is like a termite's nest,⁴
built on the back of a buttress roots-- no—

an amorphous

¹ Our Kansas State University study abroad mud
consisted of 7 students, 3 (KSU) instructors, and 2 (listed) courses. The expedition tumor
began days before my 22nd birthday, on May 21st, 2019 and lasted two weeks, wherein we visited Quito, The Amazon Rainforest, and the Galapagos islands. The mission: explore an ecologically endangered area as a means of "understanding how this particular place in the world fits into larger conversations on systems of power, privilege, and oppression", according to the independent study proposal.
² It is against the rules of the Basilica de San Francisco to take pictures inside the place of worship, much to the chagrin of many a tourist.
³ "If you do not do penance, then so shall you perish" It is engraved over the flayed and flaming bodies of hell-tortured souls, caught up in a terror that is much bigger than any one of their petty, malicious deeds.
⁴ Our study abroad group saw a few of these on our own treks through the Amazon, and by a few, I mean every third tree had a monkey-to-ape-sized growth clinging to the trunk. From a distance, we mistook many for an actual living creature, instead of an empty carcass made up of a bunch of tiny ones. It seems the business of decomposition and death, of brokenness and life after breath, is just as lucrative for the insects in this world as it is for us.
⁵ This type of tree is named after its wide, sturdy base, and abounds in the rainforest. It can reach up to 200 feet in height, and the roots spread so far into the undiscovered, that from the base, the squinted eye of a discoverer could never spot the end of the embroidery the tree spins into the ground. The intricacy of such a tree must run past the very core of the Earth.

a Ceiba.⁶

Two white towers impose like the leering eyes of a renaissance saint. At one time, they overlooked the city

as if

the people

were

leaf

cutter

ants⁷,

laboring

through

the slim

streets.

The architecture!

The church's gold leaf disguises their suffering backs, distracts from the tiny little monuments they have hidden in the eaves,⁸ in the corners so as not to get smashed: an Andean-

⁶ The indigenous name for the Spanish "Kapok", or the English "Buttress Root Tree". According to Jungwon Kim in an article by the Rainforest alliance, the San Kichwa indigenous people of Ecuador believed the tree was "the father of all the animals". When my foreign eyes eventually looked upon such a beauty, the exact poetry that escaped my lips was "Big tree". The moment is forever saved in my Snapchat memories.

⁷ On one of our hikes in Tiputini, the Biodiversity Research Station in the Amazon, we spotted a line of leaf cutter ants painting a green vein across the trail. The ants were a thin ribbon curling around a tree to my left, a never-ending line of can-can dancers in green skirts, a crew of 10,000 architects. If not for the guide pointing them out, the rubber soles of our visitor's boots would have smashed right through them.

⁸ Clues. In Spanish American Culture, we learned about Sincretismo: The blending of cultures upon impact. White structural violence turning Pink from blood and burial. The Day of the Dead as a war on Los Santos. It was Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* y la mestizaje. It was the Coatlicue state: La Virgen de

appled⁹ cheek, the feathered crown of a statue¹⁰, a geometric sun in the arch above the altar¹¹.

Brown cherubs fly above paper white¹² paper wasps¹³; a torture-bled,¹⁴ cochinita¹⁵-red Jesus sits¹⁶ bone-tired; and Maria is painted as Pachamama¹⁷--

The indígena made the church as catholic¹⁸ as rock / soil / Earth, their whole view sprouting through, hanging on like *lianas*,¹⁹ fighting for their own sun / light / God runs in rivers down brown cheeks-- the Earth's suffering-- The Earth's shuddering knocks down the

Coatloapeuh as Snake *and* Goddess, Mother *and* Lover, offering up a ripe, red apple and taking the bite herself. It was Aztec, Inca, Maya, Quiche culture and art and gods, sprouting up from behind the smothering grey cement and willing itself to breathe.

⁹ The brown cherubs and all else painted in the cathedral sported bright red on their round cheeks, a symptom of living in the Andes, and a contradiction in all the European paintings of White Jesus and friends.

¹⁰ The religious figures carved into the walls (probably by indigenous hands) can also be seen sporting the headdresses of indigenous religious and historical figures.

¹¹ La Basilica de San Francisco was built over an indigenous temple of the sun.

¹² Some of the Europeans that are painted and sculpted by native hand appear with sickly, paper-white skin, in what our guide tells us is a satiric image of the conquistadors and their European counterparts.

¹³ The paper wasps nests in the amazon are very similar to that of the termites. Except, of course, that the termites use mud, and the paper wasps use chewed up wood. Which is, more or less irrelevant. I suppose what is not irrelevant is that, at some level, the termites' work to eradicate rot and the paper wasps only work for themselves.

¹⁴ The Jesus's pictured in South American cathedrals are much gorier than European Jesuses. The indígena related much more to the blood and suffering and the Catholic church was super ok with it.

¹⁵ In English: "cochineal"-red. The *cochinilla* insect was smashed together by indigenous people to create a red dye that, after La Conquista, was instantly stolen and sold across the Atlantic. The dye was a much deeper and truer form of red pigment than had ever before been used in European art and clothing dyes, despite all efforts to the contrary. Every religious painting after La Conquista featured the blood-red color of the tiny *cochinilla* insect.

¹⁶ Our guide informed us that European Jesuses are not pictured sitting.

¹⁷ The Virgen Maria is often a disguise for the indigenous goddess Pachamama, essentially Mother Earth. In "La Virgen de Cerro", the virgin Mary's face and arms are pictured emerging from a mountaintop. In her earthen, triangular body, trees and vines and kings grow.

¹⁸ "catholic", meaning "worldly" according to my middle school religion teacher, Mr. Sheely.

¹⁹ English: vines

towers one, two, three times,²⁰ until finally the basilica itself is brought to its knees, peering at the graffiti-masked brick across the plaza.

“#nosfaltantodos”

“Resistencia”

Our bus follows its gaze through the city-- a pilgrimage-- studies the streets of the city as closely as a bible.

“Voto todo”

“Sin educación no hay respeto”

“#lomarcho”

“La (in)justicia nos mata”

“Contra el gobierno terrorismo”

“Viva la lucha del pueblo”

“Quiero gritar

sin abrir

la boca”

²⁰ La basilica de San Francisco had to be rebuilt three times. The tall towers collapsed from earthquakes until they were eventually replaced with shorter, sturdier versions.

A rusted, abandoned car overlooks a one-hundred-foot drop. It is resplendent in splashes of paint. The architecture is nothing compared to what is written on / it / whispers like gunfire, like canons, cracking brick in whips of color.

Guayasamín and God

"Painting is a sort of prayer as well as a cry."

At least, that's what the video said he said. Oswaldo Guayasamín. The video said he named his final exhibit "The Chapel of Man", that he felt the woes of the world and created this place to change them. The museum guide said the artist wasn't religious, that in childhood he lost his best friend to a bullet and asked, "if there is a God then how do these things happen?"

When my mother clutched the steering wheel of her silver Ford Escape with a white grip, she said to me, red from tears, "Kaylee, if there is a God, then your brother will be out there safe". The hand-me-down champagne red Dodge Ram, his iPhone, and his vape pen scattered in a ditch in the backyard of Russell, KS, my kid brother with a man's beard had gotten real unlucky and lost himself to the Great Plains.

When I was 16, I was confirmed Catholic, not because I believed in much of anything yet, but because I was conflict-adverse, and Catholic families like to talk. We were asked to choose a saint name to represent us, and after weeks of my mother yelling out the Wikipedia descriptions of random Patron Saints at me, I finally stumbled across inspiration. You see, for so long, all I wanted to be was the heroin in my storybooks and soap operas, and in Season 6, Episode 8 of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, "Tabula Rasa", the cast loses their memories and home girl has to choose a name for herself. She chose Joan, I chose Joan of Arc, and as soon as I was able, I never went to that kind of church again.

In his version of "Pieta de Avignon" two Marias and Martha still grieve, reach broken hands out toward the body of a broken man, shaping broken faces. Yet, because the random and unknown white, robed man originally pictured in the painting had been deleted in Guayasamín's depiction of Jesus's death, we are told that the creator of the "Chapel of Man" was not religious.

I never believed much in that kind of God in the first place. You know, white man, big beard, sits atop a giant staircase between pearly gates. No, a person can be religious and still believe that god is roots, veins, synapses—believe that god is they not he, embedded in the cracks of the pavement, crawling up the telephone wire in swirls of bright orange blooms, reaching out to us and with us and through us.

The chapel of man will make you feel god.

In the thick of the Amazon Rainforest, some trees grow taller than half a football field. There are vines everywhere. Peter, our Dutch Quiteño USFQ professor/chaperone, says that when one tree falls, the vines are so entangled in each other and the branches that a whole clearing of trees will be felled along with it.

They say the Holy Spirit is in all of us, and maybe that bit I believe, that we are all wholly connected in spirit or energy or existence; that when one of us cries, another does also; that some kinds of pain will bruise us all, take us all to our knees.

My brother was not the first to get pulled underneath i-70's 75 mph current, not the first to go

missing in Kansas, but boy did he strike a nerve. Concerned Christian parents reposted and commented until few did not know of the boyish, 20-year-old K-State student or his well-intentioned manhunt. I shouldn't joke; it's possible that public uproar might have been the reason my brother's body was dumped alive just south of St. Louis just four days after his truck broke down whole a state over. But in the moment my mother told me her faith in God was hinged on finding my brother, I couldn't help wonder about all the bad that happened already, wonder what Facebook's enthusiastically helpful response to his crisis might have been if he were just a little bit browner.

"Mural Rostros de America" is a garden. In neat rows obelisk heads of red and green and yellow and blue starve and stare and sleep.

Using Maya, Inca, and Quiche art forms, he painted the effects of historical events of violence, of abuses of power. In "Lidice", Guayasamín depicts the Czechoslovakian city destroyed by Hitler's airstrikes as a mix of chins and foreheads and jaws, many a jumble of incomplete faces, upside down and sideways and staring. Dilated, pinprick pupils, perfectly circular for lack of eyelids. Terror. Teeth. Barbed wire and thorns for mouths. In the video he says, "If this were just history, if this had passed, I would not have built the chapel of man."

In the Antisana, the highlands, the Condors are threatened by the cattle-raising. It's the birds or the beasts, el uno o el otro-- expansive habits degrade the landscape and one by one the condors disappear. In what is called the Jaguar Fiesta, forty condors, symbolizing the indigenous people, are roped to La Conquista, the Spanish bull, and dragged along with it down a path of destruction. If the birds survive, they are released, and the native people say they themselves are also freed from their own torment. Guayasamín paints the condor freed, its thorn-like talons and beak inches from the cowering face of its previous captor. The bird's wings escape the edges of the canvas, glimmering silver and white from above. It is retribution of the divine variety. And the bull's wide eyes, pupils shocked small, look at us all in warning.

One time, during a collegiate rugby regional rugby match, my crazy team had the singular experience of partying with an uber-religious group of girls from John Brown University. It was there, in the bathroom of a Boy Scout Camp in Missouri, that I found myself in a teary-eyed, two-hour team bonding session with a JBU girl. She talked about Jesus and I talked about bell hooks. We talked in circles and in abstractions. We talked about respect and love and faith and future. We talked about Making A Difference and the Missteps of our Ideological Histories. And the truth is that for the most part, I have no idea what we talked about, because I was drunk on honey whiskey and tea, but I remember that it felt like inspiration.

Peter also said that the vines were so thick that we could Tarzan through the jungle if we wished. We did wish, and another student and I later tested this theory on one of the green cables that draped itself near our cabin. The vine snapped, collapsing slowly, bringing part of the tree with it. We hid the evidence as effectively as a child cleans their room, by quickly shoving it a couple of feet away

and into the green canopy. Still, when we later trekked through the mud on our hike, we stumbled through a group of fallen trees-- years of life, scattered in bits on the forest floor.

“Mural los Mutilados” has no faces. In beige and black and olive green, it is as if a lazy child had tried to reassemble a bucket of Barbies that they themselves had broken.

I thought my brother was cubed meat in the Konza Prairie, just parts of body parts scattered for the bugs and the birds. I imagined that his blood is what had stained the sunset so red, like the world had just absorbed my brother into the dirt, watercolor on a wet paper towel. Wilderness is a term we with privilege often reserve for those “less-developed” places that are unknown to us. I’m telling you now, there’s not much to know about the prairie but grass, miles and miles of it.

Guayasamín paints of mutilated bodies, floating interchangeable pieces that merge and depart from each other. The canvases themselves are like giant puzzles. The guide says that the panels can be arranged in hundreds of ways and still function. It’s expressionist. And cubist. Lots of bits.

JBU bathroom girl and I decided there are really a remarkable amount of similarities between Christianity and Feminism. Both have the core message and goal to treat others with love and respect. Both acknowledge that humans have become flawed by some great evil. Call it sin. Call it prejudice. Call it Satan or Imperialist White Supremacist Capitalist Heteropatriarchy. Whatever. Either way, we were both trying to explain that a life well lived is done so with others and for the good of others. Either way, we were both a couple of girls with dirty knees sitting in the corner of a white-tiled bathroom and wishing we could save the world.

People always assume that resistance comes from a place of anger, of hate—there is anger, but mostly there is pain, and there is empathy in pain, and there is hope, and there is hope enough for change.

In “Las Torturadas”, the skeletal body of a man outlined and detailed in red is painted three times in three panels. In two, his body lay crumpled and beaten. The man in the middle panel is pulled up by his arms; they are raised up and out as if by mounted chains. His palms cup pools of blood and extend toward the foreground, fingers spread wide to show us. He is Victor Jara, friend of Guayasamín, Chilean folk singer with politics too liberal for the political usurper Agosto Pinochet, and his artist’s hands were pulverized by the butts of rifles probably paid for by the U.S. government itself.

My dad was afraid to let me leave for Ecuador, knowing that once again, one of his children could be lost to the wilderness. But nothing I’ve ever done was as scary as driving the length of Kansas I-70 for the second time in one day, staring out at every passing car and knowing my brother could be in any one of them. Most things, the grass fields, the rolling dirt roads, even I-70, can be just as dangerous as any jungle. Despite this, we do not call what we can see out the window “Wild Thing”. We reserve that for somewhere else, someone else. It is a defense mechanism to make us believe we are safe and separate from the violence that we overlook.

Here / There, Us / Them, as if these two things are so unlike.

In the graveyard of trees whose fates were roped together with lianas, our group is told that despite the destruction, good could still come to the area. The sunlight is able to break through the canopy to the soil there, where from that brokenness something new might sprout.

“Mural Rostros de America” is a garden. In neat rows obelisk heads of red and green and yellow and blue starve and stare and sleep.

Guayasamín says, “My desire is to say through my paintings, may there be peace someday”, and I thought Hallelujah.

When I was 18 and I sat crouched in a dorm hallway reading Feminism is for Everybody at 3:30 in the morning, bell hooks said, “There can be no love when domination is present,” and I thought Amen.

At the top of the Antisana, near the volcano called Pichincha, Peter says we are on the ceiling of the world. Maybe he means Heaven, and maybe I believe him. At least, if there is a Heaven I believe it is covered in almojadilla. It is soft enough for rest, yet just spiked enough to remind you that you once have lived. I guess I prefer my death with a little bit more life in it than clouds can offer, and the spongey plant has just as much life in it as the rest of us. In the highlands, introduced cows eat and stomp out the native plants, but the almojadilla creeps up past the fencing, poking pointed toes back into the grazed-over cattle land. It is an act of resilience, a reminder that to live in this world is to struggle in it, a reminder that sometimes we resist because the alternative is ceasing to exist altogether.

Ruckus and Roots

Georgina says, "If you are cat-called just ignore it".

The oil company says, "No pictures".

Flacita, Gordita, Negrita— Negro, Maricón are ok here".

[bus tour guide name] says, "Weather is like women here in Ecuador". She means wily, subject to change.

Endearment.

She is our minder— Trying to keep us stupid americans from drinking brawling breaking our collarbones

bell hooks says, in liberation theology "Struggles to end Patriarchy Are divinely ordained".

Cristóbol colón said, me too

islanders do not always share interests.

[this guide] says, The densest jungle Is the shortest: large trees take large parts of everything for themselves.

Vladimir says, "Almojadilla" and points at the spongey plant wavering on the outskirts of the cattle ground.

Shutting down. Woman does not feel safe when her own culture, and white culture, are critical of her; when all the males of all races hunt her as prey...

The Carlos Darwin museum says the first Galapagans were forced— Imprisoned on an island penal colony and made to work.

Georgina says, "If you are cat-called just ignore it".

Karin, our tour guide in Quito wags her finger and smiles and says, "Wear your sunscreen!"

Long arms sweep out across the seats like a beauty contestant or a princess or a politician.

Diego says, the matapalos are trees that grow around the trunk of another for support and sunlight, growing stronger and tighter until the matapalo strangles the other in its tight grip.

does not come for free."

Peter says, the vines are so entangled in each other and the branches that, when one tree falls, a whole clearing of trees will be felled along with it.

Crenshaw says it's intersectional.

Peter says, that everything we drive by in the Antisana tour was once owned by a singular family, that the tiny farms we barely see as we zoom past were purchased with a lifetime of servitude.

Vladimir says, Planted for profit the pine mounts miles of mountainside Cattle and pine kill and clear away native flora.

My Spanish American Culture professor says, that agricultural communities in the Andes are primarily of indigenous background, forced to serve under conquistadores turned caudillistas

Our guide Genesis says, "Me llamo Garapatero" "It's sad to say, but sometimes an islander will threaten to let loose a predatory species if the government does something they do not like".

"Eaters of ticks"

Until, that is, Vladimir says the condors are mangled in the Jaguarfiesta; Garapateros were introduced To the ganadería in Georgina says, endangered birds Galapagos "We are worried that... sloop up and over the preservation and ate there are people here; [the government is] extremist. Peter says, the government now sees the preservation efforts in the Antisana as good, because it brings tourism and tourism brings money.

she inhabits." (42)

Karin says, "God gave us too many beautiful things, so he dropped the bad politicians here too".

Dave, our KSU bird specialist professor says, "Well, we've got one more for you, if you'll take him."

Genesis says, they are trying to eradicate the smooth billed Anis, but the little critters hide their nests in the brush and call out together by the swarm we are here we are here and in the confusion

I think, "Careful,

It's not as if

This one vine says, "Screw you" to everything else in the Rainforest with spines as sharp as broken glass.

they become large and cannot be found by the wildlife conservation employee.

bell hooks says, "Western metaphysical dualism (the assumption that the world can be understood in binary categories, that there is an inferior and superior, a good and a bad) was the ideological foundation of all forms of group oppression, sexism, racism, etc., and that such thinking formed the basis of Judeo-Christian belief systems" (105-6). The wall at the Chapel of Man says Guayasamin says, "De pueblo en pueblo, de ciudad en ciudad fuimos testigos de la más inmensa miseria: pueblos de barro negro, en tierra negra, con niños embarrados de lodo negro; hombres y mujeres con rostros de piel quemada por el frio, donde las lágrimas estaban congeladas por siglos, hasta no saber si eran de sal o eran de piedra, música de zamponas y rondadores que describen la inmensa soledad sin tiempo, sin dioses, sin sol, sin maíz, solamente el barro y el viento." Anzaldúa says, "Why does she have to go and make 'sense' of it all? Every time she makes 'sense' of something, she has to 'cross over,' kicking a hole out of the old boundaries of the self and slipping under or over, dragging the old skin along, stumbling over it. It hampers her movement in the new territory, dragging the ghost of the past with her" (71).

El Niño and Nihilism

Sometimes nature kills itself. In the Galapagos, we learn about El Niño, a warm current in the central and eastern tropical Pacific Ocean that changes direction once every 2-7 years. This phenomenon, along with altering global weather conditions, makes the ocean around the Galapagos uninhabitable, killing up to 90% of the sea life in the area.

In the Antisana, the analogies are simple: Western pines screw and pillage the mountainside. Beef commerce tramples the rest. The native brush-- the ojos de las incas, the almojadilla-- persists, rebounds, and resurges when and where it can.

In the Amazon, every fourth plant had espinas to wound and elbow for room. The native matapalos are “killer trees”. They grow by latching on to the trunk of another and caging them in an extractive embrace. The matapalo grows and grows until they are strong and the tree that was there first is suffocated, reduced to an empty shell, and the matapalo claims the space as its own. Even the ceibas, whose roots seem like a God to Quiches, whose leaves reach the clouds and whose roots reach other countries—Even the ceibas take up more than their share of sun. The thickest and most diverse parts of the forest are the shortest.

Just as it is natural to grow in spite of domination, it is also natural to grow because of it. And in the Galapagos the analogies fail in scarier ways. The conservationists try to eradicate the introduced species, before they overrun the area: The *Rubus niveus*, the *Psidium guajava*, guava, hundreds or thousands of blackberry bushes; the smooth billed-anis which eat the brush/ spread the seed of the blackberry bush; the dogs, the cats, the pigs, the rats, the goats (which eat everything); 550 species of insects, just one of them, the *Philornis downsi*, is a parasite fly that embeds itself in the eggs and offspring of birds, can kill whole flocks before they can fly; pathogens and diseases; and microorganisms and regular organisms that hitch rides on the hulls of boats from every ocean in the world, such as *Amathea vertisolea*, a moss that kills the sea grass. The best conservationists are trying to find ways to kill all the introduced species, only momentarily forgetting that even the native Galapagans themselves are an introduced species.

The government says they are happy to preserve the Galapagos, but Georgina says the rules have loopholes, points across the bay to a beach-side, luxury hotel masquerading as one fancy house. US and European companies pay “testaferros”, figureheads, use a person like a puppet, a passageway for hundreds of rich tourists to climb through, experience paraíso, leave it littered with Chaco prints. Georgina says, “We are worried that... there are people here; [the government’s] extremist. They put nature over people.”

The government says they are happy to preserve the Galapagos, because to do so means money. And when I say government, remember, remember, that “governance” in South America was formed first by imperial monarchy-- then, by colorist, oligarchist, pastoral powers-- a cake violently whisked together in a big mixing bowl full of bleached, wheat flour, clouding the air like the smoke

of trains, brought to Ecuador by Gabriel Garcia Moreno when the country’s independence was again leveraged on neo-imperialist capitalism-- the US in particular. (In Spanish American Culture we learned that wheat tortillas are white tortillas: native peoples in South America depended on corn until wheat harvest production was introduced by conquistadors. Gabriel Garcia Moreno was also, consequently, the name of the street of the USFQ hotel our group stayed in.

And even in the Antisana, the analogies are not that simple. The owners of the cattle and the pines are economically disenfranchised by a history of Latifundias. To preserve the native grass is not necessarily to preserve the native people. And what of the condors? What of the Jaguarfiesta? Can conservationists eradicate hundreds of years of culture for the sake of their grass? The condor metaphor is a mess too. They survive now, in part, by feeding on the carcasses of dead cattle. More notably, they are the namesake of U.S. military intervention in central and South American politics: Operation Condor, which led to the torture and murder of thousands upon thousands of innocents, civilians, all in the name of eliminating forms of thinking that resist our Democratic Republic ideals. Socialists. Commies. In 1973, Victor Jara who sang about social change in the name of the starving poor had the bones of his hands crushed by the butts of rifles paid for by the United States of America, thanks to Nixon’s and Kissinger’s support of the rebellion of the eventual dictator Augusto Pinochet. His regime accounts for thousands murdered, tens of thousands tortured, and hundreds of thousands exiled and missing. That is certainly not what I meant by divine intervention, and yet here I am, meddling.

From the politically-minded female speakers who met us in Quito and the Galapagos, I heard sexist, colorist and homophobic things, but to question them would have been to be like Colón and bring my faith, my feminism, in on a flag and skewer it into the ground and say “My beliefs belong here. You need to see my god”.

And when Colón wrote home about America in his “Letter to Luis de Santangel”, he spoke not just of what could be taken in grasp, but in breath.

“[M]any fine, large, flowing rivers... many mountains and peaks...small birds of a thousand kinds... palm trees of six or eight varieties, the graceful peculiarities of each one of them being worthy of admiration as are the other trees, fruits and grasses”.

We say we are not him and yet we travelled to the depths of someone else’s wilderness to admire trees our privilege could christen exotic, floated down the Amazonas in our lifejackets and looked out at the trees for monkeys, pointing like children in a zoo. While in the Antisana, we took Instagram selfies with the mountain landscape behind us, and in the Galapagos, we trotted through the only waved albatross mating ground in the world on the limited-access Isabella island, snapping pics of blue-footed boobies fit for many a party joke.

And in the plane, I looked over the patchy landscape of the Amazon Rainforest and thought “you never truly understand the term “environmental footprint until you see it stamped into the landscape”. I then slipped my notebook back into my bag where it rested on top of 2018’s Best American Science and Nature Writing Essays which contained a singular earmarked page: David Roberts’ essay “Wealthy People Produce More Carbon Pollution, Even ‘Green’ Ones”, where he clearly states that one of the most environmentally-impactful actions a single person can make, is travel.

And to get to the Tiputini, we took a motorized boat to the port of an oil company stationed in the Amazon. They loaded us onto their chiva, gave us each plastic-bagged lunches with plastic wrapped Halls, Oreos, ham and cheese sandwiches, crackers, and juice. They told us we couldn’t take pictures as we drove down their road shaded by a thin, on-or-two-tree wall that almost kept us from seeing the patches where a lack of trees presided on the other side. At the end of our stay, we watched a presentation on the phototraps in the Amazon. We saw pictures of all the animals that were too afraid of us to have shown their faces in three days of load forest stomping. Diego, the presenter, said that the biggest threat to the Amazon is the roads. “If you have roads, then you have people; it’s the end. If you have people, then you immediately have deforestation, pollution, hunting.” And after all that, we travelled back on the roads built by the oil company nearby, with yet another plastic-bagged lunch.

And I write that the streets of Spanish-built Quito cry out “La (in)justicia nos mata”, and I mention a White Supremacist history in the Colónization of South America. But why should I be the one to speak of that when, in the U.S., Brown and Black Lives, Disabled and Neurodivergent individuals, Queer and Trans Folk, asylum-seeking refugees and more say the same thing about Officer Joes from down the street.

And despite all of my indignation and girthy prose, the Spring Break months before my trip, my baby brother went missing, and for three days, I was Paul in the bible after Jesus’s crucifixion. My brother went missing, and for three days I didn’t care about all the white privilege in the world if it meant I could see him again.

Sometimes nature kills itself; Sometimes social justice does too. The wilderness in us was made to expand, to take. The same allows us to exist, to resist others from taking away our spot in the sun. But sometimes, what I call connectedness looks like a trap: a sticky spider’s web of contradiction. And we are just ants.

In the Galapagos, we learned about El Niño. It is named after Christ because it comes around Christmas, when the mangoes grow in Ecuador. Upon its arrival, almost everything is killed. Only that which has adapted to the violence survives. I asked, “Is it so bad?” Isn’t it like when forests burn and allow for new growth? They shook their heads and said it’s not. It’s too much too fast and getting faster all the time, thanks to Global Warming and other human factors. I said “oh”, but I did not yet fully understand the difference.

I wondered for a bit if Global Warming was not perhaps our own manmade El Niño, thinning the excess like forest fire, giving the earth space to grow something other than concrete. I had seen so much of our excess. The wilderness in us was made to expand. The people who didn’t work to change, the people who stood on podiums and said “Fake News” would see, in the end. We kill ourselves. For a second, I became dangerously close to giving up on any kind of justice. Sometimes, it seems like you can’t do much of anything without causing or finding more problems than you tried to fix.

But of course, we would not all die together. The problem is that those who would survive are also those who actively choose to spread and support the slaughter and brutalization of life on Earth, human especially. The people with money and power would survive. This violent selection would rid the world not of humans, but of humanity. Fighting for the world is fighting for all of those who are connected to it.

I’m glad the nihilism didn’t stick, because only a month after my return, deep into this essay’s second revision, the Amazon rainforest caught fire. The “lungs of the planet” are still burning. Too much, too fast.

Sunsets and the Sea

In the boat, I thought

We’re all connected, submerged, floating and such, singing islands in the stream, in our heads, in a boat, in the Pacific. It touches the water, the sea life, the shore and the soles of everyone else. I guess that’s easy to think when I’m cradled by oceans I’ve just had the pleasure of meeting, trailing my fingers across the surface, splashing as if it’s shimmering bathtub water for us college-aged kids dreaming we’re grown, but afloat on our parent’s or government’s dime. Maybe it’s easy for me to say that we beat on like boats against the current, pushing forward ceaselessly into the future.

Maybe that’s too obvious; maybe when we were all looking for the green on the horizon in a political climate that tells us our futures look like Hades and our kids won’t have one, maybe when I spend all my tuition money on Gender Justice and English with a president who speaks in open defiance of justice and with little control of the English language, maybe a Fitzgerald reference is just too obvious. Besides the pretentious and entitled white narrator doesn’t get very far in that one, does he, and the idyllic and entitled white protagonist dies. But I made the reference anyway, because I have to pretend that I know something. What’s the takeaway? What’s the solution? I don’t know. I don’t know how to save us.

Every night in the Galapagos, we tried to see the green flash over the horizon, and every night there was a small set of clouds in the distance, just big enough to block our vision.

Beyond the horizon, there are islands of trash as big as Australia, four of them, floating so far out in the ocean that the currents can’t reach them (and that’s why they’ve settled there). There are

tiny, broken-down microplastics in the ocean and the rotting bellies of fish and birds and sea turtles. There are nanoplastics, even tinier, more broken-down pieces, in our drinking water. Due to Global Warming, there is the rising sea level that will eventually drown the Galapagos. Out of sight. Out of mind. Fake news. Some of us refuse to read the writing on the wall. Too afraid to recognize that we too could be ants in the Amazon, and we let privilege mold our minds like Cordyceps.

I wonder if it coaxes them with indifference, makes their smallness seem less like a cage and more like a cushion. I wonder if ignorance is like pure oxytocin, if it suffocates their little ant synapses, snuffs out the pain so that the fungus feels like heaven to them—not spiked, but soft and easy and warm—so that their shuffling feet, dreary and drone-like aren’t so sore as they are forced to climb higher and higher up the trunk of an endless Amazon tree, as they clamp down on the bark with a death bite, as they explode—poof—into a million tiny spores, sending their salvation soaring toward the others, injecting that parasitic politic into all the others, as they kill the others, as they are killing themselves.

One time I wrote that structures of oppression are like spiders. Thousands of them. They spin their webs in and around us, crawl up our spines, bite us in our softest flesh, leaving an itch under the skin like venom. They lay their eggs in the ears of our young. But no—see, I like spiders; they dispose of mosquitoes, bite only when necessary, and when the sun hits the horizon and shines into the work they’ve done, spiders’ webs are real pretty. When the day does break that we can finally lay our eyes on what’s in the distance, on what we have made, our eyes will bleed Lagrimas de Sangre.

Meanwhile, wanderlust travelers drop Evian over the side of their cruise ships, churning up the nanosecrets we swallow in tap water; we leave wakes like waves behind us, and something like a widow’s veil severs guilt from the onlooker who cannot see.

I am not Joan of arc; I am not Buffy the Vampire Slayer. If I am anything, I am a girl with dirty knees and grass scrapes sitting in the corner of a white-tiled bathroom, praying and crying and believing in something better. If anything, I’m an ant. But ants build anthills. I believe we’re all as connected as the trees in the Amazon, tight with lianas, or the wide-open Konza with its blood-stained sunset and the roots of prairie grass. I believe that no matter how small we are we are not powerless. I believe that the only way to truly go on living in life is to go on like the almojadilla, go on living as all living things do. All living things reach. All living things grow. All living things change. All living things persist. Persist, with every small act of resistance. Because resistencia, resistance, is the natural and inevitable fight to survive—to live, despite each other, and yet simultaneously because of each other.

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MILKWEED MELANCHOLIA

Madison Leierer

junior | biochemistry

When I first began to write Milkweed Melancholia, all I had was an idea of the hopeless feelings I wanted to communicate. Namely, feeling like a shell of what you could have been because of past trauma and that trauma being ever-present and inescapable. A major struggle for many victims of abuse, myself included, is a nagging worry that they'll never be who they could have been if those things hadn't happened. Even if the worry is unfounded, and the survivor emerged stronger, it's easy to slip back into a self-destructive pattern of thoughts. Recovery isn't a straight path. It's different for everyone, and sometimes the road bends, spins, spirals, and causes you to backtrack on months of progress and healing. Sometimes, the lingering effects of a traumatic event can feel as though you are being eaten alive by something you have no possibility of escaping from.

I thought a good way to illustrate this feeling would be the relationship between a monarch and a parasitic wasp. Certain species of chalcid wasps will stalk monarch caterpillars and wait for them to form their chrysalis. Once the caterpillar has formed its chrysalis, chalcids will swoop in and lay eggs in the chrysalis while it is still soft. There is nothing that the caterpillar can do to defend itself in this state. The chalcid larvae will eventually hatch and eat the monarch alive. Instead of a monarch emerging, chalcids will pour out of small holes in the chrysalis and leave the empty chrysalis as a reminder of something that could have been but was not.

As a whole, Milkweed Melancholia is a grim reflection of the impact trauma has had on my life and the lives of many others. I worry that my past has left me a broken reminder of what I could have been in the same way that the wasps left the chrysalis, and similar to an internal parasite, trauma can seem at times to be virtually inescapable. Whether trauma resurfaces as a silent grimace or a panic attack between the aisles of a grocery store, it can make you feel hopeless, helpless, and as if it is eating away at you from the inside out.

Skin ripples off in waves as
She curls into a question
Of who she'll become once
She emerges.

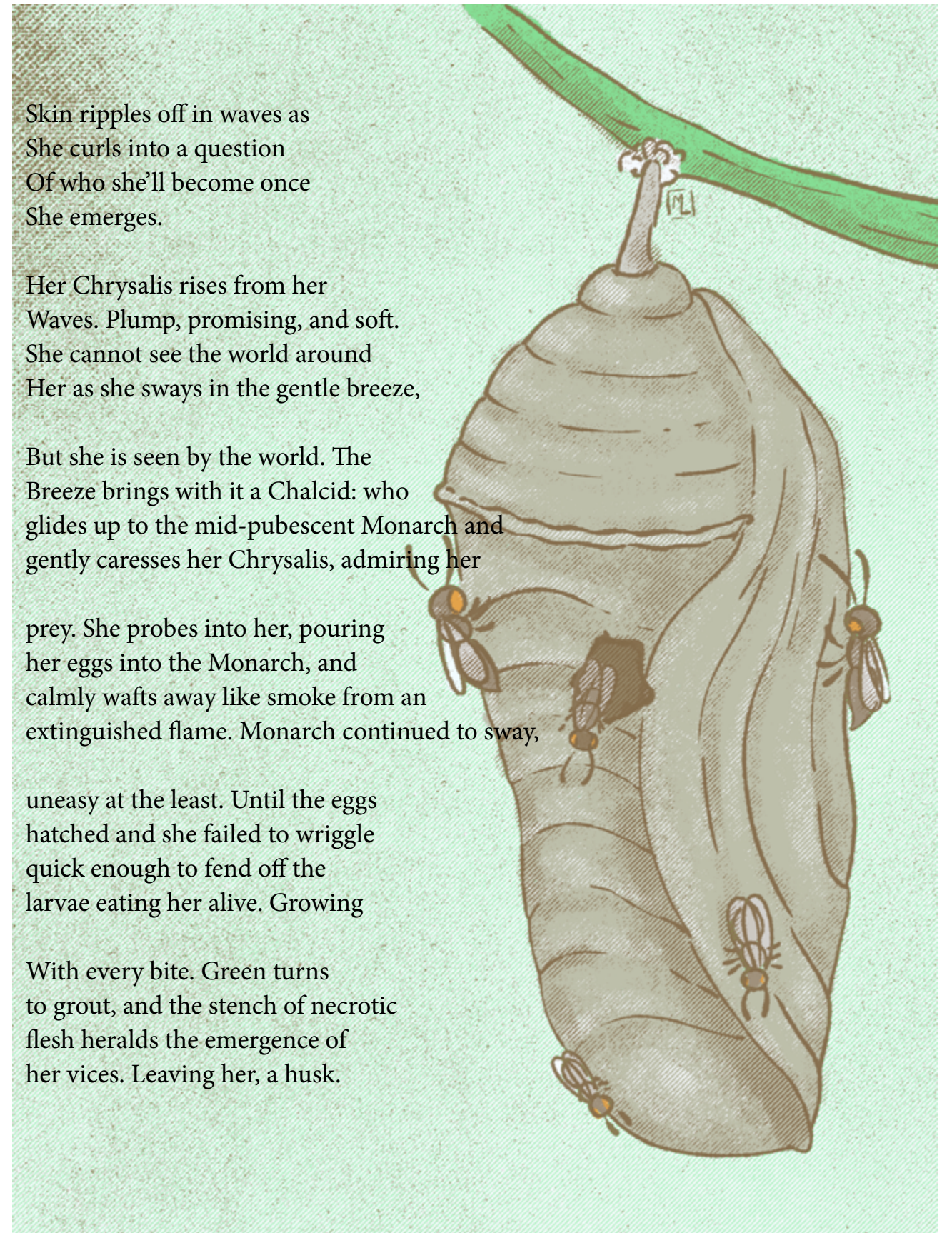
Her Chrysalis rises from her
Waves. Plump, promising, and soft.
She cannot see the world around
Her as she sways in the gentle breeze,

But she is seen by the world. The
Breeze brings with it a Chalcid: who
glides up to the mid-pubescent Monarch and
gently caresses her Chrysalis, admiring her

prey. She probes into her, pouring
her eggs into the Monarch, and
calmly wafts away like smoke from an
extinguished flame. Monarch continued to sway,

uneasy at the least. Until the eggs
hatched and she failed to wriggle
quick enough to fend off the
larvae eating her alive. Growing

With every bite. Green turns
to grout, and the stench of necrotic
flesh heralds the emergence of
her vices. Leaving her, a husk.





AN UNFINISHED STORY

PART II

Suan Sonna
sophomore | philosophy

Part I of An Unfinished Story can be found in the October 2019 edition of Live Ideas.

Ren, a senior at The Spencer School, is accepted into Stanford University. In just three days, however, his life takes a series of radical turns. He's forced to face his past mistakes, failed friendships and lovers, and to rediscover what it means to be a man. This short story hits at the anxieties of not only Asian men but any man's coming of age in today's world. It also addresses the deeper human longings for harmony, beauty, and intimacy.

Keywords: Beauty, Masculinity, Asian, Romance, Teen

After waking up, I expected to see my father in the living room. Instead, I had another night to myself. At first, I was scared. It seemed as if the entire world had thrown itself into an eternal midnight. For the last two days, my waking hours mostly consisted of darkness. Sunlight was a fading memory.

The living room looked as if it were sprawling with shadowy forms, except for the coffee table illuminated by a single blue streetlight. I flicked the lights on and immediately noticed the dinner plate dad had left me. He had done the dishes, and I guess left to the bar for his routine. I called Yori and asked him to pick me up.

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In high school, Yori and I were on the debate team. He was a year older than I, which gave him the paradoxical task of encouraging and defeating me. He had to keep his title, while also giving me enough wiggle room to grow. The Spencer School was respected for debate, and we went in understanding the centrality of the sport to our institution. Yori introduced me to the ropes of the art, and then showed me the various debating events I could choose. I originally wanted to do Lincoln-Douglas Debate, but our coach saw potential in us being partners in Public Forum and Policy. Indeed, we were unstoppable in either event. I'm sure Stanford was impressed by our national titles.

Aside from the accolades, however, there were nights where we would just stay up talking about life, gossiping about teachers and students, watching mindless videos for hours. We would always show up late to roll call in the morning, knowing that our coach couldn't remove or penalize us. People eventually started calling us "Asian Persu-Asian", and we carried that title with pride. We blasted through opponents, left with trophies and medals, and had secure spots as valedictorians in our respective classes. By all accounts, we were ideal students.

Unfortunately, Yori didn't get accepted into any of the institutions he wanted. He had everything he needed to get in: a remarkable story, the academics, the accolades, the recommendation letters, but they all fell through.

Even after we had won the national title during my junior and his senior year, he looked unsatisfied. When we returned to our hotel, I was elated just to pull off my suit and toss the formal leech into the closet. Meanwhile, he was changing out of his outfit more methodically. He didn't even utter a word or make a sound.

"What's up?" I asked.

He turned and smiled, as if this gave me closure.

"What happened?" I demanded.

Yori leaned back on his pillows after removing his shirt. He then sighed away what little energy he had left, "I was around this group of girls today. We were the only guys in the out-rounds, remember? When you had left, they started talking about where they got into. The first one said, 'Harvard.' The second said, 'M.I.T.' The third said, 'Princeton.' And then I told them I was going to a state

school. One of them chuckled and then they moved on. The next one was ‘Harvard.’ The other was ‘Stanford.’ It then occurred to me that the national title doesn’t mean anything. All the kids we beat still get their dream schools. They still get their ticket to greatness... Maybe this will mean something for you one day, Ren.”

I was too elated by our victory to digest his words. I nodded and pretended to understand his pain; but, in all honesty, I didn’t know what to say. I doubted there was anything I could say really. And then he continued: “I was trying to get a prom date this year. I always avoided going to parties and school outings, because I just never saw the use. Well, I asked this girl if she wanted to go, and she turned me down politely. I was sad, sure, but I didn’t think much of it. And then one of my friends showed me a screenshot of her group chat. They were joking about my size, the idea that Asian men are smaller.” He curled his body towards the window, away from me, “Everyone’s laughing now, Ren.”

My speechlessness started bothering me. I didn’t have any words that felt right for this moment. So, I grabbed a book and escaped to the lobby.

I sat there for about ten minutes, trying to read, before my team surprised me with a cake. One of them asked where Yori was, and I told them I would get him. When someone asked if he was okay, I said nothing back. And as that silence lingered, it began speaking more than I had intended.

Yori gave up on his dreams after that. He moved into an apartment nearby and just spent his days working in a warehouse. I would tell him not to waste his mind away, because whenever a topic filled him with passion he would speak profundities into existence. He still had his intellect, and his wit remained intact. And, in those ways, he would always be Yori.

Perhaps one of the biggest changes he made in his life was going to the gym. After a few months, he had toned his body into something wonderful. And, when I’d asked him why he was doing all of this, he’d tell me it’s for his mental health. But, I knew that answer was only partly true. On one hand, I knew exercising helped him stay sane. It seemed to be the only thing that kept him motivated. But then there was this other side of him I can never forget. That hotel room memory still colors my perception of him. I will always see him as that broken soul I couldn’t save, that older brother who drifted away from prominence and into dishonor. Indeed, after cutting off his parents and many of the people who truly loved him, I didn’t know who he was trying to impress anymore.

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He picked me up soon after I called, and we sat in his apartment eating some sushi he had prepared. “You know, my grandfather was a sushi chef. He introduced me to the art when I was younger.”

I was more in love with his nigiri than his story.

“How much did this tuna cost? This is insane!”

“Thank you, but I’ll keep the price a secret.” He wiped his hands clean and asked, “So, what are

you in the mood for tonight?”

“Probably not drinking. I’ve been feeling drowsy lately. I don’t think last night helped.”

“Probably not.” He was cleaning his equipment now, causing metals to chime lovely tunes.

“How’s your father doing?”

I made the drinking motion to Yori, and he understood.

“Ah. I see.” He paused then said, “You know, you should try rebuilding your relationship with him.”

“I think it’s fine.”

“No, I’m being serious. I know I’m not the best example, but... your father isn’t a bad guy. You shouldn’t blame him for what happened. She was going to smoke anyway.”

“Okay. I’ll take that into consideration.” I wanted to change the topic, so I turned the television on. There was nothing worthwhile except for the news and a few classic films.

“Before you go off to Stanford, you should go to the gym with me. I can show you what work-out routine you should be doing up there.”

“Sure thing.”

He finished his work in the kitchen and joined me in the living room. We were both trying to find a channel to settle on, but nothing compelled us. It took him some convincing, but I eventually got us to watch some anime. At first, he was appalled by the seemingly feminine overtones of the show, but then he appreciated its charm and aesthetic by the end. He was impressed by what I got him to waste three hours of his life on.

It wasn’t until after the binge session ended that I recalled what I wanted to talk to him about. As he was gathering the bits of rice we had dropped on the ground, I told him about my dream. He was silent throughout, from the beginning with Juniper to the end with my demonic self. That meant he was either perplexed or knew exactly what was going on. I waited to see his side of the dichotomy, and he did not disappoint.

“Your dream has no meaning.” He said bluntly. “It’s just telling you that you still feel guilty about the past. You still have feelings for Juniper, right?”

I nodded. “I guess.”

“It’s a yes or no question.”

“Then, yes. I still have feelings for her.”

“Why?” His tone roughened. “You had the chance to be with her, and you threw that opportunity away.”

“Women aren’t everything, Yori.”

“Look at you.” He shook his head as he went to the fridge for a glass of milk at midnight.

“You said in your ‘research’ that women are essentially beautiful and that men long for something like that beauty. Men long to be ‘sophisticatedly desirable’, ‘unified with their bodies and aesthetic appe-

tite’, as you put it. Next thing you know, you had the chance to be with someone beautiful and you-” He stopped himself. “Sorry, we shouldn’t be doing this.”

“You’re so sensitive, Yori.” I was ready to let him hear the truth, how I really felt about his life-style choices.

“No. Actually, I’m going to finish my thought.” He positioned himself upright just as he did during debate rounds. “You debunked your own thesis. You want to be beautiful; you want to create yourself into some kind of masterpiece or character; but when you had the chance to obtain the masculine ideal you so highly covet, you chickened out.”

“I could have never achieved that ideal, Yori.” I snapped. “I wasn’t her ideal. And, the harder I tried to make myself into that, the more I hated myself. You know, I’ve tried going to the gym; but it just feels like a cult of the body. It feels like I’m trying to make myself into someone I’m not.” I was confused now: how did merely explaining my dream cause all of this?

“Sounds like a personal problem, Ray.”

I decided to let loose: “I see you working out every day, trying to perfect yourself, but we both know you could have been so much more. It’s a punch in the gut to see you living like this!”

“You’re right.” Yori was pacing around the kitchen. “I am wasting my life. I’ve embarrassed my parents, my family’s reputation. I had my whole life planned in front of me, and then I watched everything fall apart. Every institution rejected me! All the options left were pathetic. Now, look at you here lecturing me about how I should live my life. But, you got your dreams. You got what you wanted.” He set his cup of milk down and continued. “No one cares about what you did in high school. No one cares how much you worked, the mental health issues you got in order to be valedictorian, how you ruined your body for the sake of your mind and ‘academic development’. No one cares. And, it’s funny that Stanford admitted you. That institution has discriminated against people like us, but you act like you’ll change everything. Yes. You’ll finally set things right on Asian masculinity. No you won’t. They don’t want to listen to us. No one wants to listen to men talk about beauty. No one wants to hear men like us talk about beauty. You can publish your novel ideas in all the Ivy League journals you want, but no one will really care. You can try sharing these ideas to the community, but no one wants to talk. It’s a lie, Ren. It’s all a lie. So, go to Stanford. Enjoy those years, because they’re all vanity in the end.”

“What are you saying?” I murmured to myself as I walked out the door. Once again, I felt like I was locked in that hotel room. I had to escape. I momentarily had an inclination to return to him, maybe finish the argument or apologize, but I decided to call an UBER instead.

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My mind was still in limbo after arguing with Yori. It didn’t help that heading to school the

next day reminded me of him, what he was like yesteryear. I would walk through the hallways in the morning usually exhausted from homework and unable to shut my mind off. And then, if we ran into each other, Yori would ask me how I was doing, usually scrounging on a bag of hot chips and sharing them with me. I had always imagined celebrating him getting into his dream school one morning. Perhaps I would supply the chips and try to calm his excited mind. Neither of our dreams were fulfilled.

Throughout the day, people were complimenting me. I tried to pretend as if nothing had happened, but they persisted with the extraordinary responses. Some of my friends clapped and hollered when I stepped into class, and some teachers would even respectfully nod or shake my hand as I walked by. All of these little gestures were delightful, until Yori’s spirit struck right after: what if I was just some glorified pig for slaughter? What if I’m just going to be forgotten?

When I returned home that evening, my father had prepared a delectable meal, probably spending more than he should have. He had prepared Sashimi, Soba noodles, and Miso soup. Seeing the slices of raw fish in their colorful variety and all the work he had poured into the Soba and Miso were humbling. In fact, when he invited me to the dinner table, there was something different about his appearance. He had finally shaved and gotten a haircut. For once, I could see why people said I looked like him. There was a traditional handsomeness to his appearance.

“What do you think?” He asked with a smile.

Like any good son should, I praised and thanked him for the food. “This looks wonderful, dad. Thank you.”

“Well, let’s eat.”

We immediately dug into our food. Of course, we maintained appropriate table manners, but we were eating like starving men. I understood why my father was in a ravenous fit, he often forgets to eat, but I didn’t understand my appetite. I inherited my mother’s smaller stomach, but, for once, I was starving for my father’s cooking.

“I read your paper on men and women.” My father began lightly then proceeded further. “It brought back two memories.” He looked over to see if he had my attention, and I nodded. “Growing up, I used to plow the fields with water buffaloes. There was a day where I wanted to play a joke on my brothers. So, I ran and tried to hide in the bushes. I wanted to scare them. Apparently, the bushes had been sliced a particular way and, as time passed, the leaves had covered the sharp points. I tried hiding but ended up stabbing my legs. Instead of scaring my brothers with a joke, I walked out bleeding. I don’t remember what happened next very well. But, when I went to the hospital, I saw my father in the room with me. He looked poised even though he was covered in my blood. After what you wrote about, on masculinity, I wondered... What if we can only be masculine in our homeland, our culture? And, when we made the transition from there to here, you lost that identity?”

“Are you saying I’m not masculine?”

He had stopped eating now and examined me with honest eyes. “You don’t understand masculinity... And, I’m to blame in part. I thought about the movies I took you to see as a kid, about the sports I expected you to play, and how I never encouraged you in other areas. But, your mother, she was there. And she loved you. And, when you gave yourself to her, as she had given herself to you, you and I should have seen that as the masculine ideal.” His eyes were beginning to swell with a canvas of memories. He wiped them away and then used a napkin to clean his face.

“When I read what you described as the feminine ideal, it didn’t sit well with me. It reminded me of when I was a younger man. After the war, things were more liberalized. We didn’t have arranged marriages so much anymore. So, I had the chance to pick and choose. In fact, I had a girl before your mother, and she was beautiful. She could have been a model. But, I thought about her, and then I thought about your mother who was just my friend at the time. The woman I was dating was certainly beautiful and, in some sense, made me feel like a ‘man’. But, I didn’t want her to know me. I didn’t want to be weak around her, and I always made her have to earn my humor and vulnerability. She also complained she never felt truly present around me. On the other hand, your mother, my friend at the time, she knew me. And, I reasoned, if I am going to be a man, then I want to be loved. After all, things that are loved become beautiful over time. And, I reasoned further that if I am going to be loved, then I want to be known.”

He paused to look at me again and then bobbed his head a few times. That was his way of preparing a confession:

“Your mother wasn’t the embodiment of some feminine ideal. She wasn’t even my ideal love. In the end, she was my only real love.” He cleared his throat, then closed with, “In America, you were raised to pursue ideals but not reality. In Asian culture, we are willing to sacrifice ideals for real beauty. As your father, I failed to see that. I didn’t know how different American culture was, so I assumed like my father and your grandfather that you would grow up like us, believing what we believed and adopting our traditions. I never cared to articulate them. I just lived them out without knowing them fully. And that’s when I began taking things too easily. I stopped doing little things for your mother like opening the door, telling her I loved her; I took her for granted. Soon, I started smoking to cope with my inexplicable sadness. I couldn’t articulate my emotions or my traditions. And then I passed it to her. She picked up that horrible habit from me, and the more I abandoned her, the deeper she fell into it. You are now my last chance, Ren. For so long, I was afraid of acknowledging this reality. I wanted some ideal where I was absolved of responsibility. But, now I see, son. And, I am sorry for what I have done and failed to do for you.”

I looked at my plate, the delicate Sashimi slices napping at the center, and excused myself. I had never heard a confession before from my father, and I didn’t know how to confess my heart back.

He was right about one thing however: I don’t want to be known.

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The more I meditated on my father’s apology, the more I realized I had been finally granted agency over my beauty. My father’s apology placed the onus of change in my hands, and it frightened me. For so long, I had assumed the possibility of change, especially radical change, was nonexistent. But, my father had introduced a paradigm shift to my worldview. I was now left to either consume this fact in my darkness or reconfigure my form into something more authentically human.

With every demonstration of grace, I reasoned, I must do something afterwards. So, I called Juniper. I knew it was a ridiculous idea and that the likelihood of her reciprocating was zero – until that myth was dispelled. Her voice emerged on the other line, and our worlds were intertwined again.

“Hi... This is Ray.”

“What do you want?” Her voice was tough, and rightfully so.

“Let me be honest. I’ve thought about how I treated you, and I know nothing I can say will change the past. But... I am sorry, and I accept my fault. I hope you can forgive me, or at least let me earn your forgiveness.”

She was silent for a few moments. And then those moments extended into what eventually felt like forever, until she split the chain of infinite silence, “There’s a coffeeshop on Windsor street. You’ll go there first. If I choose to show up, then I’ll give you a chance. If I don’t, then that’s my right. Saturday at 9 AM. Capeesh?”

“Yeah... Capeesh.”

“Ren... I really hope you’ve changed.”

She ended the call and left me speechless.

Author's Reflection

An Unfinished Story is the first story I have ever written for “myself.” Many of my past stories were written for the sake of impressing others. I would try and finetune my writings in order to meet the critical standards I had accumulated over time. However, when I wrote *Mishima in Love* last school year, I remember how this desire to impress others wilted away. This year, *An Unfinished Story* is a firm declaration of my independence – from myself, for myself.

The first striking fact about this story is that it does not have a traditional plot structure. There is no clear objective for the character, no discernable ending – just the seemingly random events that follow from the night he sneaks out. This is intentional. The fact that so much is thrown at the audience without much exposition, aside from the dizzying dream sequence, is meant to convey the messiness of life. You have to be patient with this story and persist to the ending – regardless of whether or not you find the journey ultimately fulfilling. Isn't that life?

The second obvious fact is that this story is about an Asian American character, Ren, and his struggle with, among other things, masculinity. This is a real anxiety for what seems to be many Asian American men. The history and literature on this problem, while not rich, is sufficient. But there is generally no interest, or perhaps a great discomfort, among people to discuss it, and masculinity more generally. There is a great awkwardness for men to express their emotions. So much so that I have no further comments on it here.

The third fact that some readers might have sensed is that this story is, in large part, autobiographical. That I have a friend like Ana, Yori, and Juniper is true. For example, Yori's inability to find a date due to the stereotype about Asian men's genitalia was unfortunately true for one of my Chinese American friends. Additionally, Yori mentions how a group of Ivy League girls laughed at him when he revealed he was going to a state university. That was a personal story. In short, writing this tale was therapeutic to an extent – for myself and certain friends.

Fourth, beauty is sprinkled throughout the text as an ambiguous concept. It is never truly defined or quantified. Indeed, this was my experience reading the Japanese author Yukio Mishima. I found that this inner desire to pursue and be beautiful became more self-evident as I felt my own emotions more deeply and honestly. Beauty is not a concept often associated with men, and perhaps it is this act of

defiance that I find liberating – that men desire to pursue and be beautiful is what allows us to be free from the constraints upon us. Giving texture and form, reality, to this mysterious ideal gives our lives purpose.

Let me say a few things about the ending of the story – of which there are two. The first is the father's confession. This scene serves to show Ren, among other things, that there is hope in authenticity, something rare and hidden in today's world. The second ending, Juniper's ultimatum, is meant to be open. It is the task of the reader to guess (or not) what the ending of the story will ultimately be. Do they think there's enough hope for a happy ending? Or, will Ren remain unforgiven? Or, does the audience even care enough to postulate an ending? The truth is that not everyone's life will be a perfect or interesting drama. Whether we take interest in another's story is more revealing of ourselves than of them.

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