Academy of American Poets

Undergraduate winner	Meredith Irvin	*Thoughts on a Burning*
Honorable mention	Charlotte Greenbaum	*Seven Miles Across*
Graduate winner	Allan Popa	*Envoi*
Graduate honorable mention	Phillip Matthews	*Whose Burrow He Can't Renounce*

Leanna Boysko Essay Contest

Junior winner	Rebecca Tsevat	*Settlement, Resettlement, and the Domestic Life in Sense and Sensibility*
Senior Winner	Katherine Gaertner	*Millennial Constellations: Roth, Whitehead, and the Dangers of Narrative History*

Cornelison English Essay Contest

1st place winner	Katherine Henderson	*Something Happened Samuel Beckett, Flann O'Brien, Late Modernism*
2nd place winner	Anna Teekell	*Elizabeth Bowen and Language at War*

F. Ward Denys Essay Contest

Winner	David Blinn	*The Endless Process of Ending in Beckett's Endgame*

Dramatics Club of St. Louis Contest

1st place winner	Marley Teter	*Haunted Theatre: The Fortune Theatre and The Woman in Black*
2nd place winner	Leah Barsanti	*Monster*

Carrie S. Galt Fiction Contest

Winner	Caroline Wilkinson	*Half-Glass Bed*

Andrea Goff Memorial Poetry Contest

Winner	Evan Luzzatto	*Day Dreams*

Roger Conant Hatch Poetry Contest

Winner	Anna Stalker	*Clouds I, II, IV*

Harriet Schwenk Kluver Contest

1st place winner	Kara Gordon	*The Delusion of Control*
2nd place tie winner	Jessica Rosen	*Why I Write: Side-Click*
2nd place tie winner	Marissa Pomerance	*The Same Insanities*

Norma Lowry Memorial Fund Poetry Contest

Undergraduate winner	Emma Hine	*Rainforests*
Graduate winner	Marni Ludwig	*Secret*

Julia Viola McNeely Poetry Contest

Winner	Zachary Amittay	*Visiting Hours*

James Merrill Poetry Contest

Winner	Catlyne Lasser	*palimpsest*

Washington University Fiction Contest

Winner	Zachary Amittay	*Cutman*

Thought on a Burning

2011 Undergraduate Winner
Academy of American Poets Contest

Meredith Irvin

Thoughts on a Burning

I lie alone
and watch the uncut wheat arch,
in waves above me.
Each strand sways
through me, a rising hum
across the pastel field. I look up.
Time is leaving me. The stars turn
across the midnight,
drag a thick tablecloth
from the barn, still burning,
and pull it around my shaking shoulders.

Seven Miles Across

2011 Undergraduate Honorable Mention
Academy of American Poets Contest

Charlotte Greenbaum

Seven Miles Across

Lie in chicory,
chew on papery
rye grass stalks,
a stem of flax,
still so pale,
waiting for gold.

Bathe only in the sea,
smell forever of salt

Let your skin darken
and burn
and peel
and darken again,
on shoulders let freckles bloom,
apple cheeks with red be stained.
Let your hair grow wild.

Drink gin and tonic, piquant with lime,
wet your dry throats, pass the time.
Let thorns prick your heels and falter your pace
striding by briar and butterfly bush.
Let the cigarettes burn, acrid smoke billow.

Let the island break your heart,
let it make you strange.

Envoi

2011 Graduate Winner
Academy of American Poets Contest

Allan Popa

Envoi

Sleep now, little book.

The leaves of the acacia tree are folded
and in the shade, the ghost of a boy

is riding the swing again.

He is headless, they say. No, he's got his head
cradled on his lap as though to console it.

No one can remember the expression

on the child's face.
At a doorway, a mother calling.

Whose Burrow He Can't Renounce

2011 Graduate Honorable Mention
Academy of American Poets Contest

Phillip Matthews

Whose Burrow He Can't Renounce

He's whispering into the rotary phone, making plans. He's young. Somebody he loved isn't dead yet. Outside, his pasture of artworks. The windmills he made of air-conditioning parts. The carved legs that feel like running. He approaches one of his structures: a metal rod, a skirt around it. It signifies to him himself, the way dissatisfaction circuits the mind, the stupid motor of harm. Against himself, he gets ideas. He imagines a doll always looking is dead. He imagines his brother's greased arms operating inside the cracked truck of his body. If it hurts, he knows he deserves it. He's lit-up at night with boys, hands inside their pockets. Far down the road, few cars around. There used to be more owls. He slept to the bright noise of rodents in the leaves, then the bright noise without them.

Settlement, Resettlement, and the Domestic Life in Sense and Sensibility

2011 Winner Leanna Boysko Essay Contest

Rebecca Tsevat

Settlement, Resettlement, and the Domestic Life in *Sense and Sensibility*

In *Sense and Sensibility,* Jane Austen explores the condition of settlement through the social and psychological changes that accompany movement between homes. Throughout this novel, several characters leave their homes permanently or temporarily and must resettle elsewhere: the Dashwoods leave Norland for Barton; Edward Ferrars relocates to Delaford; and even Mrs. Jennings travels between her two homes in Devonshire and London. Critics have commented on Austen's treatment of settlement and resettlement, particularly with regard to the dispossession of women by the heirs of their family estates. In the Introduction to the Oxford Edition of *Sense and Sensibility*, Margaret Anne Doody claims that "Jane Austen is very interested in the condition of females who are subjected to the loss of home" (Doody ix). She draws attention to the novel's opening with the relocation of Mrs. Dashwood and her daughters and characterizes their condition as nomadic after leaving Norland. For Doody, however, this transition is very negative, for she acknowledges with regret that they are "exiled and can never return" (xi). While the injustice to women has been one noted consequence of the stipulations of property transfer, it is not the only one worth emphasizing. In fact, in opposition to Doody's claim, I argue that the Dashwoods' resettlement is not treated negatively in this novel, for it ultimately enables them to pursue a more stimulating and active domestic life at Barton. Though the concept of permanent settlement itself is not critiqued, Austen demonstrates the negative consequences of idleness and immobility within and outside of the home. In doing so, she redefines the ideal domestic setting as one that promotes progress and productivity.

In order to understand Austen's endorsement of purposeful movement and activity, it is necessary to first examine the characters who remain idle for much of the story. Though the novel carefully tracks the movement of Dashwood sisters and others as they journey from Norland to Barton to London and back to Barton, their continual motion stands in sharp contrast to the state of inertia that defines the lives of many of the remaining characters. In this text, Austen establishes a clear divide between those who travel and those who do not: Colonel Brandon, Mrs. Jennings, the Steeles, and John Willoughby all go to London at the same time as Elinor and Marianne (albeit for different reasons), while the Middletons and Mr. and Mrs. John Dashwood remain at home for most of the novel. Nevertheless, this text is not only interested in mobility as it relates to pursuits outside of the household, for it also monitors movement and occupation within the home. We know very early on that Marianne plays the pianoforte and Elinor enjoys art, while the Steeles, the Middletons, and the Ferrars have no noteworthy intellectual or artistic interests. By drawing considerable attention to the domestic and professional engagements of each of her main characters, Austen establishes both activity in the household and geographic movement as important to the characterization of settlement in this text.

Austen warns against the consequences of idleness through her pejorative treatment of the static characters in the novel. She notes that Sir John and Lady Middleton "resembled each other in that total want of talent and taste which confined their employments…within a very narrow compass" (25). This lack of talent and taste stems from their "deficiencies of nature and education," which, Austen implies, only "continual engagements *at home and abroad*" can ameliorate (25, emphasis mine). Nevertheless, it soon becomes clear that only Sir John leaves his property frequently, while his wife remains extremely idle and pursues no meaningful activity

even within her own house.[1] Not only does she make very few efforts to entertain and converse with her houseguests, but she also displays little emotion or energy and can only be roused to enjoyment by the entrance of her children (27). Though the "boisterous mirth" of Sir John and Mrs. Jennings is ridiculed, Lady Middleton's "cold insipidity, [which] was so particularly repulsive" seems to be a more heinous offense in this context (27). Austen suggests that Lady Middleton's unsociable demeanor is provoked by her decision to remain idle following her marriage to Sir John; as evidence of her former passions, we are told that she had been a talented pianist before she "had celebrated [her marriage] by giving up music" (27). Thus, while her matrimony involves movement between homes, her abandonment of previous employments upon resettling causes her to lose her vitality. Perhaps the most extreme embodiment of immobility in this text, Lady Middleton demonstrates the negative repercussions of idleness both inside and outside of the home: she is unproductive in the household, is unable to participate in intellectual discussions, and derives no pleasure from former artistic pursuits.

Lady Middleton's stasis distinguishes her from many of the other characters that are mobile in this text. Nevertheless, Austen demonstrates that physical, geographic movement is not enough to rectify the surly dispositions of Lady Middleton and others like her. In spite of the fact that he does travel frequently to and from London, Edward Ferrars' idleness is likened to that of Lady Middleton, for he lacks a profession and does not engage in other meaningful activities within the home. At the beginning of the novel, his mother and sister "long to see him distinguished – as – they hardly [know] what," and Marianne criticizes him both for having "no taste in drawing" and for displaying no passion or emotion while reading (12, 15). Like Lady

[1] Sir John Middleton, who was "not in the habit of seeing much occupation at home," expresses incredulity upon finding the Dashwood women "always employed" at Barton (31). His reaction upon visiting them further emphasizes the contrast between the very active domestic life of the Dashwoods and the extreme idleness of the Middletons.

Middleton, too, Edward's extreme investment in "domestic comforts and the quiet of private life" produces a negative psychological effect on him, an effect that is acknowledged by Mrs. Dashwood and her daughters as well as Edward himself (13). When Edward visits the Dashwoods at Barton, he displays "silence, coldness, and reserve" (72). Though Elinor attributes his low spirits to his mother's influence and his want of independence from her, Mrs. Dashwood provides another interpretation, one that is more in line with Edward's own assessment of his mental state and with Austen's endorsement of professional and domestic activity throughout the novel. Mrs. Dashwood remarks that Edward would be a "happier man if [he] had any profession to engage [his] time and give an interest to [his] plans and actions" (77). Indeed, Edward's depressive and self-deprecating demeanor confirms that his idleness within the home is the source of his negative self-image and, ultimately, his foolish engagement to Lucy Steele. He reflects that his inability to agree with his family on a profession has made him "an idle, helpless being," and he later attributes his unfortunate attachment to Lucy to a "foolish, idle inclination...and want of employment" (77, 161).

If Edward's domestic and professional idleness are what fuel his discontent, then it follows that his split from his mother and the prospect of a physical relocation to Colonel Brandon's cottage in Delaford are not enough to cure him of his unhappiness, for he remains in this state throughout his engagement to Lucy. Rather, the commencement of his employment as a clergyman and his attachment to a more social and active woman are what lift his spirits and provide him with a greater sense of purpose, thereby differentiating his experience of resettlement from that of Lady Middleton; by the end of the novel, his situation is "more than commonly joyful," and he is "brought from misery to happiness" upon becoming engaged to Elinor and starting his career (274). Marked by "constant communication between Barton and

Delaford," the image of domesticity at the conclusion is indeed one of perpetual movement and activity (289): just as Edward begins his occupation as a member of the clergy, so too does Elinor travel frequently between Delaford and Barton, for her marriage "divides her as little from her family as could well be contrived" (287). Significantly, this efflorescence of domestic and professional activity is not only confined to Edward and Elinor but also includes Marianne and Colonel Brandon. Although she resolves earlier to "remain for ever with her mother...finding her only pleasures in retirement and study," Marianne's fate at the end of the novel is similar to that of Edward (288). Upon marrying Colonel Brandon, she finds herself "submitting to new attachments, entering on new duties, placed in a new home, a wife, the mistress of a family, and the patroness of a village" (288). The emphasis placed on the novelty and liveliness of Marianne's situation, as well as the attention paid to her various roles within and outside the home, enable her to emerge as a very active and productive character by the end of the novel; her occupations are treated very positively in the conclusion, for they are associated with happiness in marriage, devotion to family, and involvement in the community.

The image of domestic vitality that marks the conclusion of *Sense and Sensibility* demonstrates that, for Austen, settlement and activity are not mutually exclusive. In fact, Austen's ideal domestic setting is one that encompasses both of these concepts, for undirected geographic movement and idleness within the home have similar social and psychological consequences in this text. If the domestic situations of the "unemployed" characters that manifest these maladaptive behaviors are criticized in the novel, then so too are the traditional structures that support them. Through her endorsement of mobility and activity within the domestic sphere, Austen offers a critique of a more traditional and stagnant model of the home, a model reflected not only in the estates of the Middletons and Mrs. Ferrars but also in Norland Park.

Significantly, the text does not devote as much attention to the domestic and professional engagements of John and Fanny Dashwood at Norland Park as it does to some of the other characters; this notable absence likely attests to the lack of such pursuits. As further evidence of the stasis that characterizes the female Dashwoods' former residence, Austen establishes a dramatic contrast between the stagnation of Norland Park described from the beginning and the novelty of Elinor and Marianne's domestic arrangements at the conclusion. Aside from the transfer of the estate to Mr. John Dashwood, there appears to be no indication of change during this generation or the next; we expect that, through John and Fanny's rigid adherence to the laws of primogeniture and patriarchal hierarchy, the family of Dashwood will continue to be long "settled" in Sussex with the same idleness as in the past (3). In this sense, the literal movement between homes that frames the novel is adaptive, because it provides the opportunity to pursue a more fulfilling life within the home.[2] Edward and Marianne do not begin to engage in more stimulating activities until after they relocate, although as demonstrated through Lady Middleton's experience, relocation is not sufficient in itself to bring about such a positive transformation. The active resettlement of the Dashwoods and others can thus be interpreted in broader terms as an indication of progress in this text. Only by physically leaving their households and participating in professional and domestic activities do these characters escape the inertia of their former lives and contribute to society in meaningful ways.

[2] An acknowledgment of the adaptiveness of resettlement thus opposes Doody's focus on loss and female dispossession. While she characterizes Mrs. Dashwood and her daughters as "exiles" after their removal from Norland, her argument does not account for the resurgence of activity and productivity that accompanies their resettlement at the end of the novel (Doody xi).

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Millennial Constellations: Roth, Whitehead, and the Dangers of Narrative History

2011 Winner Leanna Boysko Essay Contest

Katherine Gaertner

Millennial Constellations:
Roth, Whitehead, and the Dangers of Narrative History

Eleven years ago, the arrival of the second millennium created a veritable windfall of subject material for contemporary novelists. Because of the significance accorded to the year 2000 in popular culture, authors of socially driven "millennial novels" took stabs at creating works that were both retrospective and forward-looking, texts that reflected with readers on the turbulent century that was coming to a close and highlighted the social issues that they would face in the new millennium. Insofar as cultural memory is marked by a series of symbolic images called "history," the task at hand for any millennial novel, it would seem, was to synthesize, comment on, and make sense of history as it approached the millennium point and paused to reflect. This windfall, however, was also a paradox. Synthesis and sense are in many ways incompatible with the philosophical framework underlying the last quarter of the twentieth century, and postmodernism had forced authors writing in and around the year 2000 to think in a way that questioned both the connections between historical symbols and the very imposition of objective time in units such as years, centuries, and millennia. In writing *The Intuitionist* and *The Plot Against America*, both Colson Whitehead and Philip Roth confront the paradox of representing the millennium in an age that rejects narrative history by presenting speculative fictions that are, more than anything else, a look back into the reasons why any causal history that purports to be objective ought to be questioned.

One can glean simply by reading the back-cover excerpts of both Whitehead's novel and Roth's that both novelists are inventors of not only narrative but context; both *The Intuitionist* and *The Plot Against America* take place in worlds where political history as we know it has been re-conceptualized into speculative fiction that follows the course of counterfactual histories. In Whitehead's presumably American, presumably New York City society, political and social mechanisms are governed by a fictional elevator inspectors' guild; in Roth's definitively American, semi-autobiographical social context, political history follows an alternate plot, with Charles Lindbergh elected president in 1940 instead of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

But in spite of these obvious differences in what could be referred to as "historical context," certain cultural objects that the readers of Whitehead and Roth view as conventional markers of American history remain the same. Because of the political primacy accorded to everything involving elevators in Whitehead's fictional world, the elevator manufacturer Arbo seems to possess a cultural and historical weight that no real-life elevator brand carries. The cultural symbols with which that significance is translated into popular culture, however, are the same as those that carried the significance of automotive brands in the twentieth century. Whitehead writes, "Lila Mae remembers from an Institute class on elevator marketing that Arbo spent millions promoting the Smooth-Glide in the trades and at conventions. They were the first to understand the dark powers of the bikini. On a revolving platform festooned with red, white and blue streamers, slender fingers fan the air, summoning the contractors hither" (4). Invented in 1946, the bikini is a culturally and historically symbolic object for many twentieth-century Americans: it represents a movement in fashion that women allowed more freedom of movement to accompany advancing amounts of political and economic freedom, it symbolizes

increasing levels of both sexual openness and sexual objectification in American society, and, through its namesake—Bikini Atoll, where the first atomic bomb was tested—it puts both of these factors in dialogue with a broader sense of the beginnings of the Cold War. By writing an object conventionally viewed as historically significant into the plot of a novel whose level of adherence to American history is often ambiguous, Whitehead suggests that the causal continuity we often wish to see between and within cultural and political senses of history is flawed.

Roth, too, exposes flaws in the notion of causal history, holding certain prominent markers of conventional history constant despite his invention of the Lindbergh presidency. In spite of the intrusion of fictional bodies like the German-American Bund and the Office of American Absorption, many cultural monikers remain the same: large crowds still gather for speakers at Madison Square Garden (38); the *New York Times* and the *Boston Herald* are still disseminators of the news (261, 263); Philip is treated at the Beth Israel hospital (233); investigations still take place through the FBI (170). And the Lindbergh presidency makes no difference in certain prominent historical happenings: the Cardinals still play the Yankees in the novel's 1942 World Series and perform the same in Game 5 as is written in history books; the elder Philip who narrates the story recalls the assassination of presidential candidate Bobby Kennedy as it took place in recorded history: "New York's Democratic senator … fatally shot in the head after winning his party's California primary on Tuesday, June 4, 1968" (272). It would seem that Roth, like Whitehead, is purposely creating a disjointed sense of history—an uneasiness that leads the American reader to question the validity of the connective causalities taught in textbook American history.

The critique of narrative history in both of these novels is more than a statement about the postmodern faultiness of epistemological frameworks, however. By presenting societies that contain some degree of fascist politics, both Roth's novel and Whitehead's hearken back to the ultimate forms of racism and bigotry exposed in the twentieth century—in particular, and especially in Roth, the events of the Holocaust. In *The Plot Against America,* the Lindbergh presidency leads to Nazi-influenced attempts at creating a homogenous culture and a resultant amplification of anti-Semitism. And in *The Intuitionist*, the practices of the Elevator Inspectors' Guild, in spite of its minor efforts at racial integration, evoke certain elements of a fascist government: nepotism, strict uniforms and notions of prestige, the concentration of power in unitary leadership, bias against minorities and minority perspectives.

History within these fictional proto-fascisms is viewed as objective and contains a singular aim of progress. The vision of the future taught at the Institute for Vertical Transport encourages a Lila Mae "caught up in linearity" to write an answer on an exam that "[envisions] a future cooperative and patentless"—a conceptualization that evokes the fascist aim of a classless and property-less society (98). The elevator itself is a metaphor for a historical point of view by which society ascends toward a unitary aim in movement along a singular track, and those within the Guild are obsessed with this goal. And in Roth's novel, the Lindbergh presidency is characterized by a rhetorical vision of social progress within a normal sphere:

> Lindbergh already the record-breaking master of long-distance flight, could knowledgeably lead his countrymen into the unknown of the aeronautical future while assuring them, by his strait-laced, old-fashioned demeanor that modern engineering achievements need not erode the values of the past … what Charles A. Lindbergh represented was normalcy raised to heroic proportions, a decent man with an honest face and an undistinguished voice who had resoundingly demonstrated to the entire planet the courage to take charge and the fortitude to shape history … (53).

In conveying social preferences as uniformly oriented toward an objective of historical "progress," the rhetoric of these fictional governments is necessarily antithetical to a belief in social pluralism.

The experiences of bigotry faced by both Lila Mae and the fictional Philip Roth convey the dangers posed to minorities by a majority belief in objective historical causality. Against the backdrop of such prejudices, we see in both novels an argument for a subjective view of history. In *The Intuitionist,* Lila Mae finds herself examining a government mural in the lobby of the Fanny Briggs Building—a building that is, in efforts to promote social integration, named after a black heroine—and studying the subjective orientation of its history:

> It started out jauntily enough to Lila Mae's left. Cheerless Indians holding up a deerskin in front of a fire. The original tenants, sure. A galleon negotiating the tricky channels around the island. Two beaming Indians trading beads to a gang of white men—the infamous sale of the Island. Big moment, have to include that, the first of many dubious transactions in the city's history ... The mural jumped over to the Revolution then, she noticed, skipped over a lot of stuff. The painter seemed to be making it up as he went along, like the men who shaped the city. The Revolution scene was a nice setpiece—the colonists pulling down the statue of King George III. They melted it down for ammunition, if she remembers correctly. It's always nice when a good mob comes together. The painting ended there ... Judging from the amount of wall space that remained to Lila Mae's right, the mural would have to get even more brief in its chronicle of the city's greatest hits. Either the painter had misjudged how much space he had or the intervening years weren't that compelling to him. Just the broad strokes, please. (48)

Lila Mae's examination of the painting demonstrates both the subjective relationships between historical images and the problematic nature of attempts to merely incorporate minority stories ("beaming Indians trading beads to a gang of white men") into the accepted majority narrative of history, regardless of whether it listens to their voices. Implicitly, this suggests that no mural, textbook or volume of newspapers can represent an objective trajectory of historical images.

In *The Plot Against America,* Roth makes a similar implicit endorsement of a multiplicity of historical viewpoints through Sandy Roth's first-place award in a poster contest

for the commemoration of Arbor Day 1940. Sandy has complete agency over the content of the poster he enters, and his design contains two white children and a black child planting a tree. This decision "provide[s] the poster with a social content that implied a theme by no means common in 1940, not in poster art or anywhere else either, and that for reasons of 'taste' might even have proved unacceptable to the judges" (23). Sandy's award in the contest earns his text a place in the public sphere and in cultural memory, suggesting the potential for a world in which the published texts through which we understand and absorb history have many authors, where history comes from a multiplicity of subjective viewpoints, and where the concept of "normalcy" is subject to continuous adjustment and evaluation.

Both of these scenes demonstrate that history is subjective from the viewpoints of both he who writes it and he who reads it, and the underlying theories they project echo the philosophy of the 20th century German-Jewish intellectual Walter Benjamin, who wrote,

> It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, an image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural … Only dialectical images are genuinely historical. (463)

In Benjamin's view, each specific, subjective present moment renders legible a specific, subjective moment in the past. Time as we would normally measure it is unimportant and causal order is thus irrelevant; Benjamin's view of historical constellation presents a vision of "historical time" as the natural distance between past and present images that combine to form history, influenced by the subjective roles of memory, experience and expectation.

The echoes of Benjamin's view of history in Roth and Whitehead tie together the implications of postmodern epistemological uncertainty and the allusions to fascism in both novels. Benjamin's work—much of which was written while on the run from the Nazis in late

1930s Europe—is groundbreaking in its rejection of Hegelian or historicist political thought, the historical belief that undergirded the fascist notions of "progress" at play both in the real political universe of the 20th century and within the fictional worlds of the novels. Benjamin found the aim of social progress homogenizing; instead of an ultimate political goal, he endorsed ideas of actualization—the reach of full human agency through bursts of revolution or cultural transformation. And though he wrote long before the term "postmodernism" was officially coined, his writings manifested a heavy influence on Derrida's 1970s ideas of deconstruction, from which many literary critics say postmodernism took its course.

The postmodern legacy that Roth and Whitehead bring with them as millennial authors of literature is thus purposefully grounded in their very subject matter. Were they to subject the millennium to a narrative historical viewpoint, as is the temptation in popular culture, these authors would run the risk of excluding voices and prohibiting the understandings created by a multiplicity of viewpoints. Instead, both Roth and Whitehead eschew the problem of narrative representation by writing fiction of a world whose historical context is itself fictional, forcing their readers to project the events of these worlds onto their own situations—and in turn, to question the role of myths of cause and effect in their own actions and cultural memories.

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"Something Happened": Samuel Beckett, Flann O'Brien, Late Modernism

2011 1st Place Winner
Cornelison English Essay Contest

Katherine Henderson

Submission for the Cornelison English Graduate Prize

Academic Year 2010-2011

"Something Happened": Samuel Beckett, Flann O'Brien, Late Modernism

I. The Beginning of Endings

Literary modernism, in most accounts, rises around the turn of the century to an apex in 1922, to be followed by the Auden Generation and the late careers of the high modernists. What comes next, according to a standard chronological narrative, would be postmodernism, a period defined by experimental authors and their "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard xxiv), representations of fragmented subjectivity (Jameson 372), and "historiographic meta-fictions" (Hutcheon 5). Only at the end of the twentieth century do mid-century texts from aging high modernists, more obscure authors, or authors who previously were classed as "postmodernists" garner substantial attention under the auspices of a new categorical term: "late modernism." Variously conceived of as a sort of bridge between two other accepted periods of literary production and as its own independent period, late modernism arrives on the critical scene at a moment in which postmodernism is being questioned as either being over or as having perhaps never begun.[1] However, the opening of Fredric Jameson's seminal text, *Postmodernism* (1991), observes that, "The last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism, in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that" (1), precisely, albeit preemptively, cataloguing the studies of late modernism that

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[1] Jed Esty, under discussion in this essay, is one of the critics who seems, at least in *A Shrinking Island*, not to fully believe in postmodernism. He uses this period's problematic existence to justify his own project, writing (in an endnote): "[T]he concept of postmodernism as a period/style applies better to the visual arts than to literature and better to other cultures than to England. With the exception of some obliging metafictions (e.g., by John Fowles, Jeanette Winterson, or Julian Barnes), it remains difficult to generate a strong account of English literary postmodernism" (Esty 228). While he obviously leaves out many British authors who surely fit better into a conventional understanding of "postmodernism" than any other (e.g. J. G. Ballard, Martin Amis, Doris Lessing, David Mitchell, B. S. Johnson, and Jonathan Coe, to name a few) his point is well taken that this is a problematic field, and one whose existence has been under critical debate for quite some time.

would crop up over the next two decades. Late modernist studies first appears in the late nineties, yet turn critical attention toward the literature of the mid-twentieth century, fixating upon endings, decline, and diminution and returning to the last moments of modernism before a full postmodern fragmentation ensued. Their concerns with futurity reflect a futurity that has, in some sense, already happened, mimicking the sense of futurity that is present, as I will argue, in the literature of late modern texts themselves.

The category of "late modernism" is thus itself a postmodern invention, subject to the particular anxieties and characteristics of postmodernity. A uniquely reflexive period, postmodernism is commonly understood to be engaged in the attempt to historicize its own present, resulting in a disconnect from history itself. The beginning of this confusion crops up in two novels composed in the interwar period, Samuel Beckett's *Murphy* (1938) and Flann O'Brien's[2] *The Third Policeman* (1967), in the peculiar relationship the protagonists of these novels have to the passage of time and the order of events. Yet in my reading, rather than these novels constituting postmodernist texts, even of the earliest varieties, they are definitively late modernist in that they conceive of themselves as being post-modern but not yet postmodern; in other words, regardless of whether or not Beckett or O'Brien can be said to "become" postmodernists with their later work, the two novels in question are uniquely situated as representative late modernist texts in that they embody an anxiety of interstitiality. They describe not simply a sense of being after something, but also of being before something—something new, but something that has also already occurred. In the first two sections of this paper, I will read these two novels as late modernist texts in this sense and in the senses of the

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[2] For simplicity's sake, I will consistently refer to the author of *The Third Policeman* by the pseudonym under which that novel was published, Flann O'Brien, though many critics (some of which will be cited here) either refer to him by another pseudonym (Myles na gCopaleen) or by his given name (Brian O'Nolan).

term provided in the three most important critical studies defining "late modernism" as a period—Tyrus Miller's *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (1999), Jed Esty's *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (2004) and Marina MacKay's *Modernism and World War II* (2007). The final section of the paper will examine how the authors' shared nationality and youth have (largely) excluded them from prior discussion of late modernism, and what their inclusion reveals about this period as such.[3] Ultimately, I want to argue that these two novels, despite being problematic for categorization, figure not just as additional or peripheral late modernist texts, but that they, in some ways, exist as crucial examples of late modernism—not in the sense of influence on other late modernists, but in terms of being especially representative of the major concerns of this period as a separate one from both modernism and postmodernism.

These novels are particularly interesting because they arise out of both authors' coming of age as writers. Rather than the late texts of writers who are normally considered modernists—e.g. Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1941), T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1943)[4], or Wyndham Lewis's *Self-Condemned* (1954)—these are only both authors' second novel (composed, though not necessarily published) and the precursors to much longer careers of writing. Their chronological and authorial youth complicates existing accounts of late modernism, which figure it as connected to a profoundly personal sense of decline, diminution, and loss. Moreover, their status as Irish writers participating in a cosmopolitan but increasingly English tradition problematizes versions of late modernism such as Esty's and Mackay's which draw attention,

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[3] Miller has an entire chapter on Beckett in which he does explicitly discuss *Murphy*, but he does so with a particular interest in humor and "riant spaciousness," issues which will play a minimal role in my paper, if they are present at all (181). Otherwise, neither Esty nor MacKay account for Beckett, and none of the three of these scholars discuss O'Brien at all.

[4] This date obviously does not reflect the prior publication dates of the four poems comprising *Four Quartets*, which range from 1936-1942.

respectively, to an "anthropological turn" (Esty 2) and a burgeoning national consciousness among the English (MacKay 2). As all-too-recent colonials, Beckett and O'Brien's relationships to the "shrinking island" of England are necessarily fraught in ways that reveal more about this transitional period between Empire and nation than previously accounted for. While not disagreeing with the basic theses of accounts like Miller's, Esty's, and MacKay's, this paper will attempt to shift the late modernist focus to the writing of these young, nationally distanced authors, rather than aging, culturally central writers, in pursuit of a more oblique view of what constitutes the period now understood as late modernism.

II. Tense Shifts

Both Beckett and O'Brien raise numerous difficulties for period, aesthetic, generic, and linguistic classifications. There is, of course, a massive inequality in critical attention toward these two, with Beckett having had somewhere on the order of thirty times more critical studies published on his work than O'Brien[5]; yet the pair of novels in question, in being so closely contemporaneous, similarly represent anxieties that contribute significantly to the authors' shared periodicity problems. Flann O'Brien scholars have almost unanimously claimed him as a postmodernist—Keith Booker's title *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-Modernist* explicitly suggests this classification, as does Brian McHale's repeated use of *The Third Policeman* as an exemplary "postmodernist fiction" in his monograph of the same name (65 and *passim*). However, McHale himself influentially goes on to develop his parameters for postmodernism in a more recent article, "1966 Nervous Breakdown; or, When Did

[5] This number is based on a simple MLA Bibliography Online search (on November 22, 2010) of each of the respective author's names, with no restrictions for search parameters. There are, obviously, some methodological problems with this kind of statistic, in that it does not control for factors like studies that include both authors, etc. However, the numbers this simple search reveals—4,821 hits for Beckett and 158 for O'Brien—give a fairly representative sense of the disparity in critical attention toward them.

Postmodernism Begin?" in which he argues for postmodernism's origination in 1966 (400). Though McHale does not acknowledge the year for this reason, 1966 also happens to be the year in which Flann O'Brien died; many of O'Brien's works, including *The Third Policeman*, were not published until a year later, 1967, situating them within the purview of postmodernism in the sense of publication date, though certainly not in terms of composition. This raises the question of how it is a writer could be participating in a literary period that has not yet begun, or conversely, how he could participate in it—and according to Joshua Esty "almost" be read as writing manifestoes for it—post-humously ("Post-Post" 25). Likewise, debate continues to this day about where and when Beckett fits into literary history. Before Tyrus Miller labeled him a late modernist[6], Hugh Kenner called him "the Last Modernist," a moniker Anthony Cronin would use as the title for his Beckett biography published a decade later (Kenner 97). But even before Kenner's classification of "modernist," David Lodge wrote that, "Samuel Beckett [...] has a strong claim to be considered the first important postmodernist writer" (221), and earlier still (and more apropos of a discussion of these particular novels), Ihab Hassan responds to the self-addressed question, "[W]here will we arbitrarily say Postmodernism begins?" with the interrogative response, "With [...] Beckett's *Murphy* (1938)?" (44). I would like to suggest that the confusion of categorization for both of these authors, whether fully played out in critical dialogue (as in Beckett scholarship) or not (as in the case of O'Brien), is due to both of these writers being most appropriately classed as neither modern nor postmodern, but instead, as late modernists, in a sense closest to Miller's, Esty's, and MacKay's use of the term—as writers of a

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[6] Tyrus Miller was not technically the first to label Beckett a "late modernist." Others, like H. Porter Abbott, had done so earlier, but they had done this by locating him precisely *as* a modernist in the vein of High Modernism, e.g. "I want to argue ... that the deconstructive Beckett is, in his bones, a modernist Beckett. I am tempted to use the label John Fletcher almost used for Beckett: postmodern modernist. But late modernist is better; it indicates where Beckett's center of gravity can be found. Indeed, if I am not mistaken, a center of gravity is something a modernist has" (Abbott 74). Thus, Miller was the first to use the label "late modernist" with reference to Beckett operating with a sense of the term quite separate from one as a "modernist" proper.

period that, while perhaps sharing some characteristics with those that immediately precede and follow it, is set apart from these bookending eras by different literary characteristics and concerns which are common within this interstice and give it something of a coherence as a period (albeit arguably a micro-period) in its own right.

Exemplary among the attributes that identify these particular authors as late modernists is the manner in which they memorialize the First World War. Scholarly conversations about modernism necessarily revolve around this conflict as a defining event for the literary and cultural artifacts that emerge in its wake. These studies seem to loosely organize themselves on either side of a dichotomy: the first half, represented by cultural critics like Jay Winter, argues for modernism's continuity with the past and repeated returns thereto; the second, typified by work such as Vincent Sherry's, argues for modernism's radical rupture with the past, leaving the moment in a perceived "now-time" of internal conflict: "modernity against itself" (16). On both sides, it is the Great War that either enforces continuity or creates rupture, and the literary and cultural impact of this conflict well after the Armistice, certainly into the late interwar period, has long been accepted as a critical commonplace. Accordingly, in *Murphy* and *The Third Policeman*, the importance of the Great War identified by the aforementioned critics (and others) powerfully endures: there are repeated returns to the past, especially to the trauma of WWI, and literature continues to navigate the internal divisiveness of the language of the present. Yet what sets Beckett and O'Brien's novels apart as late modernist, rather than merely modernist, is their additional concern, related to but distinct from the trauma of the Great War—a concern for the future[7], represented both in the persistence of internally conflicted language beyond the British

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[7] The "future" was obviously a concern for avant-garde literature previous to and contemporaneous with the category of high modernism and Great War writing. Miller begins to identify a relationship between the avant-garde and late modernism's thoughts about the future, writing, "A similar thought animates both artists [Wyndham Lewis

Liberal Party's loss of power to Labour and the decline of its wartime discourse, and, even more powerfully, under the specter of another war on the horizon.

Most Beckett or O'Brien criticism, even the works that label them modernists, excludes them from a discussion of the Great War and of High Modernism. The critical discourse about these authors pertaining to war overwhelmingly concerns the Second World War, the time in which Beckett, famously and literally, was forced underground and in which O'Brien began his notorious (and notoriously "neutral") wartime journalism for *Cruiskeen Lawn*.[8] Moreover, these authors' frequent treatment under the auspices of their shared national identification as Irish has helped exclude them from sustained inquiry with regard to either World War—because of greater critical attention to inter-Irish conflict in terms of the teens and twenties, and to issues of neutrality in terms of the thirties and forties.[9] But while their respective ages during the first part of the century naturally has prevented an examination of their work in light of Great War era writing, the First World War certainly affected these writers and their texts, informing the way they approached the "great war" of their own adult lives. Beckett and O'Brien found themselves, at the beginning of their illustrious writing careers, poised in a moment of duality, overwhelmed by both past and future: while not old enough to have participated in the first war, these authors knew well of its horror; and though the massive-scale European conflict had not

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and Richard Tipping], that the avant-garde has failed—that it has never ceased to fail—to deliver on its historical promise to 'materialize' an unprecedented future in prophetic works of art" (3). Yet the sense of futurity I am identifying in these late modernist works is distinct from, though related to, this one. Beckett and O'Brien are not trying to bring about a future in these novels—if anything, they fear the violence the future holds. While an avant-garde "future," in the sense of a desire to be "modern" or cutting-edge, is a desire somewhat operative in these novels, the sense of futurity I am using is one that sees the future as catastrophic, rather than celebratory.

[8] Clair Wills gives a pithy sense of O'Brien's problematic relationship to Irish neutrality in saying that, in his journalism, O'Brien is "supportive of neutrality yet ferociously contemptuous of the new political and cultural consensus" (13). In addition to mirroring my argument about O'Brien being suspended between two opposing ideologies or forces, this juxtaposition gives a sense (which will become more important in the final section of this paper) of how critically problematic it is to categorize him as an Irish writer *simply* working in a nationalist vein, despite his repeated, vehement attacks on Irish anglophiles.

[9] There is certainly much to say about the participation of Irish people and artists in reference to both the First and Second World War, but this, unfortunately, falls outside the scope of this project.

yet returned, they could see warning signs of a new danger's approach.

Thus, as many scholars of modernism, like Winter, tell us, past traumas and traditions continue to be held close; but in *Murphy* and *The Third Policeman,* the memorializing of WWI becomes, instead of a way of grieving over the war that has already happened, a way to talk about something that is *about* to happen. Similarly, the novels ultimately do not contradict Sherry's argument for a moment in which modernity finds itself torn in two at the level of language. But Beckett and O'Brien give this internal division a new layer of political meaning that has less to do with the "reason-seeming nonsense [that] describes accurately the linguistic style of the Liberal war" and more to do with *un*reasonable-seeming nonsense and the deep-seated ambivalence regarding how one should react to the threat of "nonsensical" violence renewed (Sherry 92). Both authors demonstrate awareness of mounting international unease in their novels by figuring conflict as the future site of objects and codes powerfully associated with WWI. Of course, neither was prescient of the full horrors of the Second World War; yet *Murphy* and *The Third Policeman* articulate a particular anxiety about the future, best articulated by Beckett in a 1936 letter, in which he remarks, "They *must* fight soon (or burst)" (Knowson 242, original italics). Beckett and O'Brien locate trauma—especially that of war—not in the past but in the future. Similarly, they use the language of code and rationality associated with wartime language and high modernists, such as T. S. Eliot and James Joyce, not simply to situate themselves in a tradition of literature in English, or to express an underlying irrationality to supposedly rational discourse, but to convey an anxiety about the very possibility of a rational language about the future in the face of a return of the Great War's violence. Tyrus Miller characterizes the "central paradox of late modernist literature in English" as being "its apparent admixture of decadent and forward-looking elements and its consequent lack of a clearly defined

place in the dominant frameworks of twentieth-century criticism" (7). This description of a Janus-faced literature, backward- and forward-looking, absolutely applies to both *Murphy* and *The Third Policeman*, in that not only are they unable to be adequately fixed in a literary category, but that their confusing transpositions of past and future reflect a real fear of history repeating itself, of being bound to a past from which they are distant, but which is also always about to happen to them, for them, for the first time.

Beckett most noticeably references the legacy of the violence in this future-past mode by setting *Murphy* in large part in a mental institution based on the famous London mental asylum, Bethlam Royal Hospital, a.k.a. Bedlam. This real-world institution had, in the1930s, relocated and in doing so had had its original grounds devoted to the housing of the Imperial War Museum.[10] In referencing the asylum that had so recently moved to accommodate this memorial to the First World War, Beckett draws on a history of the Great War itself. He recreates a spatial idiosyncrasy of the real, new site of Bedlam in his description of the fictional Magdalen Mental Mercyseat: "[It] lay a little way out of town, ideally situated in its own grounds on the boundary of two counties. In order to die in one sherrifalty rather than in the other some patients had merely to move up, or be moved up, a little in the bed" (95). As Beckett's biographer, James Knowlson points out, "One part of the real hospital ... really does lie in Surrey, while one ward is situated in Kent" (198). In pointing out this spatial oddity, Beckett draws attention to the

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[10] Jay Winter points out, "In Britain, an officially sponsored Imperial War Museum was formed in 1917, ironically enough on the grounds of the former 'Bedlam' lunatic asylum" (Winter 80). This is technically true, but the date is somewhat misleading. The Imperial War Museum had existed since 1917, but the original grounds of Bedlam were not vacated until 1930 and did not officially open as the new home of the Imperial War Museum until July 7, 1936, at which time *Murphy* was already being sent out to publishers. However, moving the museum to the former site of the asylum had been discussed years earlier; the possibility appears in the London *Times* in November 1930, in an article quoting a Home Office official as stating, "Provisional arrangements have already been made" ("Imperial War Museum"). The decision was finalized only a month later, announced in the *Times* on December 19, though the transfer of materials and conversion of the building were delayed by the economic slump plaguing much of the western world ("Transfer").

minorness of the alterations that occur between a situation on one or the other side of a border: it is literally a matter of inches. The language depicting patients being moved scarcely at all, and for the explicit purpose of death, especially at this site that cannot help but call to mind a war memorial, recalls the stasis of the Great War, its "inmates" moving—and dying—over a matter of inches. Winter claims that "war memorials, with their material representation of names and losses, are there to help in the necessary art of forgetting," of containing a loss to a certain space and thus putting it aside (115). But Beckett references the ameliorative site of mourning not just as an attempt to assuage cultural trauma through a reference to "tradition" as it is embodied in a building, but also as a challenge to the attempted recuperation contained therein. The characters cannot forget the site of trauma; instead, Murphy gets a job there in order to start his family with Celia, to secure his *future* for the two of them. Beckett shifts the site of mourning into a site in which—not out of which—his characters must live and build their futures.

Similarly, while O'Brien does not directly figure Bedlam as an actual or metaphorical site, *The Third Policeman* does refer the reader to the Imperial War Museum. An early footnote about the fictional scholar de Selby provides the only direct mention of the war: "On ne saura jamais jusqu'à quell point de Selby fut cause de la Grande Guerre" (246).[11] In this instance, the Great War provides a possible explanation for de Selby's idiosyncrasies and nothing more. But the conflict, only mentioned off-hand in a footnoted anecdote, gradually takes over the story. What begins with minor details about the narrator "embark[ing] upon the task of learning French and German thoroughly in order to read the works of other commentators [on de Selby] in those languages" culminates in international violence (227). Infuriated by the supposed defamation of de Selby, a fellow scholar named Hatchjaw "was convinced that the name 'du Garbandier' was

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[11] My own loose translation: "We will never know to what extent de Selby was [the way he was] because of the Great War."

merely a pseudonym adopted for his own ends by the shadowy Kraus," yet another scholar, one with a name obviously reminiscent of the moniker given to German soldiers in WWI, "Kraut" (374). Hatchjaw sets out for vengeance, bringing along an expansive inventory of weapons, the appropriate location of which is made clear: "Probably no private traveler has ever gone abroad accompanied by a more formidable armoury and nowhere outside a museum has there been assembled a more varied or deadly collection of lethal engines" (376). Such an arsenal, this note implies, belongs not in Hatchjaw's trunk but in a war museum exhibit. And while this particular mini-narrative within the novel is rendered in the past tense, the weapons' departure from their proper locale to one "outside a museum" suggests a concern about rearmament and preparation for war.[12] As this story builds toward its frustrated conclusion, the footnotes that contain it expand: the story of Hatchjaw's murderous journey appears in the last and longest footnote, stretching over three full pages and onto a fourth (373-376). The primary narrative finds itself squeezed off the page, displaced by the allegorical reference to a long, ultimately pointless academic war between an Englishman and a German, by way of a Frenchman. The Great War, then, contained by the footnoted narrative, pushes back the boundaries of its delimiting form.[13]

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[12] In fact, at the time of *The Third Policeman*'s composition, the actual Imperial War Museum had already begun preparing for the return of war, as far back as 1933, according to Terry Charman, senior historian of the museum. He writes, "The Sudeten crisis of 1938 ... had provided the IWM with a dress rehearsal for the 'real thing' with, in one emergency measure, an assistant and seven attendants, equipped with German steel helmets, gas rattles, picks and shovels, acting as an air raid patrol" (Charman 102-3). Flann O'Brien's relocation of weaponry out of the preservative museum and back into a field of battle reflects an actual emergency plan, still yet to be enacted at the time of the novel's completion, but one that was being rehearsed for an event that seemed increasingly probable.

[13] Alternatively, this push back against delimitation reflects a sense of confinement Wills identifies in *The Third Policeman* as a whole as related to Ireland's geographical sense of itself in the late 1930s: "O'Brien's novel was completed in January 1940. It would be wrong to interpret it as a portrait of the stagnation caused by the war. Nonetheless the novel's surreal take on rural Ireland ... drives home the feeling of confinement. The afterlife of the central character ... has odd similarities with the 'real' world of Ireland in mid-century. The rural community, populated only by policemen and ageing bachelors, and cut off from commerce with the world outside, runs according to its own arcane laws. ... a portrait of a culture neither one thing nor the other, neither sovereign and independent nor imperial dominion" (265). The sense of temporality I address is transformed from the sensibility in Wills's argument of confinement in a space, but the manifestation of being "neither one thing nor the other" is certainly apropos of a discussion of interstitiality and belatedness.

The paragraph breaks after the list of munitions, and five possible futures for Hatchjaw, none of which are mutually exclusive, are presented in a numbered list, leaving the reader in a confused state of anticipation. One cannot determine what the future holds (or held) for a character that has become one of the most bellicose in the novel, leaving the reader waiting for the next installment of his story to arrive.

In both novels, the attempts to contain the Great War in a museum fails as more references to it leak into the primary narratives, exploding, in both cases, in a conflagration. Miller attributes this quality as a particularly late modernist one, writing, "[L]ate modernist works dramatized the comic fragility of modernist attempts to contain contingency and violence aesthetically, through literary form" (20), and likewise, Beckett and O'Brien demonstrate that, at the level of syntax, representations of WWI cannot be restricted to the past but must continually shift into the future time of the narrative. Before Murphy kills himself by filling his garret with gas while a flame is lit, he wonders, "What was the etymology of gas? … Could it be the same words as chaos? Hardly. Chaos was a yawn. But then cretin was Christian. Chaos would do, it might not be right but it was pleasant, for him henceforward gas would be chaos, and chaos gas" (Beckett 106). In fact, "gas" does come from "chaos," etymologically. But in the narrative, the sequence is reversed: the chaos of the explosion and the muddle of identifying Murphy's body is a result of the gas in the garret. More than calling up memories of the exploded bodies that proliferated in the Great War and the notorious use of gas in that conflict, these thoughts move from an attempt to trace a linear genealogy—to situate a current word in reference to its past—to a dismissal of historical relevance. Murphy decides that even if "chaos" is not the origin of "gas," he will use the two interchangeably, as indeed he later does: "The gas went on in the w.c., excellent gas, superfine chaos" (151). This movement collapses the past into the present, but

does not stop at the "now-time" of the novel, as one might expect. Rather, this sentence is followed by the statement, "Soon his body was quiet" (151). The sudden move to "Soon" shifts the focus from the present to the future, to what is *about* to happen to Murphy. The use of a past-tense verb, "was," with the "soon" here only further confuses the sense of the past with the future, especially when the reader recalls that this sentence is a repetition of one that came earlier, "Soon his body *would be* quiet" (8, my italics). The move of the earlier future tense verb into a past tense one should suggest the linear progression of time; but when the repletion of the sentence comes, Murphy has not yet died. The absence of the explosion in the narrative creates another temporal disjunction with the past tense referring to an event that will happen "soon." Thus, Beckett's figuration of the Great War phenomena, chaotic gas and bodies rendered anonymous by explosion, shifts them from a location in that past trauma to an explosion that has not yet happened but which is, in the end, inevitable.

The casting of a past violent event into an oncoming future continues in *Murphy* after his death, when the protagonist's erstwhile friends arrive upon the scene to identify his corpse. Just as we do not receive a description of Murphy's actual death, neither do we get Murphy's body in any explicit description, even when we arrive at it belatedly. Beckett writes:

> "Death by burns," said the coroner, "perhaps I am expected to add, is a wholly unscientific condition. Burns always shocks, I beg your pardon, my dear Angus, always shock ... The same is true of scalds."
>
> "Sepsis does not arise," said Dr. Killiecrankie.
>
> "My physiology is rather rusty," said the coroner, "but no doubt it was not required."
>
> "We arrived too late for sepsis to arise," said Dr. Killiecrankie. "The shock was ample."

> "Then suppose we say severe shock following burns," said the coroner, "to be absolutely clear."
>
> "Yes," said Dr. Killiecrankie, "or severe shock following severe burrrns. I do not think that is too strong." (157)

In addition to the stress on the primacy of "shock" recalling shell-shock, the word "shock" here precedes the burns on Murphy's body for the reader: the ominous statement, "Soon his body was quiet" makes his impending death clear before it has occurred (157). The doctor and his coroner muddy the waters by dislocating when exactly it was that Murphy died and what from by moving from the statement "Burns always shock" to the statement "shock following burns." Both death and shock follow burns in the linear chronology of what happens to Murphy, but both precede burns at the level of syntax—the diagnoses, "Death by burns," "shock following burns"—as well as in the presentation of events. The reader receives the effects, the shock and the death, of the explosive event, but never gets the burning or the burned body in a description of the remains. Rather, Murphy's "charred buttocks" stand in as a synecdoche for precisely over what "The eyes of all, seventeen in all, strayed and mingled" (159). This failed description only draws attention to the unavailability of the body in its present state, as we are forced to wonder what has become of it, even as we are told, in reverse order, the cause of death. Beckett creates a preposterous situation in the truest sense of the word—hinderparts foremost, literally, ass-backwards—in that the events that happened first are given last, representing a past that returns at the end of the sentence. We are put in a position of expectation, waiting on the arrival of a plot point that has already past.

Like Murphy, O'Brien's narrator and his reader are thrust into an anticipatory state by the interrupted and prolonged description of his death. As in *Murphy*'s coroner's chronological

explanation, shock follows the burn of the explosion. In the chronology of *The Third Policeman*'s plot, the narrator triggers a bomb and dies early in the second chapter, an event that transports the narrative into its hellish new setting. Despite the narrator's admission, "I cannot hope to describe what it was but I had frightened me very much long before I had understood it even slightly," the language in that explosion persists in lengthy description (238). He goes on, "It was as if daylight had changed with unnatural suddenness, as if the temperature of the evening had altered greatly in an instant or as if the air had become twice as rare or dense as it had been in the winking of an eye" (238). This sentence contains three similes and yet remains entirely vague. The replacement of one simile with another by the use of the word "or" combined with the simple profusion of specific yet entirely unclear language has the effect of meaningless proliferation—though the sentence goes on, it does so without signifying anything, exemplifying what Bernard O'Donoghue calls the "extreme and unhelpful specificity" particular to Irish comic writing (34). The purpose, he claims, of such a tactic is "an attention to observed detail rather than … to an overall meaning which the detail is being used to serve" (O'Donoghue 34). The narrator's focus on what amounts to useless description undercuts the meaning one might attempt to read out of the scene; these details do not signify anything, and the reader is left in confusion as to what, if anything, actually happens. The fact of each of these similes being rendered in the pluperfect—"daylight had changed," "the temperature … had altered," and "the air had become"—pushes them even further into the past than the past-tense narrative perspective, but no matter how definitively "past" they are from the present moment of narration, the reader is still waiting for them to arrive, for them to explain what the "It" of "It was as if" actually is.

But the reader is left in this state of waiting, as the foregoing list of similes culminates in an even further destabilizing elaboration: "perhaps all of these and other things happened together for my senses were bewildered all at once and could give me no explanation" (238). This, combined with the previous comparisons describes an event that turns out to be crucial to the novel's plot; however, by its end, the sentence itself admits to "no explanation." Thomas Shea elaborates on this phenomenon in terms of the narrator's immature handling of language, saying, "The [narrator] attempts to settle himself and ease the anxiety of bewilderment by verbally placing the experience within the structures of language which previously presumed control" (121). This language, according to Shea, is the logic of linearity: "Put simply, he wants to stabilize his experience by shaping the events of his life according to the logic of cause and effect" (115). Yet due to his child-like ineptitude with language, this endeavor fails: "Reverting to the security of chronological order, he carefully arranges his fright 'long before' the onset of even slight understanding. But such a structure quickly collapses when he has to admit 'perhaps all of these and other things happened together'" (Shea 121-2). Words proliferate on the page, but the explosion does not yet happen for the reader; we register only a shift from the progression of a coherent plot into meaninglessness. The narrator blows up before the bomb goes off in the narrative, and the reader unwittingly registers the effects of the explosion before learning that it happened, both ignorant of and implicated in the hysteron proteron occurring in the novel.

III. Cracked Codes

Both novels' frequent shifts of past into future reflect an overwhelming concern with that which has yet to occur. The authors figure their protagonists as simultaneously attempting to

understand—and thus control—that future, as well as constantly having this understanding snatched away, leaving them once again caught between two distanced but oppressive forces—the trauma of the past and the terror of the future. Murphy procures his horoscope as a way of securing for himself a "future," and despite the horoscope's reliance upon history and tradition, Murphy does not use it to understand his past or even his present situation; rather, he keeps it as a talisman and manual for what to do in the future to ensure his "prospects" (13). The horoscope contains an introduction that ends with the label, "THE GOAT" (22), confusing its supposed purpose, dictating information about an individual, with one that effectively puts Murphy into a group based on his date of birth. Sun-sign astrology, the kind that uses this categorization, consists of twelve signs, of which "goat" is only one, but such a grouping minimizes Murphy's individuality and suggests his identification with a larger collective. This reflects a late modernist impulse that Esty identifies where he locates, in T. S. Eliot's later texts, "the roots of universalism in the collective life of a representative *people* rather than in the psychic contours of a representative *person*" (14). But more than just shifting from a representation of a single subject to a subject embodied or dispersed among a collective, the horoscope itself is late modernist[14] being almost entirely future-oriented: it mentions "a great desire to engage in some pursuit," a future "calamity" thrice, and future successes five times; the verbs "should" and "will" predominate (23-4). This is due, in part, to the nature of such a device, to foretell the future of an individual based on a past moment, that of his birth. But Murphy's particular concern over it is telling: "Many times he had taken it out to destroy it, lest he fell into the hands

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[14] The form of the horoscope itself underwent massive transformation in the late modern period. The practice of "genethlialogy" historically was reserved for major events in the life of a nation or regent. It was not until the 1930s that the very different practice, "sun-sign astrology"–what most people today think of as astrology—was popularized, in large part by R. H. Naylor, the first British "newspaper astrologer." According to *A History of Horoscopic Astrology*, "[Naylor] was asked in August 1930 to write an article for the London *Sunday Express* on the horoscope of the newly born Princess Margaret Rose. The article was so well received that the paper asked Naylor for more articles. The first of what was to become a weekly feature appeared on 5 October 1930" (Holden 197).

of the enemy. But his memory was so treacherous that he did not dare" (47-8). Neither the past moment of his birth and the (mis)fortune associated with that, nor his more recent acquisition of this chart are sufficient for Murphy's control over his future. His memory does not serve, and must continually refer to this writing for guidance. The language of an unknown "enemy" recalls an historic war sensibility, but its situation in a description of an object for foretelling the future locates that enemy not in the past but in the future. Ultimately, though Murphy attempts to abide by his star-chart to the letter, he still dies, and well before his "lucky year," 1990. He has, in receiving the horoscope, been promised not just a future, but a knowable one; yet he nonetheless blows himself up, demonstrating that what the future holds is not a controllable sequence of events legible from the present, but a vague catastrophe.

Just as Murphy's greatest error is not misreading his "diagram" but is assuming it was legible in the first place, the characters of *The Third Policeman*, as well as some of the critics thereof, perform a similar mistake in attempting to interpret that novel's own chart of "lever" and "beam" readings. The policemen have the daily task of taking measurements—of what, we never actually know. Whatever this chart measures, it is clear that the policemen believe sincerely in their measurement's prevention of calamity. The nature of that calamity is also indistinct, but the expressions with which it is discussed—"We were just in time," "it took our combined strengths," "in the nick of zero-hour," and "the great fall"—exemplify its proportions (370). Early on, the narrator gives a chart of these readings that he garners, "From a chance and momentary perusal of the policeman's notebook" (312). The chart gives a week's worth of numerals under various categories like "Pilot Readings," "Reading on Beam," and "Reading on Lever" (312); but without units of measurement attached to these numbers, the chart is

indecipherable.[15] The numerals are untethered, and they do not comment on the novel's progression so much as underscore the futility of attempts to predict and ward off future peril.

This aspect of the novel cannot be understood as modernist in light of descriptions of that period such as Vincent Sherry's. The nonsense that undergirds the supposedly rational measurements certainly does echo Sherry's statement about modernist writing: "A language of rationalistic stratagem has taken over the speech of public reason" (44). However, the language that Murphy and O'Brien's narrator deem rational does not ultimately even masquerade as such. These languages operate, instead, not just as reason-seeming nonsense, but as sets of bogus hermeneutics; while there is presumably a system of rules Suk follows in casting Murphy's nativity, the novel portrays the result of this process, the horoscope, to be absurd. It does not even sound rational, hence the comedic effect of Murphy taking it so seriously. Nor do the lever and beam readings actually make sense, despite the number of apparent rules that govern these procedures. This is not a matter, then, of Beckett and O'Brien, like Eliot and Pound, identifying the failure of Liberal discourse in rationalizing things that are irrational. Instead, Beckett and O'Brien amplify this tendency, irrationalizing linguistic rationality itself. Sherry writes:

> For the outlandish man ... recovery of the genuine turns on an art of the disingenuous, an instrumentality equally ingenious and mischievous. '[F]or an American,' [Eliot] writes to his mother on 3 July 1920, 'getting recognized in English letters is like breaking open a safe.' ... Opening this safe involves, not the detonations of Eliot's brief career at *Blast*,

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[15] Keith Hopper attempts to draw from this a postmodern, meta-fictional map of *The Third Policeman* itself, writing, "The seven sets of readings ... correspond to the seven chapters of the novel consumed at this point" (146). Accordingly, "Reading on Lever" corresponds to "reader awareness and participation," "Pilot Reading" to "the primacy of the author," and "Reading on Beam" to "the primacy of ... the text over the reader" (Hopper 145-6). Yet the narrator himself tells us, "For obvious reasons the figures themselves are fictitious" (O'Brien 312), and in chapter four, when we get our first mention of these figures, they do not correspond to line four of the chart we are later given, nor do they fit with Hopper's interpretation (271). Moreover, there is arguably nothing particularly postmodern about "mapping" the novel within its own space, so even if these numbers could be used in a reading like Hopper's, this would not fix the novel as postmodern.

> rather the handiwork of a cryptographer. Cracking the combination, breaking the code: Eliot keys his figure to those manipulations of English political and cultural idiom that will have unlocked this trove for him. The admission he gains to the inward keep of the English resource will have been won then by turns and counterturns with which this outsider pulls off the inside job. A language of access that is also a cipher, it spells itself out as the reason-seeming speech of British Liberalism at war ... He follows the code but only to break it, so to break in. (165)

In this context, the "code" under consideration is the English language and literary tradition, to which "provincials" like Eliot and Pound have more limited access than native Englishmen. The Irishmen Beckett and O'Brien clearly share in this struggle for admission into the "authenticity" of English discourse and resistance to the colonial label of "mimic." But the "self-awareness" to which Sherry points in the writing of Eliot and Pound, at the late date of *Murphy* and *The Third Policeman*, has taken on new resonance, beyond a relatively simple imperial/colonial power dynamic. Instead, Esty and MacKay identify a turn toward the national over the imperial in this period, a turn in which they both claim Eliot himself participated in his late modernist period. Esty discusses, "The relativization of England as one culture among many in the face of imperial contraction" (8), while MacKay calls for an accounting of, "this self-referential and historiographic late phase [of modernism]: its critical national consciousness, its scrutiny of the links between creative and economic privilege and its rehabilitation of the private life against abuses of collective power" (14). Beckett and O'Brien's novels operate in a similar vein to the one Sherry uses to characterize the modernists—their desire to "break in" to English discourse is certainly present; but both of these authors represent that which is being broken into as being already vacated of significance. The codes that could be cracked are empty ciphers, nonsense

encoding more nonsense, and the tension of trying to work both outside and inside a system arises under the new inflection of anticipation and forecasting, with an ambivalence about the future and one's ability to read it, as opposed to a sole concern with tradition, convention, and how to work one's way into it. This move does not imply a definitive rejection of writing like Eliot's, but rather, an amplification for the sake of elaborating the increased distance Beckett and O'Brien feel from the "reason-seeming nonsense" with which elder writers dealt.

Beckett implicitly takes a page from Eliot in the chess game Murphy plays with the schizophrenic, Mr. Endon, which particularly recalls the second section of *The Waste Land* (1922), "A Game of Chess."[16] This section attempts to situate his writing in a tradition of English literature that spans from Eliot's poem at least as far back as *The Tempest*. But Beckett's depiction of his game of chess in what amounts to a code both mimics and changes Eliot's similar move. Murphy and Mr. Endon's game is not described as any other piece of the narrative, but is set off from the prose by abbreviations and numerals. The system Beckett uses, known as "Descriptive Chess Notation," is highly dependent on the native language of the players, once again demonstrating a subtle shift toward a flattened sense of English as one language and culture among many (McCrary 14-5). But because of the specialized knowledge involved in this notation, anyone unfamiliar with the game of chess or with this particular system of signification would be unable to understand without lengthy study what events in the game it signifies, even if they were English-speakers. Furthermore, even a reader who knows English, the game of chess, and Descriptive Chess Notation, and who can thus follow the game from the abbreviations given, must still find the narration thereof elusive, as it is interrupted eighteen times by a series of endnotes which give further detailed descriptions of gameplay. For instance:

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[16] This is also the section in which "Lil's husband got demobbed," a specific reference to the Great War, which is interesting in light of the foregoing discussion of Beckett's repeated references to WWI in *Murphy* (l. 139).

"At this point Mr. Endon ... turned his King and Queen's Rook upside down, in which position they remained for the rest of the game" (147). In this way, even a knowledgeable reader moves through the game with many interruptions, having to flip a page ahead turn back. Conversely, readers without a knowledge of chess could simply skip over the notation of the game and read through the endnotes, which, despite being in uncomplicated English, refer to a notation they have already realized they cannot understand. In this, the joke is on the English-reading reader. While Murphy begins by playing chess by making a set of opening moves according to a logical strategy, Mr. Endon simply moves his pieces into geometrical patterns. Though he obeys the rules of the game, he does not adhere to its objective. In essence, this is form without content, abiding by an arbitrary system of rules with no rationale. But more than demonstrating, as Eliot does in Sherry's analysis, the illogic that undergirds the rationality of Liberal discourse, Beckett has already made the codes themselves, both Descriptive Chess Notation and the English language, unfamiliar by interrupting the former and emptying the latter of reference. The code is not reason-seeming nonsense, a case of reasoning that has gone "massive and disastrously wrong" (Sherry 16): it is simply nonsense, and it looks like it all along.[17] In taking up Eliot's modernism, Beckett dramatizes the paradox of being on both the outside and inside, of critiquing a code you are simultaneously trying to crack.

The Third Policeman's footnotes function in a similar way, though they do so for the duration of the entire novel, as opposed to being limited to a brief section. There is one story about de Selby that is presented partly in the primary narrative and partly in footnotes, with no

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[17] Chess is furthermore a war-game, a future-looking game of strategy and anticipation. Murphy, described at one point as a "rational being," attempts to intercept and decode Mr. Endon's strategy, to foretell his next set of moves (107). Kimberly Bohman-Kalaja, drawing a connection between game-playing and linguistic techniques, writes, "Murphy's goal in the game is dialogue with Endon ... [but] Murphy comes to realize that Endon is not playing at all, or if he is playing at all, it is solitaire" (127-9). There is no message to decipher in the notation, and no long-term thinking on Endon's part, which only serves to draw further attention to Murphy's own frustrated orientation toward the future.

apparent rationale for the split. Yet this anecdote does, in a way, match form and content, by presenting de Selby's "investigation of the nature of time and eternity by a system of mirrors" (276). Half of the story in the primary narrative, half in the footnote, the form of the anecdote, split into two non-identical but similar bodies matches the theory presented therein, which posits mirrors as a way of both returning to the past (the image in the mirror is fractionally younger than the one looking at it) and of ensuring immortality (with enough mirrors, the process could continue forever). Of course, this theory is illogical, but the image itself, "the familiar arrangement of parallel mirrors, each reflecting diminishing images of an interposed object indefinitely," (O'Brien 277) calls to mind "Gerontion" and the opening line of Sherry's book: "History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors/And issues" ("Gerontion" ll. 34-5). Sherry draws the connection between this line of Eliot's poem and the 1918 peace treaty being signed at Versailles, in the Hall of Mirrors. O'Brien, too, draws on Eliot in referring to the past, and he does so in a theory that ostensibly allows one to achieve immortality—infinite futurity. But this section's interruption by the footnote breaks down the connection we have drawn, makes the future inaccessible. The note which describes the manuscript detailing this theory ends with the sentence, "This manuscript cannot now be found," indicating the illegibility of the future de Selby's own "Hall of Mirrors" attempted to create (O'Brien 276). The theory is nonsense, and the contrived corridors of O'Brien's mirrors both looks and is ridiculous, in the spirit of all of *The Third Policeman*, which makes statements, in Carol Taaffe's analysis, about the nature of sense itself. She claims, "Nonsense writing stretches logic to its illogical ends, exposing the irrationality of rational thinking" (69). De Selby's theory takes a scientific fact and attempts to exactly duplicate it through mirrors, but he undermines his own logic by taking it to its greatest extreme in order to prove something either categorically true or false. This is not, as

Taaffe claims, an instance of "nonsense itself [acting as] logic run riot" (76). Instead, it is a fallacy, a non sequitur, an *elevatio ad absurdum*; there is no logic in this world's science, and to follow in the footsteps of an academic idol is represented as incredibly foolish.

These meaningless codes, most often presented in footnotes, are even more similar to the ones in *Murphy*'s chess game in their formal aspects. As in the chess game, the notes interrupt *The Third Policeman*'s narrative, and vice versa. Two stories are given, and the narrator's voice itself doubles as it tries to tell two things at once. The footnotes literally rise upon the page, interrupting and infiltrating the primary narrative to a greater and great degree. There is an internal struggle, over which the reader has the only agency. She must choose how to proceed into the future of her reading experience, whether not reading the footnotes at all, reading page by page (top to bottom and left to right) and foregoing logical ways to incorporate the two narratives, which are always already incorporating themselves into one another in inextricable ways, or pursuing any number of other options. Inserting de Selby, the narrator's "future" and his defunct academic idol, interrupts the narrative, forces the reader to break the code-breaking act to chase down references that refer to nothing, references that themselves do not make sense. The self-conscious sense of suspension—of a present disconnected from past and future, but obsessed with both—characteristic of these novels' late modernism manifests particularly clearly in the characters' continuance after death. Like the traumatic events that haunt them in their lifetimes, Murphy and O'Brien's narrator haunt the novels after their own explosive demises, unable to be fixed in the past, and found to be uneasily (and largely unsuccessfully) dictating the future—a state, for these authors, grounded in their national identities as Irish.

IV. Inter-ment

After Murphy's corpse is identified as definitively his, Dr. Killiecrankie produces a paper that dictates Murphy's wishes for the disposal of his remains (161). Being as his death was sudden and possibly unplanned, the presence of such a document is mysterious, as is the doctor's acquisition of it. Murphy seems to continue his obsession with what is to become of him, even from beyond the grave. Yet his desires are once again frustrated: the will demands that his remains "be burnt and placed in a paper bag and brought to the Abbey Theatre, Lr. Abbey Street, Dublin, and without pause into what the great and good Lord Chesterfield calls the necessary" (161). In a discussion separate from his work on late modernism, Esty describes this simply as an "exemplary moment of Irish literary heresy," connecting it to other instances in the novel of Beckett mocking the Gaelic cultural revival, such as when, "a distraught literary type named Neary dashed his head against the buttocks of Cuchulain's statue in the GPO, a veritable altar of the Irish Revival" ("Excremental" 46). Despite the novel's setting in London, moments like these in *Murphy* dramatize the connection of Beckett's late modernist temporal transposition to a particularly Irish history. In *A Shrinking Island,* Esty writes, "the late modernist generation absorbed the potential energy of a contracting British state and converted it into the language not of aesthetic decline but of cultural revival" (8). Beckett and O'Brien's well-known rejection of the "cultural revival" with which they were most familiar—Gaelic—would seem to exclude them from this characteristic of late modernism, and in fact, it seems to have done so far. But it is precisely the ambivalence with which they figure "cultural revival" in their novels that qualifies them definitively *as* late modernists.

In the will mentioned above, Beckett clearly pokes fun at Irish revivalism, literally associating it with the toilet and its accompanying "waste." It seems that, after death, Murphy finally knows "his place," a place that is not a recuperative space in which to form (or even re-

form) cultural identity. Beckett shows cultural revival, embodied in a structure such as the Abbey Theatre, to be an ineffective measure for creating an identity, especially since his protagonist desires to be interred there: he is dead, and the Gaelic revival is a grave, no place for him to re-vive an identity. But while these wishes mock the formation of an Irish national identity based on cultural revival, they do not debase the idea of a national identity as such. What problematizes this posthumous instruction is the impulse toward return, which brings the reader back the to the temporal notions of repetition and transposition dealt with throughout the novel; the will not only dictates that Murphy be spatially relocated back in Ireland, but also requires that the body that has already been through a conflagration now be reduced to ash, again. Beckett connects his own late modernist national consciousness to the confusion of time that obsesses his characters; a revival or a return to some pre-colonial cultural identity in the interests of building a national future becomes ridiculous—particularly as his wishes for this return are frustrated.

Though Murphy's burnt body is indeed cremated, he never makes it back to Ireland. Instead, Murphy's ashes wind up in the hands of Cooper, who, in the midst of a bar brawl,

> threw [the bag] angrily at a man who had given him great offence. It bounced, burst, off the wall on to the floor, where at once it became the object of much dribbling, passing, trapping, shooting, punching, heading and even some recognition from the gentleman's code. By closing time the body, mind and soul of Murphy were freely distributed over the floor of the saloon; and before another dayspring greyened the earth had been swept away with the sand, the beer, the butts, the glass, the matches, the spits, the vomit. (164)

The violence of Murphy's "afterlife" more than recalls horrific war images of bodies resurfacing for further abuse[18], but figures as an event that was tried to control in advance. Murphy's attempt to harness the chaos of the oncoming fails, though his afterlife goes on and on in increasing detail. His cremation is doubled, and his violent treatment is protracted, even as he is being "swept away," extending this moment between past and future into an indefinite stretch in which he is never quite completely disappeared and never quite present. Even more crucially, the narration never arrives at the Abbey Theatre, nor at any other particular location. Murphy is dispersed over the ground, and in being so, becomes groundless. Though his ashes never wholly leave London, there is no definitive resting place for him—toilet or otherwise; instead, he is "freely distributed," an event that complicates the notion of a turn toward the national in this novel, in that Murphy never returns to his homeland, even in death. But neither can he be said to be "grounded" in England; rather, he remains in an interstitial sort of space. Beckett does indeed refer to a national consciousness in his late modernist text, but he only does so raise the more crucial concerns of interstitiality, of being unable to fully and singularly inhabit a space, whether that space is configured as somehow being situated in the past—where you've been—or the future—where you say you want to go.

O'Brien manifests a similar turn toward "critical national consciousness" (MacKay 14), grounding this spatial concern, as Beckett does, in conceptions of temporality and persistence after death. In a novel set in hell, location would seem to be of crucial allegorical importance. But the novel's bizarre temporality renders the setting ambiguous. Hugh Kenner notes that, while it is reasonable to assume that the narrative is set in Ireland, there is a significant absence

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[18] Modris Eksteins gives a succinct description of this, one of the more horrifying facets of trench warfare: "Limbs and torsos were churned up again and again by the shelling. Working parties digging or repairing trenches repeatedly uncovered corpses in all stages of decay or mutilation. ... Fragments of the bodies did find their way, however, into sandbags. If those burst, they could divulge their contents in a manner so horrific that black humor became the only defense against hysteria" (151).

of specifically Irish references; he writes, "It is as if there had been no Gaelic League, as if the Republic had never been proclaimed, as if there were no Treaty, no 1922. An 'Act of Parliament', of all things, is what it will take to secure the regulation of rat-trap pedal (*TP*, p. 77). That is pre-1919 talk, and no one remarks on it" ("Fourth Policeman" 65). But despite this seeming "An Ireland from which politics and political awareness have simply been subtracted," ("Fourth Policeman 65), there are indeed many oblique references to Ireland, particularly inter-Irish violence. For instance, Maslen draws attention to O'Brien's repeated use of the word "civil" as a reference to civil war (85). More explicitly, the narrator's early mention of Parnell suggests a possibility for political speculation: "My father ... did not talk much except on Saturdays when he would mention Parnell with the customers and say that Ireland was a queer country" (223). But these hints as to location, themselves vague, destabilize one's sense of time; whether this is an Ireland of 1904, say, or 1884, or 1924, one can never determine, and the space of Ireland—either on a map or on the ground—would look different at each of these various points in time—in the final case, drastically so.[19] The mention of Parnell may support Kenner's point, that this novel's plot operates pre-1919. However, O'Brien's inclusion of this name, in 1939, does not stop at calling up images of the initial struggle for Home Rule, but includes all that follows, including the "queer country" that Ireland has become in the current moment, and making of the strange setting a familiar but unfixable landscape.

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[19] These spatial idiosyncrasies are alluded to, albeit loosely, in the novel through the several "natural" maps the narrator runs across in his journey. For instance, the narrator tells us, at a point in his journey, about a group of cows that "changed their attitudes slowly as if to show us all of the maps on their fat sides" (290); the movement of the maps themselves and their unlabeled aspect give the reader some sense of spatial instability. Later, at the Sergeant's instruction, the narrator "looked carefully at the ceiling [and] saw that Mr Mathers' house and every road and house I knew were marked there, and nets of lanes and neighborhoods that I did not know also. It was a map of the parish, complete, reliable and astonishing" (331). This map is not made by human hands, but composed of cracks in the ceiling's plaster, and it reveals things (like the "way to eternity" (332)) that are invisible to human eyes or that are deviations from the "real" terrain of the parish.

The inability to locate the narrative in time undermines the ability to fix it in space, and the instability of both come to a head in the scene in which we learn where we have been all along—outside the dominion of space and time. In the penultimate scene of the novel, we learn that the narrator is, as it were, undead, and that we, the readers, have been following him through hell—a location of sorts, but not a stable one by any means. Here there is a transformation of language that suspends temporal progression. The narrator's old partner Divney becomes hysterical, and the clauses describing their reunion are, as before in *The Third Policeman*, long and complex: "He moaned and made cries of agony which chilled me to the bone. The woman followed him on her knees, crying pitifully and trying to mumble soothing words to him. He sobbed convulsively where he lay and began to cry and mutter things disjointedly" (401). Each of these sentences has a compound verb, but the verbs do not differ from one another denotatively: making cries of agony could very well be a description of moaning, and sobbing is only different from crying by degree. This is not a matter of repetition, but of slight gradation of difference, which lengthens the time it takes to garner knowledge of what puts Divney in such a state. That knowledge that arrives with the knowledge of a bomb, signified by a sudden rhetorical shift:

> It was about me. He told me to keep away. He said I was not there. He said I was dead. He said that what he had put under the boards in the big house was not the black box but a mine, a bomb. It had gone up when I touched it. He had watched the bursting of it from where I had left him. The house was blown to bits. I was dead. He screamed to me to keep away. I was dead for sixteen years. (401-2)

These sentences are short, simple, and declarative. The anaphoric "He" and "He said" combines with the repetition of "I was dead," bringing the reader up short rhythmically after the long,

complex, adjective-heavy sentences that came before. The longest sentence is the one in which we discover the bomb itself buried in an appositive, like the bomb beneath the floor. The repetition contrasts with the doubling that occurred before this explanatory stretch: the exact same words are repeated, instead of being marked by slight changes, and conjunctions such as "and" or "or," so important earlier on, are not used at all. We linger in the knowledge of his death, uncertain what it means for the narrative in terms of plot or setting. The linguistic singleness of each statement emphasizes the uncanniness of the narrator's appearance: he is dead, yet he has come again, repeated himself.[20] But the narrator seems to immediately forget what has occurred, effectively removing it from his experience, so that he cannot know that, now with Divney in tow, he will repeat the novel's cycle, possibly infinitely. The narrator's ignorance of his own location in space and time allow him to exist, like Murphy, groundlessly: he cannot be interred in a specific location, nor in a specific time, though the trajectory of his life has ended. Instead, he is dispersed, nowhere, anywhere, potentially for all time. He remains "always on the verge of a cataclysm that has always already happened" (Maslen 101), frozen in the prolonged time between detonation and explosion, repeating things again and again, unable to impact the future. "Something" that has already happened, for him as for Murphy, is always on the horizon, oncoming, inevitable, and inscrutable.

The temporal suspension in these novels undercuts the connection late modernists critics build to a national culture or space, partially because the space of Ireland itself, the location to which Beckett and O'Brien repeatedly refer, is, in the 1930s, suspended between an imperial past—the northern counties—and a national future—the southern ones. It is not that these

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[20] The statement "I was dead" itself comes in the narrator's language, in the first person, which should render it impossible—no one who is dead can say so, and it becomes all the stranger in the past tense. Nonetheless, the repetition of this statement, in any tense or point of view, is horrifyingly excessive in allowing the narrator to comment on his late-ness.

authors do not perform the "anthropological turn" of which Esty speaks (2), or that they do not, like the authors MacKay considers, "[see] that national identification could mean anything from pernicious parochialism to the freedom from totalitarian occupation" (2). Instead, Beckett and O'Brien's Irish heritage allows them to perform these spatial acts of seeing and writing with a very specific connection to their senses of time—national, literary, and personal. Esty suggests that what allows one to "mediate between" the binaries of this period—past/future, national/imperial, etc.—is "an inherited cultural legacy" (13), but Beckett and O'Brien's historical legacy of rejection and identification with the figure of the English colonizer is different from that of the authors Esty and MacKay discuss. In their unique straddling of these very binaries[21], they have a more complicated legacy with which to mediate. Neither author can comfortably embrace a nationalistic move at this point in their career; attempts at an Irish literary revival have, by the 1930s, been going on—and struggling—for quite some time as the product of an older generation. For Beckett and O'Brien, to participate therein would be to step backward in time, in at least two senses: first, in attempting to establish a national future by reaching into a cultural past; and second, by themselves identifying their careers with the writing of the generations immediately preceding them—either modernists or artists of the Gaelic revival.

Because it is not just the authors' nationality that seems to have excluded them from consideration of how they participate in "the rise of an Anglocentric culture paradigm" (Esty 2-3). Their youth at the time of composition for these novels, the precise thing that makes English modernism a "legacy" they could hope to "inherit," has also left them largely out of the

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[21] Part of what creates this "straddling" effect is both of these authors' continued attempts to be cosmopolitan, despite the shift toward the national in contemporaneous literature and their own. Beckett obviously becomes far more successfully cosmopolitan than O'Brien, who never leaves Ireland, but O'Brien's early works, like *The Third Policeman* reflect a concern and an attempt to fit into a larger literature than just an "Irish" one, if in no other way than in his highly allusive imitations of James Joyce, even as he rejects this forerunner.

conversation. MacKay writes that, by the time late modernism begins, "Modernism … had ossified into a self-contained literary period and into an aesthetic achievement" (17-8), describing a shift in late modernist's sense of contemporaneity. Late modernists think of modernism as being over, despite its recentness and their (conflicted) desire to participate therein. Modernism, as a period, is more or less closed, and later writers cannot participate because, as Miller writes, "Late modernism … lies both a step back from and a step beyond such extremity, in the tributary channels by which memories and experiences of the war were transmitted from participants to readers and from generation to generation" (27). Similarly, at the most basic level, Beckett and O'Brien were too young to be modernists, and modernism had been going on too long, by the time they began writing, for them to perform modernist feats. But it is precisely their youth, their sense of modernism as something that has passed before they came of age, that allows them to conceive of it as a problematic inheritance—something they admire, aspire to, yet also cannot wholeheartedly endorse, let alone achieve. Their senses of interstitiality is not just spatial, but temporal, dual senses which they express in *Murphy* and *The Third Policeman* as always connected, and always held in suspension.

To claim *Murphy* and *The Third Policeman* as postmodernist, then, rather than late modernist is to ignore these novels' conflicted but conspicuous representations of time and of history. Jameson's well-known description of postmodernism has one of its defining characteristics being "an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place" (ix). But Beckett and O'Brien do not represent their characters as being entirely forgetful or unmoored from history; rather, they are hung up in what still amounts to a linear progression of time. A sense of temporality that functions cyclically, or even out of order, still figures history as a kind of grand narrative, albeit one that perpetually

confuses the characters who live therein. To characterize these narratives as postmodern, "only clock[ing] the variations themselves" (Jameson ix) is to miss their critical documentation of the period of transition from modernism, which "thought compulsively about the New and tried to watch its coming into being" to postmodernism, which "looks for breaks ... for the telltale instants after which it is no longer the same" (Jameson ix). Murphy and O'Brien's narrator attempt to seek out their futures, to secure them and thereby safeguard them from becoming mere repetitions of past failures or foretold catastrophes. The problem for them is that, in their futures, nothing new is coming into being (Murphy's stasis, in life and in death), or, if it is, that which is new to them is something that has already happened but that they cannot remember and thus cannot avoid (O'Brien's narrator's fate of ignorantly repeating a pointless journey forever). Thus, categorizing the novels as solely, uncomplicatedly postmodern strips the novels of the history with which they are obsessed, and neglects the shifting—albeit not fully shifted—notions of time they represent.

It is precisely Beckett and O'Brien's dual positions, geographic and historic, that make them so well-suited to a conversation about late modernism. Though they are, in many ways, exceptional authors, and very different even from one another, examination of the way they represent the concerns of being at a remove from either end of binaries provides an illuminating alternative view on the features that characterize the late modern period. While they cannot be completely representative of late modernist literature, they certainly participate in this category, and do so in ways that provide a new perspective on the simultaneous sense of decline and rejuvenation claimed as late modernist. Their explicit renderings of temporal confusion, always connected to spatial instability, figure the past as something inescapable, something which must be not just faced, but faced time and time again, in the future, in order to locate oneself, even

briefly, in a particular space—the boundaries of which are always shifting. These concerns are explicitly (albeit perhaps not exclusively) late modernist ones, and their presence in Beckett and O'Brien's novels of the late interwar period suggests a need to broaden the category of late modernism to include, as modernism did before it, the "outlandish" writers who cannot help but view themselves, and the period in which they live, askance.

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Elizabeth Bowen and Language at War

2011 2nd Place Winner
Cornelison English Essay Contest

Anna Teekell

Elizabeth Bowen and Language at War

Riddled with inversions, ellipses, subjunctives and double, even triple negatives, Elizabeth Bowen's prose has been accused of everything from mannerism to willful opacity.[1] Heather Bryant Jordan recently suggested that "Bowen's style may be partly responsible for the difficulty in writing about her work. At times, her sentences are convoluted in extremes of syntax…her writing – as well as the experience of reading it – can be off-putting."[2] Even at the climax of Bowen's novel of World War II, *The Heat of the Day* (1949), the language is contorted almost to the point of unintelligibility. Stella, the novel's protagonist, has just learned that Robert, her lover of two years, is a Nazi spy:

> She could not believe they had not, in those two years, drawn on the virtue of what was round them, *the* virtue peculiar to where they were – nor had this been less to be felt when she was without him, was where he was not, had not been ever, might never be: a perpetual possible illumination for her, because of him, of everything to be seen or be heard by joy.[3]

This is willfully tortuous syntax on Bowen's part; it took her ten years to finish the novel. Addressing the comments of her reader at Jonathan Cape that the novel often "abused" style to the "reader's discomfort,"[4] Bowen explained, "I'd rather keep the jars, 'jingles' and awkwardnesses – e.g. 'seemed unseemly', 'felt to falter'. They do to my mind express something. In some cases I want the rhythm to jerk or jar – to an extent, even, which may displease the reader."[5] These "jerks," "jars," and "jingles" are part of Bowen's project to create an experience of reading that is "eventful," as she calls it in *Afterthought*.[6] In fact, the experience of reading *The Heat of the Day* is rather more eventful than the novel itself, in which the melodramatic action of the spy-thriller plot is subordinated to the conversations surrounding

it.[7] (Bowen says in her 1945 "Notes on Writing a Novel," "Speech is what characters *do to each other*."[8]) Much of the novel's physical activity is taken up by actions of looking and listening; as the narrator says of Stella, "There came to be something dynamic... about her refusal to move at all" (HD 23). The words on the page, and the words that the character-spies are constantly trying to read and interpret for clues, constitute the novel's true eventfulness.

The convolution of Stella's free indirect discourse when she realizes the truth about Robert dramatizes rather than describes her psychic state, and the reader is forced to suffer alongside Stella as she begins to reinterpret two years of her life. Robert tells her, "You'll have to reread me backwards, figure me out – you will have years to do that in, if you want to" (HD 304), and Bowen's syntax forces the novel's reader, too, to reread not just the plot for missing clues but the sentences themselves for meaning. When Bowen writes, "She could not believe they had not," the hobbled double-negative is important: Stella thinks in double-negatives because she has discovered, but is not ready to admit, the truth.

Daniel George, Bowen's reader at Cape, remarked on how, in the manuscript as he read it, "Generally I notice the phrase 'could but' is overworked and so is the trick of double negatives."[9] Bowen's discomforting commitment to the (un)grammatical "trick" of double-negatives (as well as triple-negatives and even quadruples) binds the novel in a pattern of negative diction.[10] Syntactically, by invoking the double-negative, Bowen cultivates ambiguity: while two negatives may mathematically resolve to a positive, this is not always so in colloquial speech. The double-negatives may denote litotes ("she was not disobliging" the narrator says of the promiscuous Louie [HD 19]), but it may also denote emphasis (like Stella's declaration, "I am not a woman who does not know where to go" [HD 41]), or it may simply denote an unwillingness to speak straight in a crooked world.

The novel, set primarily in London during the Second World War, is the story of Stella Rodney, divorcée and civil servant, who is told that her lover, Robert, is a suspected Nazi spy. Harrison, the counter-spy who approaches Stella, offers her Robert's immunity in exchange for her bed. For her part, Stella does not refuse Harrison's offer but delays it, becoming a spy on her own lover as she tries to decode the truth. Stella's response to Harrison comes as slowly and circuitously as her sentences do, and, as Robert puts it, none of the novel's characters "seem to have shown any very great patriotic fervour" (HD 214). This is a novel about war and espionage, in which speaking the truth may, depending on the listener, amount to treason. Bowen, therefore, creates a language of war by encoding distrust into the syntax of the novel. Her use of the double-negative is intentionally ambivalent; it holds resolution in suspense (just as the narrator suspends resolution in key aspects of plot, like Robert's "fall or leap" from the roof [HD 327]). The structure of the double-negative governs *The Heat of the Day*, underpins the novel's logic, because it is a space of suspense, of non-knowingness. Such negative grammar is symbolic of the novel's espionage-based epistemology: it is the grammar of Stella's refusal to believe Harrison's story and refusal to disbelieve it, too.

*

Like her characters, Elizabeth Bowen spent the war engaged in intelligence-gathering. From 1940 to 1945, she worked for the British Ministry of Information, secretly reporting to the Dominions Office about neutral Ireland's attitudes on the war.[11] Her own sense of allegiance (which Sean O'Faolain described as "heart-cloven and split-minded"[12]), and her sense of what allegiance to a country could mean, was tested and shaped by espionage. Though *The Heat of the Day* includes two chapters set in County Cork, at the fictional big house Mount Morris, it is rarely read as an Irish novel. It holds a deserved position in the canon of British Second World

War fiction, but its relationship to the literature of Irish Neutrality (beyond Bowen's spy work) has gone largely unremarked. An important exception to this is the work of Adam Piette, who in his 1995 book on English wartime writing, *Imagination at War*, suggests that "*The Heat of the Day* fictionalizes the England-Eire relationship by transposing the secret story of Bowen's spying on her country into Stella's spying on her lover."[13] Piette writes insightfully about Bowen's novel in its English context, but his reading of Stella as Ireland is an oversimplification. The novel's depiction of allegiance is more complicated than Piette makes it sound, for he makes the mistake of seeking equivalents: "Eire's neutral position is defended by turning Ireland into a kind of Stella figure," Piette first contends. He moves on to claim that Stella's "'hybrid' Anglo-Irish self is capable of a double allegiance, to country and to that country's 'enemy.'... In the end, Stella and Robert form a secret union, an Anglo-Irish union."[14] The flaw in Piette's argument is that being neutral and being Anglo-Irish are not the same thing, as Bowen herself knew. As an Anglo-Irishwoman, she was indeed a hybrid, joking that she felt most at-home "in mid-Irish Sea."[15] Bowen was capable of serving as an ARP Warden in Marylebone and writing a defense of Ireland's neutrality in the *New Statesman*, of including herself in a British "we" in letters to Virginia Woolf and also of making the definitive statement, "I regard myself as an Irish novelist" (not an English or an Anglo-Irish one) in *The Bell.*[16] But hybridity and neutrality are non-equivalents; in a sense they are even opposites, since neutrality demands loyalty to no belligerent parties and hybridity could mean loyalty to more than one. Piette's formula falters in its insistence that this "Anglo-Irish self" would be capable of allegiance to both "country and to that country's 'enemy'"; inverted commas or not, neutral Ireland was not England's enemy, even if she could be imagined as flirting with it.[17]

A better metaphor for neutrality in the novel might be Bowen's language itself, her resolutely negative syntax. For one could argue that in declaring neutrality, the Irish Free State, by removing itself from the map of a global war, made what Bowen termed "Eire's first free self-assertion" by mapping itself in a double-negative fashion.[18] As the architect of the neutrality policy, Eamon De Valera sought to remove his country from the map of war in order to put his country, metaphorically, "on the map" – a diplomatic double-negative.[19] If the double-negative is the theoretical grammar of Irish Neutrality, then in *The Heat of the Day*, Bowen enacts neutrality not by making *Stella* neutral (she is, after all, English), but by encoding it into the language of the novel itself, by riddling its logic and bending back its momentum with negatives. Bowen's World War II novel embeds the drama of neutrality, treachery, and allegiance in a drama of language itself – a medium that is as confounding and friable as war proved the built environment to be. In the novel, as in the rest of Bowen's wartime writing, the ability to be entirely partial or to cordon oneself off as neutral is called into question by war's incessant breaching of barriers and blitzing of walls. This is enacted formally, by the fiction's shuttling between settings in Ireland and England, as well as stylistically, in the prose's self-negating syntax. The syntax itself reveals an important embedded trace in the novel: the presence of Bowen's own past, of her 1942 family history *Bowen's Court*, as a source for her peculiar language of war. Reading *The Heat of the Day* alongside *Bowen's Court* (and a key story, "The Happy Autumn Fields," set simultaneously in blitzed London and Victorian County Cork) one sees Bowen rending the "curtain" between the two books as the two places. As Arthur says in Bowen's wartime story, "Mysterious Kôr," the reader begins to feel that, "we're there now, that here's there, that now's then."[20]

*

The slippery syntax of *The Heat of the Day* has its formal correspondence in the novel's shuttling between settings in London and Ireland. Bowen herself migrated between two homes in the 1940s – her house in London and her family's estate in County Cork. In addition to her reporting for the Dominions Office, Bowen's travel to Ireland served the completion of the research and writing of *Bowen's Court* (1942), a history of her family and, by extension, of Anglo-Ireland. Most critics glance at *Bowen's Court* in the course of assessing Bowen's two "big house" novels, *The Last September* (1929) and *A World of Love* (1954); few consider its importance to *The Heat of the Day*, despite the fact that Bowen was writing the novel and the history at the same time.[21] Perhaps this is because the novel's two chapters set in Ireland concern what might rightly be considered a subplot: Stella's son Roderick has inherited Mount Morris, a distant cousin's County Cork estate. In the middle of the novel, Stella goes there to "take possession" in Roderick's absence, while he serves in the army. At the end of the book, Roderick finally has leave to travel and visits the place himself.[22]

Mount Morris's location in Cork and its status as a place outside war allies it with the real Bowen's Court and the novelist's own experiences of neutral Ireland. W.J. McCormack writes that "The very minimalism with which [*The Heat of the Day*] admits Irish setting" emphasizes its importance to the novel, but what's important to McCormack is "the rigorous pessimism with which the author addresses her diagnosis [of the relationship between Britain and Ireland]."[23] McCormack is in line with other critics who see Bowen's Court, rightly, as the real-life model for Mount Morris but fail to notice the ghostly presences of *Bowen's Court* in the novel.[24] In fact, *Bowen's Court* provides a secret subtext to Bowen's novel of secrecy, in both the novel's structural echoes of Bowen's own wartime travel to and from Ireland and London and, less transparently, in its syntactical negativity and contortion. In *The Heat of the Day's* syntactical

features, Bowen directly borrows – even copies – many of the structures of *Bowen's Court*. However, she applies these structures not to the fictional estate Mount Morris but to her depiction of London under the Blitz. Blitzed London, characterized by a diction of absence and ghostliness, is described in a gothic mode that might appear more at home in a big house novel than a thriller.

As a thriller, *The Heat of the Day* splices the diction of the plantation gothic mode with the contorted linguistics of the spy novel, promoting itself as a coded book, which will have to be "reread... backwards," as Robert suggests to Stella (HD 304). "Interpretation [in the thriller] requires vigilant separation of truth from lies," according to Allan Hepburn; this makes reading a thriller "a hermeneutical exercise" in code-breaking and skepticism.[25] Bowen demands precisely such exercise from both her readers and her characters in *The Heat of the Day* – not just in her use of the generic conventions of the spy novel (which, if read backwards as Robert suggests, would give one all the answers up front, raveling rather than unraveling its tortuous tale) but also in the texture of her language, its syntactical contortions, its unwillingness to speak directly. In her own spying experience, Bowen called this "smoke-screen use of words... a trick of the Irish mind," and the sentences in *The Heat of the Day* often set a smoke-screen around information they seem almost hesitant to impart.[26] In this passage about the morning after a particularly bad bombing attack, exemplary of Bowen's style in the novel, the reader must sift through the shape of the sentences to decode the information they present:

> Most of all the dead, from mortuaries, from under cataracts of rubble, made their anonymous presence – not as today's dead but as yesterday's living – felt though London. Uncounted, they continued to move in shoals through the city day, pervading everything to be seen or heard or felt with their torn-off senses,

> drawing on this tomorrow they had expected – for death cannot be so sudden as all that. Absent from the routine which had been life, they stamped upon that routine their absence – not knowing who the dead were, you could not know which might be the staircase somebody for the first time was not mounting this morning. (HD 99)

All those negatives – *anonymous*, *not* as today's dead, *un*counted, torn-*off*, death *cannot* be, *absent*, *absence*, *not* knowing, could *not* know, *not* mounting – add up to a world that is defined by absence rather than presence. London becomes defined by unreality rather than reality.[27] The negatively contorted grammatical logic in that last sentence recalls a similar passage in *Seven Winters*, published by the Cuala Press in 1942 as a companion book to *Bowen's Court*:

> When they first made me understand that I had been born in Dublin, I said: 'But how?—my birthdays are always at Bowen's Court.' A house where a child no longer is is virtually rolled up and put away. So by having been born where I had been born in a month in which that house did not exist, I felt that I had intruded on some no-place.[28]

What is of concern in the final sentences of both passages is the cryptic presence of absence. In blitzed London, one cannot know which extant staircases exist only through non-use. On the other hand, Bowen's Court has the ability to exist as a house that "did not exist," because Elizabeth Bowen was not there. In both cases, space is reconstituted, through negative syntax, as "no-place."[29]

No-place, this place accessed through cryptic syntax, turns out to be one of Bowen's chief wartime locations. Roderick, who finds in his mother's flat that "[t]he reality of [his] fancy was better than the unreality of the room," discovers a perfect no-place in Mount Morris, his

unseen new home. For Roderick, "by geographically standing outside war [Mount Morris] appeared also to be standing outside the present. The house, nonhuman, became the hub of his imaginary life, of fancies, fantasies only so to be called because circumstance outlawed them from reality" (HD 52).[30] Similarly, in her history of her own County Cork home, Bowen admits that for her, the "no-place" of Bowen's Court was an important refuge during the war: "I suppose that everyone, fighting or just enduring, carried within him one private image, one peaceful scene. Mine was Bowen's Court. War made me that image out of a house built of anxious history."[31] One might also say that the writer's refuge was *Bowen's Court* the book, which she completed during the war, and which gave her access to history, allowed her to live, as Roderick did at his imagined Mount Morris, "outside the present." For in Bowen's writing, text and shelter are conceptually linked. Of her family estate Bowen writes, "Like Flaubert's ideal book about nothing, it sustains itself on itself by the inner force of its style" (BC 21). This is a peculiar formula for a home: self-sustaining as an artifact, as is a book, yet made of "nothing" but style. Still, it is tempting to posit literature as a safe space in lieu of a home. After all, the fate of Bowen's Court suggests this. In 1959, when Bowen could no longer afford its upkeep, the house was sold and promptly demolished by its new owners. Where "Bowen's Court" once meant a house, it is now the title of a book.[32] The space of Bowen's Court is now preserved within the hermetic space of *Bowen's Court*.

Bowen reuses the Flaubert metaphor in *The Heat of the Day* to describe Stella and Robert's relationship: "What the inheritance came to be for Roderick, Robert was for Stella – a habitat. The lovers had for two years possessed a hermetic world, which, like the ideal book about nothing, stayed itself on itself by its inner force" (HD 97). It is anachronistic to compare the demolition of their relationship to the demolition of Bowen's home, but Bowen – who had

seen her neighbors' big houses burnt in the Troubles, and who had fictionally torched her own in *The Last September,* who had been bombed out of her London home three times by the end of World War II – knew that style or inner force alone cannot sustain a building or a love affair. The friability of Bowen's Court underwrites the fragility of Stella and Robert's supposedly "hermetic" relationship, which is ultimately destroyed, rather than sustained, from within.

In an early draft of *The Heat of the Day*, Bowen ghosts London with her big house's past. Underlying the city's wartime camaraderie, she writes, "was the emotional unity of a garrison."[33] In the published version, Bowen expands the comparison to ally wartime Londoners even more with the garrison's provisional and colonial aspects. She writes that "the stayers-on in London" were:

> campers in rooms of draughty dismantled houses, in corners of fled-from flats – it could be established, roughly, that the wicked had stayed and the good had gone. This was the new society of one kind of wealth, resilience, living how it liked – people whom the climate of danger suited... There was plenty of everything in London – attention, drink, time, taxis, most of all space. Into that intimate and loose little society of the garrison Stella and Robert had both gravitated. (HD 102-3)

Here, wartime London resembles the garrison society in Cromwellian County Cork that Bowen describes in *Bowen's Court*. "In Ireland," she writes, "the Cromwellians were people of the ruins" (BC 87). Their search for more space, for a "new society" based on colonization's promise to the settler of a land with "plenty of everything," where one can live how one likes so long as one is suited to the "climate of danger," like the wartime denizens of London, leads them

to similar habitations. Bowen writes of her ancestor Henry Bowen, colonel in Cromwell's army, that after taking possession of his Irish lands,

> He took up his quarters in the small, semi-ruinous castle just across the Farahy stream... Farahy castle was crabbed, draughty, rough and built on a ridge of limestone; cold exhalations travelled up through its walls. To this cold shelter only, Henry would be driven back by the drenching rains, impatiently fording the stream in spate. Into this dark doorway he turned at the close of long dusks. In these chambers he muttered and walked at nights. (BC 74-5)

By correlating the wartime Londoners to the early, roughest members of the Anglo-Irish colonial garrison, Bowen draws telling parallels. Stella and Robert, "the wicked [who] had stayed" in London's "draughty dismantled houses," begin to resemble Ireland's own "wicked" band of dispossessors in their "crabbed, draughty, rough" and ruinous castles. Something in the suspicious vulnerability of the garrison sticks to these colonizers of the demolished metropolis. (Later, when Stella feels that "occupied Europe [is] occupying London," the novel reminds us again of this colonial parallel [HD 139].)

In a mirror of the anxieties that drive the Anglo-Irish big house novel, Stella and Robert's London garrison is destroyed from within – the suspicion of evil lurking within supposedly safe walls of home and family is not only the thriller's trademark but also a wartime gothic nod to the plantation gothic mode.[34] Bowen's use of parallel language makes London and Bowen's Court equally uncanny, both populated by the sorts of questionable people who mutter and walk at nights. For in fact they are: the novel's London is full of spies, of the sounds of feet shifting on dark pavements, of dark nights and secretive pacts; the ingredients of this spy-thriller London echo surprisingly the ingredients that make up the gothic garrison. It is as though the ghosts of

the many wars in Bowen's Court's neighborhood are reawakened by the new ghosts created by London's position on this new war's civilian "front line." The clear division between Bowen's two homes in Cork and Marylebone begins to recede while, as the narrator of *The Heat of the Day* says, "The wall between the living and the living became less solid as the wall between the living and the dead thinned" (HD 99).[35] With Bowen's literary borrowings, the meaning of Ireland's neutrality thins, too.

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Readings of *The Heat of the Day* have often worked from the assumption that Ireland – with all its Celtic twilight and seeming apartness from the war – is the haunted, othered space in the novel, not London. After all, an imaginary Ireland is Roderick's "saving hallucination," and upon waking there, Stella finds that "[h]er place in time had been lost" (HD 196).[36] But these Irish dislocations are only a dim mirror of what Stella feels in London, where "no kind of sleep accounted for the distance she felt between herself and yesterday – and, indeed, between herself and today. Nothing she saw or touched gave token of even its own reality: even her wrist watch seemed to belie time; she fancied it had lost hours during the night" (HD 105). Lostness in time is a common denominator in her London flat and at Mount Morris. This is part of the novel's "radical disruption of a classical, linear temporality" which Bennett and Royle call "blitz-riven."[37] The novel's migrations between London and Ireland help to underscore Bowen's "blitz-riven" sense of time and place that works to haunt London as it dispossesses Ireland of its traditional ghosts. In London, Stella becomes part of a company of "shades," whereas at Mount Morris, she "know[s]" herself to be "outside the society of ghosts" (192-3).

Bowen offers Stella as a corrective to assumptions that by diplomatically and geographically lying outside war Ireland was unaffected by it.[38] Her first sensations upon arrival

are typical of many travelers' coming across from blacked-out Britain, astonished by the lights on Dublin Bay:

> The exciting sensation of being outside war had concentrated itself round those fearless lights... around the harbour water, uphill above it, the windows had not only showed and shone but blazed... dazzling reflections in damp streets made Dublin seem to be in the throes of a carnival. (HD 186)

But arriving at Mount Morris, Stella finds that the absence of electricity, combined with an extreme shortage of oil and candles, makes for its own sort of blackout. Bowen writes, "Stella had assumed there to be no shortages of any kind in Eire. In the end... what she had not cared to suspect was in fact true... she was burning up light supplies for months ahead. Well on into the winter after Stella's departure the Donovan family went to bed in the dark" (HD 186). This moment of pathos for the Donovans, the Mount Morris caretakers who sacrifice their own comforts in their effort to properly "wait on" their new mistress (herself unaccustomed to the experience), comes across as a heartfelt corrective to English ideas of Ireland's neutrality by the novelist whose Ministry of Information reports strive to do the same (HD 185).

Just as *The Heat of the Day*'s Ireland is not free from war's privations, neither are its people entirely "neutral-minded," as the censorship laws encouraged them to be.[39] Walking in the Mount Morris woods, Stella feels "the peace of the moment," imagining that this might be "the very day in which... something might intervene to save her" (HD 197). At just this moment, an ecstatic Donovan calls to her, shouting, "Montgomery's through!... It's the war turning" (HD 198). This reference to the second battle of El Alamein is the first moment in the novel in which specific historical events enter the narrative, and the comment belongs to the Irishman, Catholic, serving-class: "I would give much to have a hat to bare my head with: the

day's famous" (HD 198). Donovan goes on to identify ecumenically with the Anglo-Irish Montgomery: "We bred a very fast general. Didn't I say to you he'd be a fast general? Hasn't he got them on the run?" (HD 198). World wars do not, of course, turn so simply as that, and there was a lot of fighting left after Montgomery's North African victory, just as the novel has a long way to go toward its own resolution. Bowen acknowledges the complexity of battle, love, and Irish wartime sentiment by ending the chapter not with a newly decisive Stella but with an image of the placidly beautiful Donovan daughter, Hannah. A perfect neutral, Hannah takes her father's audacious news without a blink of emotion, so that "[w]henever in the future that Mount Morris mirage of utter victory came back to [Stella], she was to see Hannah standing there in the sunshine, as indifferent as a wand" (HD 199). Peace in Ireland is figured again and again as mirage, even if in the novel, this "mirage" of victory really appears to be the war turning. For, if "[i]t's the war turning," as Donavan says, then it's Stella's war turning, too; she will go home to confront her lover as a traitor.

The London to which Stella returns is haunted by its war dead – "These unknown dead reproached those left living not by their death, which might any night be shared, but by their unknownness, which could not be mended now" – making Bowen's London as susceptible to ghostly happenings as Mount Morris is not (HD 99). Describing the morning after an air raid in her essay "London, 1940," Bowen writes how survivors "come up out of the ground [to] see what we heard happen throughout the night... Standing, as might the risen dead in the doors of tombs, in the mouths of shelters, we have nothing to do but yawn at each other or down the void of streets" (MT 22). These "risen dead" greet Stella on her return from Mount Morris. Arriving at the train station, she finds:

> Recognition of anybody by anybody else seemed hopeless – those hoping to be

> met, hoping to be claimed, thrust hats back and turned up faces drowningly. Arrival of shades in Hades, the new dead scanned dubiously by the older, she thought that she could have thought; but she felt nothing – till her heart missed a beat, her being filled like an empty lock: with a shock of love she saw Robert's tall turning head. (HD 201)

This passage on disconnected people manifests in dissociative language: disembarking passengers (made ghostly by their mere arrival in London) exist in a subjunctive limbo, "hoping to be claimed." Disembodied by metonymy and synecdoche without linking pronouns, they become "hats" and "faces" tipping up "drowningly," as they figuratively die into the crowd. Once lost, they are caught hopelessly in the passive voice, "the new dead scanned dubiously by the older," or so Stella "thought that she could have thought."[40] The latter phrase is an act of verbal disassociation so painstaking that it catches the reader's attention, even as it distances Stella from such morbid imaginings. What's more, she feels "nothing;" this phrase marooned, by a dash, from its context (the feeling of Robert's presence is what Stella is missing here) hints that Stella herself may be among the imagined dead – those who feel nothing. Stella is alerted back to life when her heart fails, skips a beat; only through this mimicry of death is it certain she is alive. This little death precipitates Stella's recognition of Robert and hence her confrontation with him in the "haunted" taxi (HD 208).

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In her preface to the American edition of *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* (1945), Bowen plays on the formal splicing of 'here' and 'there,' 'now' and 'then' in her wartime fiction by describing the splice as the very condition under which she wrote: "Each time I sat down to write a story I opened a door; and the pressure against the other side of that door must have been

very great, for things – ideas, images, emotions – came through with force and rapidity, sometimes violence" (MT 94). In the preface, Bowen employs the image of the door, curtain, or wall – the barrier that cannot help but be breached by this war – to conflate the public and private spheres:

> It seems to me that during the war the overcharged subconsciousnesses of everybody overflowed and merged... Sometimes I hardly knew where I stopped and somebody else began. The violent destruction of solid things, the explosion of the illusion that prestige, power and permanence attach to bulk and weight, left all of us, equally, heady and disembodied. Walls went down; and we felt, if not knew, each other. (MT 95)

Here, Bowen reads the blitzing of the physical wall that divides neighbors from each other as the same movement that allows those neighbors' "subconsciousnessess" to "merge[]." This "violent destruction of solid things" also becomes the destruction of intangible values, so that the physical disruption of the metropolis becomes also the disruption of its politics.[41] In *The Heat of the Day*, the rending of this veil, this curtain, between public and private is formally emphasized by the rending of the curtain of difference between London and Ireland.[42]

Clair Wills' 2004 essay, "The Aesthetics of Irish Neutrality During The Second World War," demonstrates the multi-dimensionality of this sort of boundary-breaking. Wills writes about the dilemma that Ireland's official neutrality created for Irish writers, for whom "the moral politics of neutrality became the occasion for a particularly intense form of self-questioning, often amounting to a kind of fracturing of the self."[43] Wills summarizes the problematic stance: "Ireland should be neutral, but individuals don't need to be, as though public and private aspects of the self can be neatly disentangled."[44] Bowen's conflation of public and private spheres in her

Demon Lover preface illustrates that such "public and private aspects" cannot be disentangled; in fact, they are further entangled by the Blitz. For Bowen and the other writers Wills examines, "[t]he shifting boundary between the public and the private or intimate sphere [is also] the relation between national and global."[45] In other words, the wall coming down between one London flat and another is also the wall coming down between England (or Ireland) and the surrounding world: both walls are challenged by war. The obvious consequence of such "disruptions," Wills concludes, "is that the private and the personal can no longer function as a place of refuge or exemption."[46]

In *The Heat of the Day*, all of this is figured by the blackout curtain, which is subjected to psychological freight beyond its physical substance.[47] Beyond its function as wartime verisimilitude (Stella attends to her curtains each time she turns on a light at evening), the blackout curtain allows Bowen to reverse the meaning and location of danger, depending on the circumstance. The blackout curtain, protector of London's myriad and separate private, domestic spheres from the threatening sights of the Luftwaffe, ought, by rights, to function as a screen that keeps the dangerous public sphere away from the safe private one. But this is not always the case in *The Heat of the Day*. Early in the novel, when Roderick first arrives for his visit, Stella surveys her blacked-out flat:

> The room lacked one more thing: apprehension of time… The day had gone from the moment Stella had drawn down the fitted blinds and drawn across them the deadening curtains: now nothing took its place. Every crack was stopped; not a mote of darkness could enter – the room, sealed up in its artificial light, remained exaggerated and cerebral. (HD 59)

Here, Bowen reverses the relationship between light and darkness; the curtains, designed to keep indoor light from penetrating outside, instead keep the outdoor darkness from seeping in. The private sphere, while closed off from the "darkness" of the political world, is not, however, as cozy and secure as one might expect. Rather, with the curtains drawn, Stella's room becomes "artificial." Instead of the natural, ordinary breath of the closing day, Stella is left with the potentially terrifying "nothing." This reversal is thrown into clearer relief when Harrison visits the flat on Stella's return from Robert's frightful family home. Now the room is fully "haunted," and Stella's only escape is to follow Harrison through the curtains to be "walled away" from it and into a window open on the rainy London night, which seems "as unprecautionary, natural, as that of rocks, woods and hills on which elsewhere rain fell" (HD 153-4). At this moment, the role reversal of the public and private spheres, with regard to their traditional meanings for refuge, is complete:

> To [Stella], tonight, 'outside' meant the harmless world: the mischief was in her own and in other rooms. The grind and scream of battles, mechanized advances excoriating flesh and country, tearing through nerves and tearing up trees, were indoor-plotted; this was a war of dry cerebration inside windowless walls. (HD 157)

To imagine that the novel uses the motif of the curtain to reverse the traditional public/private configuration would, however, be an over-simplification. For as Stella's allegiances change, so does the role of her drapery. At the novel's end, Robert confesses his fascism, and Stella, knowing his hours are numbered, emphasizes her love for him by indulging in an anti-blackout fantasy. Aware that Harrison is lying in wait for Robert, Stella understands that opening the curtain will give Robert away. At this moment, Stella thinks "any offence

against the black-out seemed to her punishable by death" (HD 311). This notion is both an exaggeration of ARP protocol (which Bowen, herself, as an air raid warden, was familiar with enforcing) – in which an offence against the blackout could be punished by death from a bomb – and a statement of fact, for giving away treasonous Robert's position will certainly hasten his death. Space, as mediated by the curtain, here *becomes* a language, a way to communicate between private and public. Stella ultimately tells Robert that she wants to open the curtain, "Want[s] to crash the window open and blaze the lights on. To think of [Harrison] makes me angry – I want[] to say, 'Yes, we are here, together: what else do you suppose?'" (HD 322). This desired act, a public acting-out of her private desire for Robert, would betray the Nazi to the public sphere just as it would betray the lighted private sphere to the Nazis. In this way, Stella's imagined act of complicity in publicly loving Robert would be treasonous to both her country and her spy. There is no simple division between the sides of the curtain.

Another passage important to the novel's curtain motif occurs earlier, as Stella's "espionage" over Robert escalates (HD 191). As she begins to envision her lover as an agent for her country's enemy, the fabric of London begins to shift for Stella:

> She began to feel it was not the country but occupied Europe that was occupying London – suspicious listening, surreptitious movement and leaden hearts… The physical nearness of the Enemy – how few were the miles between the capital and the coast, between coast and coast! – became palpable. Tonight, the safety-curtain between the here and the there had lifted; the breath of danger and sorrow traveled over freely from shore to shore. (HD 139)

As the "physical nearness of the Enemy" – not just the Germans in France but her own lover, with his "cold foreign fingers" (HD 306) – becomes palpable to Stella, Britain's island isolation

becomes violable.[48] Likewise, through her knowingly loving a spy, "the ideological threat has infiltrated [Stella's] private sphere."[49] When the "safety-curtain" lifts for Stella, it lifts the divisions between public and private, domestic and foreign, with it.

The long story "The Happy Autumn Fields," from Bowen's *Demon Lover* volume epitomizes the shifts between public and private that so trouble Stella in the novel. The story formalizes the splitting of the "safety-curtain between here and there" by taking place at once in both World War II London and Victorian County Cork.[50] Formally, the story's sudden shifts between a rural Victorian *mise-en-scene* and wartime London are accomplished by the simple insertion of blank lines between the two settings, so that the shuttlecock effect is deliberately jarring. These blanks seem, however, to be enacted *in* the storylines. The story opens in Cork but suddenly breaks off after the line, "Oh, the word is lost!" as the character on the London side picks up with an offering of the "lost" name, *"Henrietta..."* (CS 675).[51]

In the London component of the story, Mary, packing her bombed-out city house – a space relegated by the Blitz to those rooms "without windows or doors"– falls through the "safety-curtain" of daily life into a trance or dream of Victorian Cork that renders her "real life" dreamlike (CS 676). Upon coming to to find her lover, Travis, in the house with her, "the unreality of this room and of Travis's presence preyed on her as figments of dreams that one knows to be dreams can do. This environment's being in semi-ruin struck her less than its being some sort of device or trap" (CS 677). Wishing she were back in the "happy autumn" and decidedly previous-century, peacetime fields of her dream, Mary becomes, "frantic at being delayed here, when the moment awaited her in the cornfield, she all but afforded a smile at the grotesquerie of being saddled with Mary's body and lover" (CS 677). For she has been, for hours, living in the afternoon across the curtain as a young girl called Sarah, who is herself in

love with a country squire Eugene.[52] After the story provides this interlude at Mary's house and returns to County Cork, Sarah herself feels that she's been asleep and dreaming for much of the afternoon – corresponding, of course, to the bewildering time spent as Mary.

Travis is concerned for the bewildered Mary's safety. After all, he says, "With the lock blown off your front door anyone who likes can get in and out" (CS 677). (In fact, the building appears to be filled with looters in furniture-mover clothing.) What is really going in and out, however, is Mary's consciousness; the blown lock between her private home and the public sphere has also blown the lock on her imagination, blown the lock between the past and the present, the dead and the living. For Mary, in this blitz of time, appears to be both herself and her ancestor, and she is terrified, for just at the point of her waking, it seems that "something terrible may be going to happen" to Eugene in County Cork, rendering there no "to-morrow" for the happy autumn fields (CS 682). Suddenly, a bomb explodes in London. "The one way back to the fields was barred by Mary's surviving the fall of ceiling. Sarah was right in doubting that there would be to-morrow: Eugene, Henrietta were lost in time to the woman weeping there on the bed, no longer reckoning who she was" (CS 683). After Travis does some reading in the family papers, he discovers from a letter that Eugene was thrown from his horse and killed. The letter writer wonders "what made the horse shy in those empty fields" (CS 685). Bowen leaves the reader to infer one answer: it was a German bomb.

*

The rending of the curtain in Bowen's wartime writing collapses difference, collapses her characters' inner and outer worlds, their safe and unsafe spaces, into something else, something blitz-riven: a no-place. This is the key location of war for Bowen, and it straddles the divide between London and Ireland. In a draft of *Bowen's Court* composed early in the war, Elizabeth

Bowen writes about the physical and metaphorical space between County Cork and the Battle of Britain:

> Bowen's Court, this December, still stands, in its particular island of timeless quietness, in the south of an island not at war. Only the wireless in the corner of the library conduct's [*sic*] the war's urgency to the place. But the idea of threat and force and danger does not seem so foreign there as it does in England. It is true, there is still the absence of the immediate physical threat. But such threats, to an Irish house, have been felt and felt: in a sense, they have never gone from the air. At the same time, in the house itself, in the country round it, there is the constant image of what peace could be. To be at Bowen's Court is like looking into a mirror at the reflection of something that does not exist.[53]

Here is an attempt to reconcile Bowen's Court's sense of timeless separation from war with its garrison-role as "an Irish house," an Anglo-Irish ghost house, w[l]hich had already, by outlasting the burnings of the 1920s, seemed to survive its own death.[54] Bowen collapses distance by contrasting the apparent peace of Ireland's neutrality with the sense that the threat of violence is "never gone" from the Irish air. Bowen's Court, by being at once "timelessly" separate from the current war and never separate from the timeless pressure of conflict, becomes "the reflection of something that does not exist": a mirage, a double-negative, a no-place.[55]

In *The Heat of the Day*, the third-person narrator occasionally slips into second and even first person to make totalizing comments on the war experience. One reads, "in these years the idea of war made you see any peaceful scene as it were through glass" (HD 114). Here is that *Bowen's Court* comment rewritten for the novel of wartime experience. Bowen's language of the no-place ("[t]o be at Bowen's Court is like looking into a mirror at the reflection of

something that does not exist") asks the reader to imagine something at a double-divide – a reflection, already a distortion, of something nonexistent – but demands, at the same time, that it be visible. After all, this is an act of "looking," and to look, one must exist, must reflect – if not in the looking-glass sense, then in the thinking sense. Bowen's troubled "mirror" is at once reminiscent of *Bowen's Court's* mirror reflections in her novel of war, and of the reflective way Bowen bends language in the novel. A reflection not only mimics but transforms, and these two places in Bowen's work – London at war and Ireland at "peace" – are transformed by and into one another just as the novel questions language's agency and directive to reflect. For if language is a mirror, its transformative work both mimics and distorts what it reflects; a mirror image is like a very fine lie. Like a spy, it seems to be what it is not. And this is both the problem and the mandate for language at war in *The Heat of the Day.*

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[1] Though nearly every recent monograph on Bowen has mentioned her syntactical acrobatics, Susan Osborn, in a review article on Neil Corcoran's and Maud Ellmann's studies of Bowen, contends that "[t]he most unaccountable absence [in both studies] is any sustained discussion of Bowen's notoriously strange prose style that produces in almost every sentence, either explicitly or subliminally, some disorientation of sense, some unexpected deviation from standard meaning." See Susan Osborn, "Reconsidering Elizabeth Bowen," *MFS* 52.1 (2006), p. 192; Neil Corcoran, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return* (Oxford: OUP, 2004); and Maud Ellmann, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2003).

[2] Heather Bryant Jordan, "A Bequest of Her Own: The Reinvention of Elizabeth Bowen," *New Hibernia Review* 12.2 (Summer 2008): 57.

[3] Elizabeth Bowen, *The Heat of the Day* (New York: Knopf, 1949), p. 309; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (HD 309).

[4] The same reader praised the novel for being the first to express the "inexpressible" tenor of life in wartime London. See Michael S. Howard, *Jonathan Cape, Publisher* (London: Cape, 1971), p. 181-2.

[5] Elizabeth Bowen, letter to Jonathan Cape (1948), quoted in Ellmann, p. 166.

[6] Elizabeth Bowen, *Seven Winters and Afterthoughts* (New York: Knopf, 1962), p. *viii*.

[7] Conversations are especially important to the novel's conception of the war itself. Stella's son Roderick asserts that "conversations are the leading thing in this war!" (HD 67).

[8] Elizabeth Bowen, *The Mulberry Tree*, ed. Hermione Lee (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 41; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (MT 41).

[9] Howard, p. 182.

[10] W.J. McCormack has noted that "the highly distinctive language of *The Heat of the Day* is required to convey a quality of absence or negativity special to the novel." See W.J. McCormack, *Dissolute Characters* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1993), p. 224.

[11] See Robert Fisk, *In Time of War: Ireland, Ulster, and the Price of Neutrality* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1983). Bowen's reports to the British Foreign Office are available in the Public Records Office at Kew and are excerpted in Fisk's book. They are also available reprinted in the rather less reliable book, Elizabeth Bowen, *Notes on Eire*, ed. Jack Lane and Brendan Clifford (Aubane, Co. Cork: Aubane Historical Society, 2009).

[12] Quoted in Ellmann, p. 10.

[13] Adam Piette, *Imagination at War* (London: Papermac, 1995), p. 172.

[14] Piette, p. 172. Many critics of the novel have claimed Anglo-Irish heritage for Stella, but this is never made clear in the novel itself. Stella's ex-husband Victor is certainly affiliated with Anglo-Ireland, as cousin to Francis of Mount Morris, but Stella's own heritage is unmentioned. One of the best diagnoses of Bowen's sketchy treatment of Stella's person and background is Barbara Bellow Watson's assertion that the heroine is "neither flat nor round but translucent." See Barbara Bellow Watson, "Variations on an Enigma: Elizabeth Bowen's War Novel," *Southern Humanities Review* 15 (1981): 131-51. Bowen's narrator suggests that this "translucence" is a condition of wartime living: "It was a characteristic of that life in the moment and for the moment's sake that one knew people well without knowing much about them... life-stories were shed as so much superfluous weight" (HD 103).

[15] Roy Foster, *Paddy and Mr. Punch* (London: Allen Lane, 1993), p. 107.

[16] See letters to Virginia Woolf (MT 216-7), and The Bellman, "Meet Elizabeth Bowen," *The Bell* 4.6 (September 1942): 424.

[17] Ellmann, noting the influence of Piette's argument, writes of Stella that "she has been practicing neutrality involuntarily" (152). This more succinct formulation is also more accurate.

[18] In a November 1940 report to the Dominions Office, Bowen writes, "It may be felt in England that Eire is making a fetish of her neutrality. But this assertion of her neutrality is Eire's first free self-assertion: As such alone it would mean a great deal to her. Eire (and I think rightly) sees her neutrality as positive, not merely negative. She has invested her self-respect in it." (Quoted in Piette, p. 170-1; see also *Notes on Eire*, p. 13). Publicly, in the *New Statesman* that year, Bowen writes that declaring neutrality "was Eire's first major independent act. As such it had, and keeps, a symbolic as well as a moral significance – a significance that identifies, for the people, Eire's neutrality with her integrity" (MT 31).

[19] See Eamon de Valera, *Speeches and Statements by Eamon de Valera, 1917-73*, ed. Maurice Moynihan (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1980).

[20] Elizabeth Bowen, *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen* (New York: Anchor, 2006), p. 730; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (CS 730).

[21] See Corcoran, Lee and Ellmann, along with Vera Krielkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1998); and Margot Gayle Backus, *The Gothic Family Romance* (Durham: Duke UP, 1999).

[22] However, in Bowen's complex formal vision, Cousin Francis of Mount Morris is wound up insome nebulous war intrigue sponsored by Harrison, who first meets Stella at Francis's funeral; moreover, Stella's stay at Mount Morris gives her the impetus to confront Robert on her return. In this way, plot cannot be cleanly disentangled from subplot. See Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle's discussion of the knottiness of the novel as "sheer kink" in *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel: Still Lives* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), p. 88.

[23] McCormack, p. 211.

[24] See Piette, Ellmann, and Krielkamp on *The Heat of the Day.*

[25] Allan Hepburn, *Intrigue: Espionage and Culture* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2005), p. xvi.

[26] In a letter of 5 January 1941, Bowen describes her own experiences of espionage to Virginia Woolf: "In Dublin I get engaged in deep rather futile talks; it is hard to remember the drift afterwards, though I remember the words. I suppose that (smoke-screen use of words) is a trick of the Irish mind" (MT 218). Neil Corcoran warns that in Bowen "acts of writing and reading are themselves constantly offered to readerly inspection and interpretation." In her prose's "negative construction, repetition, inversion, and ellipsis; in a reflexive turning back in upon itself rather than a committed motion forward; in its unyielding refusal of the obvious," Corcoran finds in Bowen "an anxiety that the mere writer herself may not remain in control of the riot" (3).

[27] A draft version of this passage includes the eerily gothic sentence, "Which homegoing trains and buses, just by so much lightened, bore to their destinations bodiless occupants?" Elizabeth Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*. Hand-corrected TS. 1945-9. Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin (HRHRC), Bowen Archive, Box 5, folder 3.

[28] Bowen, *Seven Winters*, p. 4.

[29] See Ellmann (p. 1-40) for an intelligent discussion of the concept of "nowhere" in Bowen.

[30] Bowen's Court for Elizabeth Bowen, like Mount Morris for Roderick, is one of many alternate realities that Bowen explores as "hallucinations... an unconscious, instinctive, saving resort" for her wartime characters in *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* (MT 94).

[31] Bowen, *Bowen's Court* (New York: Knopf, 1942), p. 457; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (BC 457).

[32] On Jan 5, 1941, Elizabeth Bowen wrote from Bowen's Court to Virginia Woolf, whose London home (like Bowen's) had recently been bombed: "All my life I have said, 'Whatever happens there will always be tables and chairs' – and what a mistake" (MT 217). Standing outside the Blitz and having survived the Anglo-Irish War, Bowen's Court must have appeared to stand beyond danger. Its eventual demolition seems, in this light, all the more poignant.

[33] Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*. Hand-corrected TS. 1945-9. HRHRC. Bowen Archive, Box 5, folder 3.

[34] See Jed Esty, "Virgins of Empire: *The Last September* and the Antidevelopmental Plot," *Modern Fiction Studies* 53.2 (2007), for a discussion of Bowen and plantation gothic.

[35] This is clearly an idea that sticks with Bowen. Twenty years later, in *Eva Trout*, Constantine reminds Eva that, "The wall's very thin... Between dead and living." Bowen, *Eva Trout* (New York: Anchor, 1993), p. 90.

[36] In her preface to *The Demon Lover*, Bowen writes, "The search of indestructible landmarks in a destructible world led many down strange paths. The attachment to those when they had been found produced small worlds-within-worlds of hallucination – in most cases, saving hallucination" (MT 97).

[37] Bennett and Royle, p. 91, 95.

[38] See Clair Wills, *That Neutral Island* (London: Faber, 2007) for more on the experience of the Emergency in Ireland as being dictated by rations and shortages which made it feel "not in the least like peace" (59), while outside the country, "stories of pleasure and plenty were tinged with a fairy-tale sense of unreality, as if Ireland were a fantasy refuge from the harsh outside world, a place where moral backsliding could be indulged" (6). For more, see Fisk and also Brian Girvin, *The Emergency: Neutral Ireland 1939-45* (London, Macmillan, 2006).

[39] For more on the Irish censor's demand for "neutral-mindedness," see the Introduction.

[40] In *How Will the Heart Endure: Elizabeth Bowen and the Landscape of War* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992), Heather Bryant Jordan notes that the frequent use of passive voice in the novel evokes "the torpor and convolutions of the war years" (164).

[41] See Kristine A. Miller, "'Even a Shelter's Not Safe': The Blitz on Homes in Elizabeth Bowen's Wartime Writing," *TCL* 45.2 (1999), on how in *The Heat of the Day,* "the collapse of physical boundaries between private life and politics represents the breakdown of ideological stereotypes about feminine domestic space and the masculine political area" (149).

[42] In *To Ireland, I* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), Paul Muldoon cites Bowen's collapsing of distance between the present and past, place and place, in her short stories (such as "The Demon Lover") as an example of her use of the "*féth fiada*, the barrier between being and not-being, between this world and some other, wondrous realm, [which often takes] the form of a woven fabric," a common trope in Irish (Celtic) tales (p. 24). Muldoon explicitly connects Bowen's use of the *féth fiada* with both MacNeice and Beckett. See Chapter 3 for more on the *féth fiada* in Beckett's *Watt* and O'Brien's *The Third Policeman.*

[43] Clair Wills, "The Aesthetics of Irish Neutrality During The Second World War," *boundary 2* 31.1 (2004): 124.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid., p. 121. The other writers Wills discusses in the essay are Francis Stuart and Denis Johnston.

[46] Ibid., p. 143.

[47] A hallmark of Bowen's writing is her hyper-real treatment of furniture and furnishings in her work. For example, in *The Last September* (1929), Danielstown house and its furniture are highly indicative of their inhabitants' states of mind, in *The Death of the Heart* (1938), the furniture often comes across as more human than its owners (as its caretaker, the housekeeper Matchett, is not shy of noticing), and in *Eva Trout* (1969), Eva over-furnishes her home with electronics as a substitute for normal relations with people.

[48] See Wills, Fisk, and Girvin for more on Ireland's invasion fears.

[49] Petra Rau, "The Common Frontier: Fictions of Alterity in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* and Graham Greene's *The Ministry of Fear*," *Literature & History* 4.1 (2005): 41.

[50] Bowen notes in her preface to *A Day in the Dark* that "the locale of the Victorian family in 'The Happy Autumn Fields' is, though not stated, to me unshakably County Cork." Elizabeth Bowen, *A Day in the Dark and Other Stories* (London: Cape, 1965), p. 9.

[51] This is echoed in *The Heat of the Day,* where Stella's and Robert's first words to one another are "lost" (HD 104).

[52] An indulgently long excerpt from her father and his siblings' childhood diary (1876) reprinted in *Bowen's Court* reveals Bowen's source text for the family outing in "The Happy Autumn Fields," and Bowen's family tree contains all of the fictional family's names. In this way, the relationship between Mary and her presumed ancestors in the short story may be seen to mirror Bowen's with her Cork ancestors as she worked on the history while living though the war in London. See *Bowen's Court*, p. 325-42, 453-57.

[53] Bowen. *Bowen's Court.* Hand-corrected TS. 1945-9. HRHRC. Bowen Archive, Box 1, folder 2.

[54] Though *Bowen's Court* is relatively silent on the issue, Neil Corcoran provides a bit of oral history regarding the house's survival of the Anglo-Irish war. He reports that while the Bowen family was absent, the local IRA "took a vote in the house itself about whether to burn it. The vote was, of course, not to do so... the implication being that the family had been an exceptionally tolerant one" (p. 25 n.9).

[55] The doubling of *Bowen's Court* with Bowen's Court finds an echo in the sonically doubled names of Mount Morris, Roderick Rodney, and Louie Lewis in *The Heat of the Day*. At the end of the novel, Stella discovers that her secret agents double one another: Harrison ("just Harrison") turns out to be another Robert, making these double-positives a sort of grammatical doubling just as ambiguous and compelling as the novel's double-negatives.

The Endless Process of Ending in Beckett's Endgame

2011 Winner F. Ward Denys Essay Contest

David Blinn

The Endless Process of Ending in Beckett's *Endgame*

In a rare interview with *New York Times* journalist Israel Shenker, Irish poet, author, and playwright Samuel Beckett once claimed, "I'm working with impotence, ignorance....I think anyone nowadays who pays the slightest attention to his own experience finds it the experience of a non-knower, a non-can-er" (qtd. in Graver and Federman 148). Beckett appropriately makes the "ignorant" essence of life evident in his 1957 play, *Endgame*. In this work, though, the characters are not unaware of the hopelessness of their situations, the trivialness of their relations, or the painfulness of their existences – as Arthur N. Athanson writes in *Endgame: The Ashbin Play*, the characters do, in fact, have "occasional, and striking, revelations of ironic humor and human compassion toward each other and their circumstances throughout the entirety of the play's action" (9). They seem to understand that they, together, are trapped – Hamm, Clov, Nagg, and Nell share bleak and monotonous lives from which they cannot free themselves. Nagg and Nell are forced to live in ashbins by their domineering son, Hamm, who, in turn, is contained by his blindness and immobility, and Clov, Hamm's caretaker, is restricted by a self-imposed obligation to serve his master. These characters know that they are imprisoned by their conditions. The one potential escape for these characters, however, is the aspect of their lives of which they are most ignorant: their endings. With no other way out, they are forced merely to wait for their existences to cease, presumably by death, but the question of when and how their endings will come still remains unanswered. They are unable to unveil any form of closure.

The first spoken words of *Endgame* are "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished" (Beckett 8). Articulated by Clov, this sentence implies that the end of something is close at hand. Readers or viewers of the play cannot tell what, specifically, is ending – Clov reveals only that the plot of the play is beginning near its closing stages. In

Samuel Beckett, Andrew K. Kennedy writes that Beckett's scheme of starting near the finish implies that "'ending' is a process" (48). The conclusion to the miserable situation portrayed in the play will not materialize out of thin air; it will take time to develop, to play itself out. At one point, Hamm even soliloquizes, "The end is in the beginning and yet you go on" (Beckett 77). He realizes that endings are really just the beginnings to new chapters, and those chapters give way to the beginnings of even newer ones. If such is the case, can anything ever definitively end? Kennedy does not believe so: he claims that endings are not merely processes, but *endless* processes (48). Accordingly, the continuous journey to a final cause is more tangible than the final cause itself.

As readers of *Endgame* soon learn, the thing that Clov believes is "nearly finished" is his relationship with Hamm. Clov is going to leave, thus ending his years of service to his commander. Like the rest of the characters, he wants to be done with his life of suffering. But if endings are truly endless, how can Clov possibly leave? Indeed, at the end of the play, Clov appears ready to make his final exit: he garners himself with a "Panama hat, tweed coat, raincoat over his arm, [and] umbrella bag," and he goes toward the door (Beckett 90). Nevertheless, rather than leaving, he "halts by the door and stands there, impassive and motionless, his eyes fixed on Hamm, till the end" (90). His ending, too, is suspended indeterminately. Of course, any real person would have had the capacity to walk out on a domineering ruler like Hamm if he or she desired. Here, though, while Beckett implies that Clov is in the process of leaving and will exit in due course, no definitive conclusion is reached. By withholding any form of closure from his readers, Beckett makes a keen observation about mankind's strong dislike of change: Clov is unwilling to leave because he, like all other people, is unsure of and frightened by what lies on the other side of his personal, familiar world.

So, adhering to this view, Beckett plagues *Endgame* with routines – routines that never seem to end. Near the beginning of the play, a brief dialogue between Hamm and Clov reveals a bit about the habitual nature of their lives:

HAMM: Have you not had enough?

CLOV: Yes!
[*Pause.*]
Of what?

HAMM: Of this…this…thing.

CLOV: I always had.
[*Pause.*]
Not you?

HAMM: [*gloomily*] Then there's no reason for it to change. (Beckett 11)

Evidently, neither Hamm nor Clov are satisfied with their current situations. They have exhausted themselves by doing the same things day after day: Hamm tells Clov the same stories, Clov looks at the outside world through the same windows for Hamm and reports his findings to be the same, Hamm asks Clov the same questions (because he loves the same answers), and so on. Even Nagg and Nell are victims of habit: they reminisce over the same memories and cheer each other up with the same jokes. Why, then, do they not make any alterations in their ways of life? In an essay on *Endgame*, Eric P. Levy describes Beckett's belief that "the life of an individual sustains routine patterns that insulate against the destabilizing intrusion of change" (168). In essence, people's habits function as security, as stability, in an erratic, unstable environment. When Clov asks, "Why this farce, day after day?" Hamm replies, "Routine. One never knows" (Beckett 40). Routine is, in and of itself, the reason why it exists – it is a predictable constant in an unknowable world. This is why Clov struggles to leave Hamm all the way through to end of the story. His reliance on routine prevents him from making a

change, from ending the farce that is his life. As Beckett writes in *Proust*, "Life is a succession of habits" (qtd. in Levy 172). Clov's "habit" is his eternal feeling of responsibility to care for Hamm. Beckett uses hyperbolic habits like this to remind his audience that they, too, are victims to their own routines.

Adversely, while habits are always the same, familiar actions, the people who perform them are always altering. As a general principle of life, people change. The way by which one perceives his or her self, others, and the external world is, as Martin Esslin states, "in constant flux. The voice [of an artist] tells a different story at any given moment," and, likewise, a spectator *perceives* a different story as well (3). As such, even though an observer of the play might think he or she has seen Clov climb his ladder and look out through the windows a few too many times, it is important to remember that his or her experience of Clov's actions is different for each repetition, and that Clov's experience of that action is different, too. In this way, Beckett effectively reminds his readers and viewers that Clov's habits are no more monotonous than their own, yet they are able to repeat them (and indeed *must* repeat them) because the experience of those habits is never quite the same. *Endgame* itself might as well be considered a ritualistic routine, too. In *The Broken Window*, Jane Alison Hale points to the second line of the play, in which Clov describes grains piling into a heap, as an evocation of the image of an hourglass. Like an hourglass, which, if flipped over, will reset and once again start to form a new heap, the play itself resets after each recital to be performed once more (53). Nevertheless, the way the grains fall and the way the play is enacted are never quite the same in subsequent executions (Hale 54). The performances change as a result of the flux in the actors' creative voices or the observers' perceptions – because people change, the perceived world changes, too.

Thus, it might be said that the only "truths" in the world are the ones that individual

persons perceive for themselves. A production of *Endgame*, for example, that one theatergoer did not see has absolutely no effect on his or her perception of the play. All that matters is the production that he or she was present at to observe, to experience. *That* production is his or her conception of *Endgame*; it is his or her truth, for, as Esslin writes of Beckett's philosophy, "As the individual is constantly changing, and only experience is a valid basis of truth, generalized statements claiming an applicability outside the flux of time and outside the individual's shifting self-perception, must necessarily be false" (6). In simpler terms, due to the fluctuating and transient nature of one's perceptions, the only truths that exist must be discovered experientially and *in the moment*. Moreover, because each moment in time contains the experiential-truth, every subsequent moment negates the preceding one (Esslin 7). As is stated previously, when one chapter of life ends, another begins; likewise, when one moment ends and becomes false, another begins and acquires truth. Eric P. Levy refers to this "inevitability of running down until the end, again and again," as a "disintegrative process" (179). The fading of a subjective, observable truth from moment to moment is inescapable: perceived reality is always disintegrating and being replaced by a new reality.

Indeed, one does not need to look very deep into *Endgame* to notice the ubiquitous decay that is symbolic of such a process. All the characters "exhibit the usual Beckettian symptoms of physical degeneration" (Kennedy 51). Hamm is paralyzed, blind, and in constant need of pain-killers. In addition, Clov asks him whether he bled in his sleep, implying that he has some sort of disease or disorder (Beckett 14). Clov evidently has severe pain in his legs and is unable to sit down. Nagg and Nell are old, weak, pale, and virtually helpless – they depend on Hamm (who depends on Clov) to supply them with food and to change the sand in their ashbins. Kennedy also notes that nature itself appears to have disintegrated (52). Clov explains to Hamm

that "There's no more tide" on the sea (Beckett 70). He says that there is no sun, yet it is not night; all outside is "grey" (39). When Hamm asks Clov to describe the exterior world, Clov replies that it is "corpsed" – it is lifeless and rotting (37). Although the entire universe seems to be decaying in *Endgame*, the characters' consciousnesses remain unfaltering: "their awareness of their own self continues relentlessly" (Esslin 7). The unending nature of their self-perceptions, of their consciousnesses, is, as Esslin claims, in a constant strain with the decomposing nature of their worlds (7). Hamm, Clov, Nagg, and Nell are situated so that they must simply wait until they themselves decay into nothingness, until, as Clov says of the piling grains, "one day, suddenly, there's a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap" (Beckett 8). The end is seemingly near, but, due to the nescient nature of conclusions, it may, after all, never come. There is nothing for readers and viewers of the play to look forward to, hope for, or anticipate in Beckett's universe.

Toward the end of the play, in a brief soliloquy, Hamm says, "Moment upon moment, pattering down, like the millet grains of... [*he hesitates*] ...that old Greek, and all life long you wait for that to mount up to a life" (Beckett 78). Like the heap of grains that Clov speaks of, this is a reference to the ancient Greek philosopher Zeno, who established the "logical impossibility of reaching an endpoint" (Astro 135). As Alan Astro describes,

> This ancient Greek imagined that a man nearing a certain point first goes half the distance there. Then he goes half the remaining distance, and he is three-quarters of the way there. He goes half the remaining distance, and he is seven-eighths there. It is clear that reasoned this way, the end can never be reached. (136)

Endings are intangible and indefinable. When, exactly, do the piling grains become a "heap"? Or, is there a certain amount of moments that constitute a life? The answers to these questions are ambiguous and will vary for every individual's response. Endings, then, are also highly

subjective: Astro writes, "In order that there be an end, a subjectivity is required to notice the ending; ends do not exist in themselves" (136). In other words, for an ending to truly exist, one must be present to observe it. Hamm, Clov, Nagg, and Nell are required to notice their own terminations in order to truly and fully end their suffering. But how is this possible if one's "Consciousness cannot conceive of itself as nonexisting"? (Esslin 7). Unfortunately for the characters in *Endgame*, it is, indeed, impossible. Esslin writes, "as the individual can never become aware of his own cessation, his final moments of consciousness must remain, as it were, eternally suspended in limbo and can be conceived as recurring through all eternity" (7). The characters, therefore, are not waiting for closure, but for something else. When they come close enough to their endings, their "final moments of consciousness" will echo throughout time, never actually expiring, but repeating forever. Hamm, at the end of the play, thinks that Clov has left him. In his view, his ending has finally arrived, and he embraces it by saying to himself, "You...remain" (Beckett 93). His "ending" will *remain*: it will be everlasting, for, as Astro writes, he "will always be 'nearly finished'" (145). The "last million last moments" to which Hamm refers shortly before the play's conclusion imply that endings really do continue on without finish (Beckett 92). His million last moments of existence will happen recurrently: they will repeat themselves again and again, always ending, but never coming to an end.

If such is the case – if one's entire life experience might be summed up by his or her final moments – then for what does one live? If one can never have definitive closure, then what is the point of living in the first place? The answer may lie somewhere along the lines of Virginia Woolf's philosophy: to live in and for the moment, because, as she writes in "The Moment: Summer's Night," "the present *is something*" (392; my italics). Though the present moment is always fleeting, it does contain great significance, for without the present there would be no

foundation upon which the future could build itself. Thus, in a world where one's consciousness of his or her life never ends but merely culminates into one eternal, recurring present moment, Samuel Beckett shows in *Endgame* that the only thing that gives value to human existence must be an awareness of the now, which, when coupled with every transitory moment of the past, shapes an individual's cumulative experience. In other words, one must not live for the past, for it is gone and negated; it has given way to the present. Likewise, one must not live for the future, for without the present there would not be a future. An awareness of one's present condition as it has been shaped by the past is where the significance of life lies. As Michael Worton writes in an essay on *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, "The point is not the force of any individual idea but that idea follows idea; each proposes something different but also arises from and refers on to another" (79). Individual ideas found in a single moment contain little importance by themselves. The relationship between every moment in time as it pertains to the present moment is where true meaning is found – the past has shaped the present moment, and the present moment is shaping the future. Attentiveness to this fact is the key to discovering significance in one's own present condition.

Virginia Woolf writes that "If you are young, the future lies upon the present, like a piece of glass, making it tremble and quiver. If you are old, the past lies upon the present, like a thick glass, making it waver, distorting it" (392). In *Endgame*, Nagg and Nell, the two older characters, rely heavily on past memories. Nagg tells a story of long ago when they crashed on their tandem bicycle, Nell reminisces about a time when they once went rowing on Lake Como, and every time Nagg mentions the word "yesterday," Nell becomes elegiac and says, "Ah yesterday!" Their pasts "distort" their conceptions of the current moment – they only find happiness in their memories, which essentially seals them away (like their ashbins)

from experiencing the present. Likewise, Hamm and Clov, the two younger characters, have an irrational fixation with the future. They incessantly talk about Clov's threat of leaving – they discuss whether or not he will succeed in leaving, what might happen if he does leave, how he should signify that he has left, and so forth. Their fascination with the possibilities of the future weakens their sense of now, so that their notion of the present "trembles" and "quivers" – without a solid basis in the present to construct the future, each following moment becomes more instable for them. This instability is perhaps signified by their handicaps: Hamm is immobile and blind, and Clov has a "Stiff, staggering walk" (Beckett 7).

None of the characters are able to embrace the present: for one reason or another, they fear it, they loath it, and they want their experience of it to end. They hide from the "existential experience," as Esslin calls it, by hiding from it, by "[entering] a world of games, of arbitrary actions structured to give the illusion of reality" (9). That is, because they cannot face their present reality, the characters in *Endgame* skirt around their situations by way of "games" that form a new, deceptive reality. Hamm and Clov play the same games of power day after day, and Nagg and Nell play the same games of love. Although these games are truly just illusions, or forms of escape, they nevertheless "*are* the world to the consciousness which has produced them and which in turn *is* what it experiences" (Esslin 9). The games that Hamm, Clov, Nagg, and Nell play are perceived as truth, as actuality. Nagg and Nell's effort to live in the past, when they were lovers, becomes their reality, and Hamm and Clov's effort to grasp the future, to predict what will come next, becomes theirs. As observers, audiences of *Endgame* may be well aware of how ridiculous and contrived the characters' ways of life are. But to the characters, "It is the shape of the thought, the shape of the experience that matters, for the shape is its own significance, the experience its own meaning" (Esslin 10). As Hamm says in his final

soliloquy, "Since that's the way we're playing it...let's play it that way...and speak no more about it" (Beckett 93). The games they play have become their reality, and they will play them until the end, if it ever really comes.

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Haunted Theatre:
The Fortune Theatre and The Woman in Black

2011 1st Place Winner
Dramatics Club of St. Louis Contest

Marley Teeter

Haunted Space:
The Fortune Theatre and *The Woman in Black*

Compared to its West End neighbors, the Fortune Theatre (located in the heart of London's "theatreland," where Russell Street meets Drury Lane) is rather cramped and a touch shabby. Its exterior is a white-washed concrete and its interior could be found surprisingly stale by any audience member expecting the plush grand staircases of other West End theatres, such as the Royal Drury Lane Theatre just across the street. In fact, an audience member is far more likely to *descend* to the theatre than *ascend* to it, as the theatre was built under and around a neighboring church: the dress circle is at street level, with the stalls and stage underground.

The Fortune Theatre may not be the most posh West End theatre, and, seating only a few more than 400 people, it is certainly not the biggest. It is, however, a very fitting space for Stephen Mallatratt's adaptation of Susan Hill's ghost story, *The Woman in Black*, which has been running at the Fortune now for twenty-one years, making it the second-longest running current West End show, after *The Mousetrap* (oddly–or not so oddly–enough, another thriller). It is not, however, only the play that conforms to the space, but also the space that conforms to the play.

For many years, the Fortune has, in fact, been rumored to be haunted by a spectral woman in black or grey, similar to the titular phantom of the theatre's long-running show. The inevitable question rises: Which came first?–the ghost or the ghost story?

In his adaptor's note for *The Woman in Black*, Stephen Mallatratt writes, "The intent of the show is to frighten– so if it doesn't, it's nothing" (vii). In the same note, he emphasizes the importance of the unseen over the seen: "Darkness is a powerful ally of terror, something glimpsed in the corner is far more frightening than if it's fully observed" (Mallatratt vii). MaryBeth Inverso, in her book *The Gothic Impulse in Contemporary Drama*, seems to agree, writing, "The drawback of staging the supernatural, though, no matter how effectively carried out, is that it actually *reduces* the audience's participation in the paranoia of the seer-character" (6-7). That is to say that, by limiting the audience's ability to imagine every sort of horror possible–or, better yet, to imagine that horror is beyond what they are even *capable* of imagining!–a ghost seen by the audience becomes less scary. This is a problem encountered by many ghost plays.

What happens, however, when you layer a space such as the dusty, underground Fortune Theatre, onto a ghost story? By creating a sense of a true fearful space, an audience becomes more likely to *share* in the "paranoia of the seer-character," as Inverso calls it. The space is able to layer a reality upon the fiction. This is, in fact, very important to Mallatratt's adaptation of *The Woman in Black*, which takes Susan Hill's ghost story of the same title and contextualizes it by relocating it inside a theatre.

Mallatratt's main character is a man long haunted by a horrible spectre appearing in the form of a gaunt woman dressed all in black, and by the destruction that she caused in his life. He hopes now to rid himself of the burden of his story by telling it to a public audience–and so he has hired an actor to tell the tale for him. Confusingly for someone reading the play, although of no issue to someone watching it, the haunted man is referred to as "Actor" (as well as the names of the other characters he will portray) and the actor is referred to by the haunted man's name: "Kipps," since it is the haunted man whom the actor portrays in their rendition of Kipps's story. For the sake of convenience–if not simplicity–I will refer to them in this same way.

The framing of the Mallatratt's play is simple: Kipps-who's-really-an-actor and the

Actor-who's-really-Kipps rehearse together the telling of the story of the ghastly woman in black in preparation for the public, while the real public–the audience at any given performance of *The Woman in Black*–has the story transmitted to them through this rehearsal, which, ironically, is the "real thing." The device of the play is equally simple, but produces an alarming affect:

As "rehearsals" continue, the spectre of the woman in black appears, playing her part in the story. Kipps thinks it a grand special effect, exclaiming, "But– from *nowhere*, Mr. Kipps– It was miraculous! How on earth did you set about it? [...] No. Very well. I understand. One must appreciate the magic. One must never ask how the magic works" (Mallatratt 24). He is enthralled with what he believes to be the magic of the theatre, eerily reminding the audience that they may be falling for the same trick as he. The Actor, on the other hand, never sees her. The audience may look frantically through their programs, but they will find only the two men playing the Actor and Kipps listed. The brilliance of *The Woman in Black* is this: the woman appears to not be intended to be a part of the play.

Suddenly, the play, which takes place in a theatre (and which begins with Kipps sitting among the audience, as if to illustrate this very point) has become quite real for the audience, who are seeing this "real" ghost in the theatre, just as the actor is, even if he does not know that is what he sees. The woman does not take a curtain call. The safety net of seeing any horror play at the theatre has always been the curtain call, when the frightful characters are thankfully smiling humans once more; but in *The Woman in Black*, no such reassurance is given that there was ever an actress at all, rather than a miserable ghost.

Susan Hill's original work of the same title does not include any of this artifice; her story is simply the ghost story that the man tells. Mallatratt moved the story into a theatre, bringing his audience with him and allowing the theatrical space to add to the horrific effect of the play. He did not, of course, write it specifically for London's Fortune Theatre, but he recognized the importance of the space on the performance. Mallatratt's play is more "dangerous" for its spectator, who can act as voyeur, than Hill's is for its reader because Mallatratt's play allows the audience to become witness to the ghost whose curse is said, specifically, to require sight of her. If you see the woman in black, a child close to you will die. Kipps has revealed earlier in the play that he has a young daughter, whom we can infer will suffer a horrible death now that her father has seen the ghost. The audience seems no safer:

> *Kipps: How does that seem?*
> *Actor: I have a horror of it. Watching you, it is as if I relive it all, moment by moment... though you, of course, will never suffer as I did– I must always tell myself that.*
> *Kipps: But never think I don't feel for you. I have a child myself. (Mallatratt 18)*

It is ironic that this revelation comes right as the Actor has reminded himself that Kipps will never have to suffer as he has–because, of course, he will.

An interesting twist in the Actor's means of storytelling in order to "un-haunt" himself is that is not, in fact, the one telling his story. As he notes above, it is Kipps who is telling it for him (and who has, thus, acquired his name in the script's very text), and so he must find his katharsis not by telling the story, but by watching it told through another.

Toward the very end of the play, after having completed telling the story of the woman in black, Kipps asks, "And is it done, d'you think? Will it now be laid to rest?" and the Actor replies, "I pray it will. I thank you for your trouble– your enthusiasm– and your effort." He adds once again, "Your emotion just now– it was as if I watched myself" (Mallatratt 50). "Kipps" has truly *become* Kipps. By telling his story–by acting as the means of that purging–he has become

the other person, so that the "Actor" who was once a man called Kipps who lost his child to the curse of the woman in black can lay his own sorrows to rest, while the Kipps who was once an actor who agreed to tell a ghost story now will suffer the same fate he portrayed.

The realization comes in the final lines of the play that perhaps what was seen on-stage was not simply some theatrical magic, but the actual ghost of the woman in black. Perhaps Kipps does not yet understand what has befallen him, but the Actor does, and, after questioning Kipps about the "young woman" he has seen, ends the play with the deliberate statement, "I did not see a young woman," echoing the characters he had portrayed earlier in the play who had already had their town ravaged by the woman in black's curse (Mallatratt 51). As long as you don't *see* the woman in black, you are safe.

But the audience has seen her. By portraying Kipps in the story's recreation as witnessed by the audience, the actor-we've-been-calling-Kipps leaves the audience with the somewhat unsettling feeling that he is, in fact, the one to whom the events of the story happened. By pretending to be a part of something in which he initially had no part, the actor has brought the ghost's curse upon himself. In the case of *The Woman in Black* storytelling becomes less a means of un-haunting as a means of passing that haunting from one person to the next: from the Actor to Kipps to the audience. The haunted man has found his katharsis, but the haunting does not end with him. This is the brilliance of Mallatratt's placing of Hill's story within a theatre. The Fortune Theatre becomes haunted by his woman in black. Perhaps it is little wonder that actors and audience members claim to have seen a "real" woman in black haunting the auditorium.

It is a recurring theme in gothic stories: the story that is told to another as a means of warning, but whose full meaning the other fails to recognize until it is too late. "There is no such thing as safe voyeurism in the Gothic; spectatorship is the most dangerous condition. Even if the spectator decides to 'do' something to ward off the catastrophe prefigured by the spectacle, there is little evidence to conclude that such a gesture would make any difference" (Inverso 41). Thus is true for poor Kipps, who, even had he recognized the woman in black for what she was when first he saw her on-stage, could have done nothing to stop the fact he *had* seen her, and that he would now fall under her curse. Like in the story of Medusa, the very act of *seeing* is what is so dangerous, and that is precisely why *The Woman in Black* works. Even if the audience suspends their disbelief and believes for the course of the play that Kipps and the Actor are Kipps and the Actor, they can look in the program and be reminded otherwise. They will be saved from the "reality" of the play when they see the actors break character at curtain call. They never get this relief with the ghost of the woman in black, and that turns her into the something *other* that is ghostly, rather than simply an actress playing a ghost. Chaos is maintained in an otherwise very straight-forward play by denying the audience their presumed right to see the actress out of character, as a name in a playbill or as a person taking her bow.

These are aspects of the play's "space": the playbill and the curtain call. They are signals that what has occurred is a play, put on by people who are not in fact Kipps or the Actor or the ghostly woman in black. It is our social understanding that these figures should all reveal themselves to us in their true forms by telling us about their past work in their playbill biographies and by bowing as themselves after the show has concluded. *The Woman in Black* muddles these signals by having an Actor who is an actor who has taken on the name of another man who is, in fact, an actor as well. It muddles the signals further by not allowing us to see the real actress who is the phantom woman in black. When a theatre audience has these semiotics

taken from them, they are left ill at ease and spooked.

I asked earlier which came first in the case of the Fortune Theatre: ghost or ghost story? The unfortunately simple answer, in this particular case, is the ghost story. I spoke to an usher at the Fortune who said that, to his knowledge, no sightings of the ghost were mentioned prior to twenty-one years ago. Others milling around the theatre (some of whom seemed surprisingly well-versed in its haunted history) agreed. Although the woman in black has been sighted by two actors and multiple audience members, it seems she did not appear until the play whose title so resembled her first began its run in 1989. The most commonly anecdoted sighting goes as follows: "One of the actors, Sebastian Harcombe, saw two women to the right of the stage where no living person was in fact standing. At the same time, the leading lady mentioned that she felt that she had been followed onto the stage by someone she couldn't see" (Real-British-Ghosts.com). Perhaps, however, this is more interesting than if the ghost had existed prior to *The Woman in Black* taking up home in the theatre. It shows the power of space on performance.

I will not make any claims as to whether these ghosts are "real" or not; that isn't important. What is important is that the theatre is somehow a space ripe for ghosts. "In his account of the uncanny, Freud tells a kind of linguistic ghost story as he traces through the transformations of meaning in *heimlich* to show that the notion of the familiar, comfortable, tame, or at home with, comes around to mean also what is secretive, concealed, deceitful, or withheld" (Rayner x). After all, what is theatre, but a double for life, just as ghosts act as doubles for the living? Theatre is *very similar to* life, but it isn't life. It has that odd ring to it of something that almost feels like everyday, but which doesn't quite. Something is *off*. The theatre is filled with things pretending to be other things. It is also a space which can be filled with such light and sound and vibrancy, but which just as quickly can be emptied and hollowed: the audiences leave and, within a few hours, the set is torn down, and it's as if none of the story was ever there at all. It is easy to see why so many theatres claim to be haunted.

The very space of the theatre–dark and exitless, trapping an audience for the duration of a show–seems to seep with the desire to tell ghost stories. It all goes back to the eeriness of the double, the thing which almost *is*, but *isn't quite*. In no place is the double so alive and well as it is in the theatre, where real, breathing people are real, breathing characters–and yet aren't. The character and the actor are doubles for one another. The stories we see on stage are almost like reality, but not quite. Some playwrights take great pains to remind us that we are in a theatre, while others take pains to have us forget it entirely, and yet the simpler version of "which came first–ghost or play?" remains true: Does art imitate life or does life imitate art? The theatre and the real are too close of kin, at times, to be told apart decisively, and yet the one is our reality and the other is merely an illusion created by actors, set, lights, a script, rehearsal, etc.

It is interesting briefly to remember the death of the French playwright-actor Molière, which became legend. He collapsed on stage during a show in a fit of coughing and hemorrhaging, and died thereafter. "How impertinent of nature to shatter the illusion of art, to touch [Molière when he was] not, so to speak, [himself]. [...] Had Molière collapsed in rehearsal, the event would lose its phenomenal significance and become a detail in his obituary. The mystery rests, rather, in the fact that the event took place in the theatre" (qtd. Inverso 130). It seems almost that death, in the case of Molière, has violated what should have been a sanctified moment and place. Art and reality are so close that when the latter chooses to force itself upon the former, it leaves us with a sensationally morbid sort of death, in which one double breaks through another and kills not only it (the illusion of the theatre) but itself (the actual man who is

Molière). I cannot help but be reminded of another classic Gothic story, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and how when the unfortunate Dorian tries to stab and destroy the painting that is his double, it is he who is found with the knife in his chest.

In his book *The Haunted Stage: the Theatre as Memory Machine*, Marvin Carlson claims that, "every play might be called *Ghosts*" because the whole of theatre is about the bringing back to life of past theatrical experiences (2). "The retelling of stories already told, the reenactment of events already enacted, the reexperience of emotions already experienced, these are and have always been central concerns of the theatre" (Carlson 3). For Carlson, theatre is more than simply Gothic doubling: it is a layering upon layering of memory. Because each time a memory is invoked it, in its turn, invokes yet more layers of memory, watching a play of which you've seen a different production before or seeing an actor in a different part than you once saw him causes the "ghosts" of all previous theatrical experiences to arise in the mind of an audience member. Sitting in the very architecture of a theatre in which you have sat before peels layers away from this onion-like memory until the single theatrical experience cannot exist on its own, it is so rife with ghosts of experiences past.

The Fortune Theatre capitalizes on this phenomenon, which Carlson coins as "*ghosting*" (Carlson 2). It allows its space and the stories of its supposed hauntedness to layer the experience of attending a performance of *The Woman in Black* and, by doing so, uses the semiotics of its space to the performance's advantage. Just as campfire tales are spookier by flashlight and the nominal campfire than they are in the middle of the afternoon, a ghost story that takes place in a theatre is scariest in a musty theatre at the heart of an old city.

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Monster

2011 2nd Place Winner
Dramatics Club of St. Louis Contest

Leah Barsanti

MONSTER

"Battle not with monsters,

Lest ye become a monster."

-Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzche

CHARACTERS:

Monster: the leader of "The Sisterhood" is a 22 year old sociopath with a "thriving sex addiction;" obsessive, self-aggrandizing, and sporadic, she is most commonly attired in bright colored leggings and over sized t-shirts

Cherry: an immature and slightly bitchy 17 year old girl with problems beyond a nasty habit of slicing into her wrists with razorblades and a love of cherry lollipops, which she is constantly sucking on; the youngest of "The Sisterhood," Cherry's day to day attire is a red cotton dress, white sneakers, and red sweatbands around both wrists, but no matter the occasion, her color is red

Almond: 19; a nervous anorexic who is constantly reading fashion magazines; Almond worships Monster and Cosmo equally and completely; she is always up to date on all fashion trends and hangs around Monster's apartment in a pink size 0 Juicy sweat suit; she also has a large scar on the left side of her face

Daisy: Daisy is 21 and bipolar and a writer; she is the newest recruit to "The Sisterhood;" Daisy always wears blue, floral Doc Martens, and a yellow ribbon in her hair

SETTING: New York City

TIME: present.

Act 1.

Welcome To Your World.

set: blank stage with three specials, Monster holds a flashlight

Cherry

(special on **Cherry** as she takes a razor blade from her pocket and runs it across her wrists, then turns them out toward the audience, admiring the blood as it drips down her arms, she fixates on her left wrist and licks the blood from it, smiling crazily, lights down)

Almond

(as the special comes on too-skinny **Almond** we see her sprawled on the floor, flipping through a fashion magazine, hoarsely singing a chorus of "I Am Beautiful" by Christina Aguilera, lights down)

Daisy

(special on **Daisy**, she is sitting a in corner, silent tears running down her cheeks, turning a prescription bottle over and over in her hands, through her sobs we can hear her whine "I don't want to live anymore, not in THIS world," lights down)

Monster

(turns a flashlight on her face as if she is telling a ghost story around a campfire)

Hello everyone! Welcome! Welcome to a fantastic show starring none other than the fabulous: ME! That's Monster to you, and to the world, for that matter.

May I say that you are all looking dashing tonight.

(to a specific audience member)

Especially you, LOVE that dress. I love all your dresses! But of course I do. After all, you're all dressed to the nines, dressed to impress, if you will. And why shouldn't you be, you're at the theatre after all. And art requires a CERTAIN ATTIRE, does it not? I certain way of dressing, of being, really… art is something YOU yourself must put on a show for… but isn't everything?

But, here's the thing LADIES and GENTLEMEN! You're not just in a theatre, you're also in MY WORLD, which is yours as well, at least for now. And in my world, there is no dress code, no "way of being." Come. As. You. Are.

That being said, I would like to start the evening's festivities off with a little inquiry, a little question of all you prim and proper theatre goers:

Ever had a vice? No?

LIAR!

We all have them, hidden away, somewhere in your deepest of souls there are… lies, secrets, a secret that you don't want even yourself to know. A secret that's probably not so different than mine, or any of ours.

The girl with the bloody wrists,

(light up on **Cherry** again, she continues to admire her bloody wrists)

that's Cherry. She likes sharp things.

(lights down on **Cherry**)

And the really skinny one,

(light up on **Almond**, still flicking through that magazine and singing)

we call her Almond because... well because that's just about all she'll eat.

(lights down on **Almond**)

And then there's poor little Daisy,

(light up on **Daisy**)

a "manic depressive" with a hankering for sleeping pills.

(lights down on **Daisy**).

And... I guess that just leaves me, a sociopath and thriving sex addict.

(sitting on an audience member's lap)

And if these things scare you, make you feel uncomfortable or uneasy...

(loudly, in the audience member's ear)

GOOD.

It's only because we are merely reflections of you... of your deepest. Desires.

Listen, we all have the same problems, we're all incredibly FUCKED UP. Some of us are just more upfront about it, and I'm not saying that makes us better than you... but it DOES.

You see, I never put on a show for art... or for anything else for that matter. I'm just my big bad self, and I think that makes for some pretty damn fine entertainment, but, if you don't agree, the exit's over thata way. However, if you do, in fact, choose to stay, I have but one sentiment left to express:

Welcome my friends, welcome to your world.

(flashlight off, exit **Monster**)

Act 2.

Daisy, Daisy, Give Me Your Answer True.

set: card board boxes and a garbage can or two create an alley, when the lights come up Daisy is standing in the middle of the alley blankly staring off into space, Monster stumbles into the alley, pulling her t-shirt back on over her bra

Monster

(calling back down the alley)

Thanks! You were wonderful, keep the change! No really!

(seeing **Daisy**)

Wellywellwellwell, what have we here, is Cinderella late for the ball?

Daisy

What... no?

Monster

Pregnant? Wrong guy's baby?

Daisy

No.

Monster

O... I know! You killed a man in Reno.

Daisy

What?

Monster

(taking **Daisy** under her arm)

Don't worry honey... we've all been there, why just last month I...

(interrupting herself)

The important thing is that you hid the body well. So... what'd you do with it?

Daisy

No, I... I just don't see the point anymore, ok?

Monster

The point of what? Your nose? Because I can't see mine either. What you need is a mirror.

But seriously, what did you do with the body?

Daisy

No, not the point of my nose you idiot, the point of living.

Monster

Well that's absolutely ridiculous, haven't you ever had a hot fudge sundae?

(**Daisy** doesn't respond)

Gollee! Tough crowd tonight, what's s'matter? You depressed or something?

Daisy

Maybe.

Monster

Do tell, I'm all ears… well not actually because then I'd be pretty damn freaky lookin' but you know what I mean…

Daisy

Are you insane?

Monster

If I say yes will you tell me what's wrong?

Daisy

(hesitantly)

My parents… they want me to take… this… medicine… pills. But I… I won't take 'em!

They disowned me…

Monster

Pills huh? For what?

Daisy

Man- why do you care what they're for?

Monster

Suppose I don't really, just trying to make conversation.

Daisy

Well this isn't exactly a conversation I want to have with a stranger… JUST PLEASE… please… leave me alone and let me kill myself in peace…

Monster

Aww shucks darling… you've just had a baaaad day. Forget all that. Come with me.

Daisy

Why?

Monster

Because I'll show you the point. And because you, my dear, don't really have anything more to lose. Do you?

Daisy

Where are we going?

Monster

A magical magical land of wonder!

(Daisy doesn't respond)

My place. C'mon, shake a leg.

Daisy

I don't have any money if that's what you're after!

Monster

PUHHH-lease. I have money. I make quite a killing in the Sado-masicist friendly adult film industry.

Daisy

That's not funny.

Monster

Also wasn't a joke.

Daisy

So what DO you want?

Monster

Come with me and you'll find out. Don't worry, I'm not gonna force you into the sex industry or anything… unless of course you're into that shit.

Daisy

I'm not.

Monster

Alrighty then, now we've got that settled let's jet!

(Daisy doesn't respond)

Where else do you have to go? Do you really want to be a homeless? With your flawless bone structure... girl, this city would eat you alive.

(lights down, exit **Monster, Daisy** steps to the front of the stage, into the light of a special)

Daisy

So, guys, I went with her, I mean, how could I not? It was like she was so... SURE... of everything. And I was so... unsure... writing "best selling novels" one day and the next, thinking of the best ways to die in a city like this.

(pulling a notebook out of her pocket and flipping through it, searching for something specific)

I sometimes think of random lines and write them down for later use, I've never found a use for this one but I've always liked it, perhaps even more than any completed piece I've ever written.

(reading)

When the soul finds its twilight place, and dawn refuses to shine on you, hop on the first wave that will carry you away into the darkness, into whatever unknown is darker than your soul. It is there where you will finally be at home.

(closing the notebook)

At the time when my soul was darkest, the tidal wave that was Monster found me.

The thing about Monster was that she had this way of bewitching you into seeing yourself as the person you wanted to be. She reminded me of every girl mesmerizingly strange enough to have a poem written about her: like she was Poe's Annabelle Lee or the boy that Shakespeare wrote all those love sonnets to... but it was even more than that. It was like she had the world and the galaxy and the universe all in her back pocket, like she was 8 steps ahead of Fate even... and if you went along for the ride maybe you could get a glimpse of the answers she seemed so certain of. So yeah, I went with her. You all would have too.

(lights down, exit **Daisy**)

Act 3.

Much Madness Is Divinest Sense.

set: (MONSTER'S APARTMENT) a door- center stage- leads back to what all the girls know to be Monster's Room (backstage); on either side of the door are couches laden with pillows and blankets, as if someone had turned them into makeshift beds, the "bed" on the right- belonging to Cherry- is messily unmade, the "bed on the left, however, has nicely folded blankets and pristinely stacked pillows; there is a sleeping bag on the floor and Almond lies on top of it, head on a pillow, reading a fashion magazine; in the corner is a fairly nice stereo system playing "It's My Life" by Bon Jovi, Cherry gyrates next to the stereo, singing along to the song at the top of her lungs, using her lollipop as a microphone

(enter **Monster**, throwing her arms up in a dramatic flourish; **Daisy** shuffles in behind her, staring at her feet)

Monster

(she picks up the stereo remote on the floor and switches off the music)

(singing to the tune of "The Yellow Rose of Texas")

Much madness is divinest sense

To a discerning eye:

Much sense -- the starkest madness

'Tis the majority…

(she stops singing and instead switches to an overly dramatic performance of the poem)

In this, as all, prevails,

Assent, and you are sane;

Demur—you're straightway dangerous,

And handled with a chain.

(**Cherry** and **Almond** being to clap immediately as **Monster** takes bows and blows kisses to the "crowd")

Almond

(in awe) What was that?

Daisy

Emily Dickenson.

(all eyes in the room turn to her)

Monster

O, by the way ladies, I brought you some fresh meat… and apparently she's a pretty smart cookie…

(with a Vana White flourish in **Daisy**'s direction)

THIS. IS. DAISY.

Daisy

My name's not-

Cherry

(clearly quoting Monster)

(cutoff) Of course it's not, but it's not really whatever it is either, now is it? Your parents gave a name to you, the world calls you by it. WE are all about saying FUCK YOU to the big bad world!

Isn't that right Monster?

(she looks at **Monster**)

Monster

(beaming at Cherry)

EXACTLY. In The Sisterhood, we have names that reflect who we are, not just baby names arbitrarily picked out of some book. This is Cherry…

Cherry

Because I love the color red and cherry lollipops!

Almond

And because you like to cut your wrists.

Cherry

(shooting Almond a leering grin)

That too!

("cough talking")

Fatass! Ugggh uggh.

Monster

(in a warning tone)

Ladies…

Almond

(immediately, and as if she had done something horrible)

Sorry Monster.

(**Cherry** rolls her eyes)

Monster

You see Daisy, in The Sisterhood our "diseases" are merely assets we possess as part of our individual-

Daisy

(overlap) Assets?

Monster

(a smile growing on her face) But of course. Everyone feels fat, depressed, unloved, in need of a release… and the world looks down on US because we're not afraid to show it? Hell to the FUCK NO! Not here, not in The Sisterhood.

Daisy

So you guys are all… umm… insane?

(Almond and Cherry snicker)

Monster

I don't know… do we seem crazy to you?

Daisy

I don't know?

Monster

(shrugging)

The insane are, on occasion, not without their charms.

Daisy

(in awe)

That's Vonnegut.

(Monster smiles)

Monster

And you, my dear, are just as charming as we are. And just as charming as Kurt Vonnegut Junior, for that matter… actually, he was quite the asshole…

Daisy

Yeah.

But… umm Monster… what if I don't want to be in… The Sisterhood.

Monster

Then you wouldn't have come with me, now would you have Daisy?

(**Daisy** doesn't respond; with a brilliant smile)

That's what I thought. You can sleep in Cobra's old bed.

(she points to the stage left couch)

Daisy

...just as much as it horrified...

Almond

(lunging for **Cherry**)

SHUT UP!

Cherry

Your. Dear. Father.

Almond

(overlap)

SHUT UP! SHUT UP! SHUT UP!

Cherry

(to **Daisy**)

She wanted to fuck him after her mom died, you know? be a replacement of sorts. But she was much too ugly.

Almond

I will kill you!

(A flicker of fear scampers across **Cherry**'s face, she backs down)

Cherry

Relax, I'm only kidding.

Almond

(sitting back down with her magazine)

It's not funny.

Cherry

(slightly defensively)

I was amused.

(looking at **Daisy**, who looks horrified)

Don't worry Daisy, no harm done- this is just the way things work around here... it takes a little getting used to.

Daisy

Wait. Isn't this supposed to be a Sisterhood?

Cherry

Got a sister?

Daisy

No.. but-

Cherry

(cutoff)

Listen Daze, if you don't know how Almond truly is...

Almond

(overlap)

That's not how I am!

Cherry

How are you supposed to EVER see her as a sister?

So what's your deal?

Daisy

O I don't have a-

Cherry

(cutoff)

Of course you have a deal, you wouldn't be here if you didn't, so spill.

Daisy

Well... ummm... I'm a writer.

(raising her voice so **Almond** can hear)

She's just in a PISSY MOOD because she gained two pounds this week.

Almond

(into her magazine)

...that's the last time I ever consider bulimia as an option.

Cherry

(to **Daisy**)

Wait so have you ever been like... suicidal?

Daisy

The thought of suicide is a powerful solace...

Cherry

Huh?

Daisy

It's Nietzsche.

(**Cherry** gives her a blank look)

Yeah, yeah, I have.

Cherry

That's great!

Daisy

Is it?

Cherry

Anyways if you follow Monster's rules you'll love it here.

Almond

(looking up from her magazine, suddenly interested in the conversation again, she speaks in reverence)

Monster's fantastic, she's the greatest thing that has ever happened to me, she's... she's a genius. I didn't even know who I was until I met her... she... she taught me to be myself.

Cherry

(to **Daisy**)

Almond's also prone to hero worship.

And if you have any questions, you can talk to me... I mean, I'm kind of Monster's right hand girl.

Almond

O is that what you think?

Cherry

Yeah, that's what I think and it's true.

(with a slight tremble of fear in her voice)

What are you going to do about it?

Almond

At least I don't try to turn myself into a fucking cheap knock-off. That's what YOU are, you know.

Cherry

No, I'm-

Almond

(cutoff)

A wannabe. A fake. Daisy, you should know THAT about HER! She's a little faker! And Monster hates fakes.

Cherry

Well she's no better! Kissing the ground Monster walks on. It's pathetic.

Almond

Maybe. But don't try to pretend that you're the favorite, it's not true. And as far as I'm concerned, well you have nothing to worry about.

(to **Daisy**)

And as for you… you're pretty. 2?

Daisy

2?

Almond

Your size?

Daisy

O yeah.

Almond

Lucky bitch.

Cherry

Yeah, you are really pretty. Seems to me you'd have little to be depressed about. But then that's always the way ain't it? Pretty girls always cry the most.

Daisy

Ummm.. thanks.

Cherry

Anything for a new sister… especially a bipolar one.

Daisy

Why especially?

Cherry

Trust me.

Daisy

Hey, can I ask you guys a question?

Cherry

Shoot.

Daisy

Why do you guys care so much who Monster likes better?

Almond

Are you serious? Have you met her?

Daisy

Yeah she seems… nice enough, and she gave me a place to live so I'm really grateful and all, but-

Cherry

(cutoff)

O shut up, you did not come with Monster because she gave you a place to live… or because she's nice. You came with her for the same reason we did…because there's something about her… and you will spend the rest of your life trying to get as close to that thing as you can… unless…

Almond

(looking up from her magazine, horrified)

Cherry, don't.

Cherry

(smiling wickedly)

Unless of course you end up like Cobra.

Almond

Cherry, seriously, Monster wouldn't want you to-

Daisy

(cutoff, intently)

Cobra?

Cherry

Cobra.

Daisy

Who's Cobra?

Almond

(pleading, with a hint of out-of-control danger)

CHERRY! I don't want you to.

Cherry

(seemingly heeding **Almond**'s warning and backing off the subject, picking her words slowly and carefully)

She just... just didn't fit in with the sisterhood.

(with the last word, **Cherry** immediately whirls away on her heel and goes over to the stereo, turning the Bon Jovi song back on; **Almond,** looking relieved, goes back to reading her magazine; **Daisy** stands there for a few minutes, confusedly soaking in the strange scene that she is now a part of, before going to her new sleeping place, pulling out a paper and pen, and beginning to write; lights down; **Cherry** pulls **Daisy** into the light of the special as if it's a safe haven in which to tell secrets)

Cherry

Alright newbie, let me lay down the rules for you straight now that fat bitch is gone.

Daisy

Why are you so mean to her?

Cherry

Relax, she knows I don't mean anything by it! And I just needed to... establish my superiority, so you know who to come to, ya know?

Daisy

I mean... I guess, but doesn't that seem-

Cherry

(overlap)

Crazy? Hahaha! Yeah, a little.

Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the craziest of them all? That would be yours truly. And I am O SO PROUD! And so is Monster, my savior, my inspiration… I mean, Monster's by no means the God Almond thinks she is but she's… sublime, to say the least. And no matter what Almond thinks, she still loves me the best because she knows… she knows that I do just as she asks: I am myself.

(getting right up in **Daisy**'s face)

GRRRRRRRRR…

Daisy

Holy shit!

Cherry

(giggles tauntingly)

Did I scare you?

Daisy

Uhhhh… yeah a bit.

(**Cherry** laughs, and **Daisy** stands terrified, unsure of what to do in the face of this little "act" that **Cherry** is putting on, lights down, the screaming bleeds a little into the blackout, exit **Cherry** and **Daisy**)

Act 4.

Randle P. McMurphy.

set: MONSTER'S APARTMENT, as before. Bon Jovi's "It's My Life" still plays from the speakers. Daisy is still writing in her notebook, occasionally murmuring to herself. Almond has abandoned Cosmo for sit ups, which she does ferociously, stopping every ten to lay down, place her hand on her flat stomach with a disapproving look, and suck her "fat" in. Cherry sprawls on her couch, not doing much of anything but occasionally bobbing her head to the music or mouthing the words to the song.

(enter **Monster**, with a shopping bag dangling from her arm, Almond and Cherry squeal with glee)

Monster

(in the voice of a sports announcer)

HELLLLLLOOOOOOO BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE! And how are you this fine night? Great? Thought so?

(abandoning her announcer persona)

Excellent. I brought presents.

(**Daisy** looks confused)

Daisy

What presents? What's-?

Cherry

(cutoff)

You'll see.

Almond

It's a little initiation ritual.

Cherry

I remember my initiation-

(but we never get to hear about Cherry's initiation because at that moment she is cut off as **Monster** opens the door with a flourish and three fairly decent looking men saunter in)

Monster

Three smoking hot escorts for three lovely ladies. I also have...

(she rummages in her shopping bag)

Some coke for Almond...

(she pulls out a bag of white powder and tosses it at **Almond**, who catches it and hugs the bag gleefully)

Some cherry vodka for Cherry...

(she presents the bottle to **Cherry** who squeals with delight)

And for Daisy... well I guess you get to pick your poison, we got beer, we got whiskey, we got weed... some funny little blue pills...\ what'll it be babycakes? Anything for you.

Daisy

(overlap)

I don't do pills!

Monster

I didn't ask what you didn't do. What do you do?

Daisy

I... I'm a whiskey girl.

Monster

Of course! Of course you are!

(**Monster** gives **Daisy** the whiskey bottle, smiling at her brilliantly for the few following seconds, before returning to the radio announcer voice she entered with)

Now for our male lineup of the night: He's fiery, he's feisty, he's quite a catch, from all the way out in the Bronx let's give a warm welcome to Willy Wonka, who will be fucking our beloved Cherry tonight.

(**Cherry** and **Almond** clap, **Almond** then clears her throat in **Daisy**'s direction, and **Daisy** reluctantly joins in the clapping as well)

And now, he's buff, he's tough, he's O SO fashionable, put your hands together for Christian Dior, scheduled to get some fine lovin' from the beautiful Almond.

(the three other girls clap once again, **Monster** abandons her radio announcer voice and addresses **Daisy** in a loud whisper that everyone else can still easily hear)

PSSSSST! Daisy and Confused! Newbie! Yeah you. Listen, I don't know what to name your dude because I don't know what you're into yet, so if you could throw me line, give me a hint, a little clue? What's your raison d'etre?

Cherry

(before **Daisy** has a chance to answer)

She's a writer.

Monster

Hmmm a writer, alright writer girl, who's your favorite author?

Daisy

O I don't know, ummmm, I REALLY like Ken Kesey.

Monster

(looking at her and smiling even more brilliantly)

O. So. Very. Fitting.

One flew east.

Daisy

One flew west.

Monster

One flew over the cuckoo's nest.

(she ruffles **Daisy**'s hair)

I like ya kid. I really do.

(returning to her announcer voice once again)

And finally, he's the sensitive type but don't let that fool you, he can be a real Tiger when he wants to be, and believe me, Daisy will make him want to be, I'd like you all to get on your feet for Randle P. McMurphy!

(she cups her hands and makes that crowd sound one makes by breathing through their hands while the other three girls clap one last time)

Alright kids, y'all have fun. Anyone should need me, I'll be in my room watching porn.

Daisy

But…

Monster

But what love? O no… please don't tell me you're a prude.

Daisy

What? O no, it's not that, it's just, where's your guy… I mean, I figured, with your particular… what did you call them.. with your particular *asset* and all-

Monster

(cutoff)

What? You mean about me being a sex addict? Hmmm…

(in singsong)

Somebody's been blabbing and I know who it is….

(in her "normal" voice once again)

Somebody's been sharing my deep, dark, personal secrets.

Almond

It was Cherry.

Monster

Of course it was, Almond, I'm smarter than you sometimes give me credit for.

Almond

I didn't mean to imply-

Monster

(cutoff)

Well whatever, Daisy'd of found out eventually.

(to Daisy)

Yes Daisy, yours truly is a sex addict, and I do quite well for myself.

Now, a "trained professional" would probably tell me that my "problems" steam from the time my 23 year old camp counselor raped me... I was 14... BUT, I stand by 1 fact and 1 fact only regarding that night I lost my virginity: BEST SEX I'VE EVER HAD.

(she makes a deep guttural noise of pleasure, then addresses **Daisy**)

Ever had an orgasm in a canoe?

Daisy

Ummm... no.

Monster

Well you should. I highly, highly, HIGHLY recommend it.

You see Daisy, the brainwashed world doesn't see things the way we see them... doesn't understand... doesn't understand us... doesn't understand that there is no right and wrong, that there's only ever GREY.

Our goal in The Sisterhood is to immerse ourselves in that grey until we drown in it.

And to answer your earlier question, the reason I don't have a man is because I only found three, and I love you guys more than I love myself.

If you do not love me I shall not be loved. If I do not love you I shall not love.

Almond

That's Samuel Beckett, isn't it? I've heard you say it before.

Monster

Right you are Almond.

(going over to **Almond** and fingering her hair)

You're an incredible girl Almond, has anyone ever told you that?

Almond

(breathless)

Really?

Monster

(dropping the piece of hair)

Hell yeah!

Almond

Mon\ster I-

Daisy

(overlap)

Wait that line was from- O sorry Almond.

Almond

That's ok, I was just saying that-

Monster

(cut off)

Hey Almond, let Daze speak, why don't cha?

(Almond shoots eye daggers at Daisy)

Daisy

That line, about love, it's from *Cascando*, yeah?

Monster

(going to **Daisy**, whispering in her ear)

You, my dear, are Brilliant.

(pulling back, to the room:)

Have fun fucking.

(**Monster** exits through the center upstage door that leads to her room; **Cherry** takes a swig of her vodka from the bottle while leading "Willy" to the couch by his hand, **Almond** shoots one last loathsome look at **Daisy** and lays out lines of coke on a mirror, saying something to "Christian" about a "shirt on" rule that she has; **Daisy** looks up at "Randle," smiles, twists the cap off her whiskey bottle and takes a long swig, then offers some to her man, who does likewise; blackout; special comes up on **Daisy** and **Almond**, sitting on the ground, passing

a bottle of alcohol back and forth and both looking shagged and fagged and sloshed)

Daisy

Sorry Monster was such a bitch to you earlier.

Almond

Oh my God, don't EVER call Monster a bitch, no matter how what she does comes across, there's always a reason. Even if it seems mean-spirited or something, there's always a plan, always a lesson, sometimes even I can't see them, but they're always there. And that's the genius, don't you see?

Daisy

I mean, I don't think I see it quite like you-

Almond

(cutoff)

She is... the SINGLE most wonderful person I ever met. She's like, the mother I never had. She gives us everything we could possibly want and... and nothing we don't. Say what you want about her but The Sisterhood... it's a utopia. She taught me how to truly be myself and for that... I LOVE HER. And I always will.

Daisy

You love her?

Almond

Uhhh yeah... I mean in the Sisterhood we love each other. We all do.

Daisy

I guess but... I mean, I think Cherry's kind of mean.

Almond

O yeah, she's a huge bitch.

But I mean maybe sometimes it might seem like she asks too much of us...

Daisy

Who... Cherry?

Almond

No, Monster, she just wants us to be ourselves, and she knows what's best... she knows what's best... even if it's hard to be myself sometimes...

And I would do anything for her, I DID do anything for her, and I don't regret it, not for a second.

(special goes out, **Almond**'s voice is heard over the blackout)

You kill in the name of your gods all the time, right?

How was what I did any different?

(exit **Almond** and **Daisy**)

Act 5.

The Freak Show.

set: blank stage with three specials, Monster holds a flashlight

Cherry

(special on **Cherry**, who is dancing around wildly singing "It's My Life" by Bon Jovi, a brilliantly haunting smile on her face, lights down)

Almond

(as the special comes on **Almond**, we see her with "her man," Christian Dior, nuzzling her neck and whispering in her ear that she is beautiful, like **Cherry**, **Almond** is smiling from ear to ear, lights down)

Daisy

(special on Daisy, who is writing furiously with a kind of possessed smile on her face and occasionally looking over what she has written and whispering lines such as: "Then Lori switches to whiskey, sipping from a flask the rest of her shift. 'So what?' she says to the empty room. The empty room comes up with no answer at all." and saying "This is gold, pure gold." to herself, she is trembling with excitement, lights down)

Monster

(turns the flashlight her face one again, as if she is telling a ghost story around a campfire)

LISTEN UP EVERYONE! Monster's speaking now.

Listen, there are things that I do that are good, and don't you ever forget that. Like Daisy,

(special back up on **Daisy**, who is as before)

Daisy wanted to kill herself when I met her and now she says she's working on what could be the next Great American Novel.

(special down on **Daisy**)

And sweet Cherry…

(special back up on **Cherry**, who is also as before)

She smiles, she dances BECAUSE OF ME.

(special down on **Cherry**)

Even Almond,

(special back up on **Almond**, who , like the other two girls, is as before)

I get her to think she's pretty sometimes, if only for a second.

(special down on **Almond**)

But I'm STILL a Monster. and don't forget that either.

(her tone changes to one of desperation, one that that seems very out of character for the confident monsteress)

The things these girls do: the cutting, the not eating, the fucking, the drugs, the daily contemplation of suicide... I don't ask these things of them, I just encourage them to be who they are... and THAT IS WHO THEY ARE, don't you see?

Society would make them hold all that hurt inside until it broke them into a million pieces, until they were so broken with so many bottled-up feelings that they would have no choice but to turn into the smiling robots I see pass by my bedroom window every day because the hurt without release would be too much for a PERSON with a SOUL to bear. I don't want them to be robots, I want them... I ENCOURAGE them to be THEMSELVES.

And in those brief moments where they are THEMSELVES... god is it beautiful.

(noticing the audience, Monster starts as if they had seen her in something more private than they could ever imagine, and switches back to the sly, easy confidence with which she seemingly lives her life)

Hey, you're all looking at me as if I'm a Monster, to which my only response is: TOLD YA SO!

But here's the real bitch of it, not one of you has the right to look at me that way, because guess what? You're all Monsters too.

(growing suddenly and desperately angry)

Ya know what? Leave. LEAVE! Get out of here right now or I swear to god I'll...

(she runs around the stage, brandishing the flashlight as if it were a lethal weapon, then recomposes herself)

Heh... you know what? None of you care about my story, you're here to be entertained... to LAUGH at the FREAK show.

(in a mocking tone)

AHHHAHAHAHA look at how psycho they are!

(entering the audience, picking a certain member, sitting on the edge of their seat, and turning the flashlight to shine in that audience member's face)

And at the end of the day you're gonna go back to your room, fuck your girlfriends and boyfriends who you think are superior to the whores we fuck because there's an extra step- dinner or sometimes a movie or say...A PLAY- between the money leaving your wallet and the fucking... and then, then you're gonna turn to that girl or boy you're pretending to love just to get some and you're gonna say,

(she puts on an overly-fake, syrupy-sweet voice)

"Darrrrrling, pumpkin, I'm glad you're not as crazy as that Monster character in the play we saw tonight."

But behind those robotic exteriors: YOU. ARE. YOU. ALL ARE.

I just wish you could see it.

(**Monster** switches off the flashlight after turning it back on her own face and aiming another one of her famous grins at the audience, blackout; exit **Monster**)

Act 6.

Why Haven't You Killed Yourself Yet?

Set: MONSTER'S APARTMENT; presumably a few weeks later, Daisy sits, leaning up againt one of the couches, turning a bottle of sleeping pills over and over in her hands. Cherry sits on her couch, sans lollipop, which is clearly putting her in a state of unease, as she is nervously sucking on her thumb. Almond lays on the floor, hoarsely singing "I Am Beautiful." Monster paces the room, surveying the scene like a proud parent.

Monster

If death meant just leaving the stage long enough to change costume and come back as a new character...Would you slow down? Or speed up?

(no one answers her, they are all too wrapped up in their own worlds, except **Almond**, who looks up apologetically, without an answer)

It's Chuck Palahniuk, I'm surprised you didn't know that Daisy.

(**Daisy** looks up from the depths of her depression)

But then, he is probably a bit "pop culture" for your taste.

(**Daisy** shrugs and looks back at the pills, **Monster** starts making clicking sounds with her tongue)

Low point huh Daze?

(in sing song)

Manic depression. Depression.... Depression.

Ok, whatever, I'm bored. Call me whenever something exciting happens.

(she exits into her bedroom)

Cherry

(to **Daisy**)

Why don't you just take those?

Daisy

(everything **Daisy** says in the first half of this act is said from deep in the throes of depression and thus with great effort, as if the strain of mere talking is simply too much for her to bear)

What?

Cherry

(to **Daisy**)

I said, why don't you just take those? She would love you if you did.

Daisy

I don't really care if she loves me.

Almond

Well that's just great!

Daisy

What's-

Almond

(cutoff)

YOU don't care and she makes you her little project. I BEG and she ignores me.

Daisy

(to the pills)

It doesn't matter.

Almond

It does to me.

(long pause)

Cherry

But do YOU want to take them?

Daisy

Take-

Cherry

(cutoff)

The pills.

Daisy

I don't know. I should.

I just want it to be over... so badly, but...

Cherry

Are you scared?

Daisy

No... not scared... not really, I just-

Cherry

(cutoff)

Because it's ok if you are, that's why I never did it.

Daisy

Did what?

Cherry

(matter-of-factly)

Killed myself. I mean I wanted to, STILL want to. That's why, first day you were here, I was so excited about your... suicidal tendencies, it's- it's something we have in common. But I guess when it comes down to it I'm scared.

Daisy

But you always seem so happy.

Cherry

Used to be an actress...

(with pride, describing a beautiful memory)

I was in my high school's production of Hamlet, I played Ophelia. The girl who killed herself for love. My parents were in the audience and Grant Freeman gave me flowers afterwards.

(pulling herself back to reality)

And I don't like being vulnerable, so I put on a mask, play a part. It's not hard… I do slip up sometimes though.

Daisy

Like when you scream at night?

Cherry

(finally living in the gravity of the situation)

Yeah.

But those are the times Monster loves me best. The times when she says I'm being myself. I guess I just don't like myself all that much.

Almond

(sitting up)

You'd rather be her.

Cherry

Well, yeah of course I would. Wouldn't you?

Almond

I could never be her. She's too incredible.

Cherry

Maybe that's why I'm so bad at it.

(long pause)

Daisy

Hey Cherry?

Cherry

Yeah.

Daisy

What happened to you?

Cherry

What do you mean?

Daisy

Well when you talk about your life… it seems like you used to be normal, not like Almond or me, our pasts were… I mean we always had problems… But you seem…

(she trails off, not really sure how to ask the question)

Cherry

(smiling lopsidedly)

What happened was I got better, stopped lying to myself about who I was… and sure, maybe it took me finding my mom's corpse to help me get better but-

Daisy

(cutoff)

WHAT?

Cherry

(with another crooked smile, she talks as if she is describing something as common as the weather)

Yeah. My dad, he was… unfaithful… she couldn't handle it. Hung herself from the ceiling fan in the kitchen. Killed herself for love, just like Ophelia, except without all the water and stuff.

Daisy

O my god.

Cherry

Yeah… and then my foster parents… well they beat me and stuff, and at that point… well I decided that I was never gonna let anyone or anything hurt me more than I hurt myself.

(long pause)

And then I ran away and… thank god I found Monster because, Daisy, if I had to go back I… I can't go back! Not ever.

Daisy

Cherry, I'm so sorry.

Cherry

Why? Turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to me. Opened my eyes to who I truly was.

(staring down at her wrists, suddenly very tense)

Made me look deep deep inside myself.

(shaking off the tension)

And then made me look back out at the world and see that for what it was too: a holding ground for lost souls and monsters.

But that's Monster talking. I see the world as… well…

What I wouldn't give to leave it…

But I'm scared.

So c'mon, take those pills, show me there's nothing to be afraid of, be my inspiration.

(she starts egging **Daisy** on and chanting)

Pain, pain, go away, Daisy's coming out to play.

Daisy

I can't.

Cherry

It's ok. I understand. I'm afraid too.

Daisy

(laughing now)

I'm not afraid… I'm not afraid to die… it's just that…

(she holds up a piece of paper)

this suicide letter is really crap.

(**Cherry** bursts out laughing, which gets **Daisy** laughing too, genuinely this time)

Almond

You guys are freaks.

Cherry

Says the queen master freak.

Daisy

(through her laughter)

Hey Almond, why haven't you killed yourself yet?

Almond

(lovingly)

Ummm maybe because I'm not a suicidal freak like you two.

Cherry

O c'mon, anyone's who ever read the newspaper and has half a heart is at least a little suicidal… has at least thought about it. So really, why haven't you ever gone through with it?

Almond

(with an "alright, I'm game" smile)

You really wanna know why?

Daisy

Yeah, we really do.

Almond

(as if delivering a punchline)

Because I don't want to leave a fat corpse.

(the girls all collapse of the floor in a fit of giggles)

Daisy

(panting from laughing so hard)

We're so fucked up.

Cherry

I kinda love it.

Daisy

My parents would never approve of the company I'm keeping.

Cherry

Puhhhhlease, what I've heard of your folks? They're WAY more fucked up than we are.

Almond

(with her best **Monster** imitation, as **Monster** enters the room from the upstage center door (her room))

We are not fucked up, our diseases are assets my darrrlings, and we are better than the rest of them because we are not liars… we know that we're MONSTERS.

Monster

(leaning on the edge of **Daisy**'s couch)

Hey, that's pretty good Almond, they ever make a movie of my life I want you to play me.

Almond

(startled at **Monster**'s sudden presence)

O!

(this new development just makes **Daisy** and **Cherry** laugh harder)

Monster

(to **Daisy**)

Looks like some one's snapped out of her funk.

(to the room)

Mother may I join your games?

Almond

Of course you can Monster.

Monster

Can I play with madness?

Daisy

What's that from?

Cherry

That, my friends, is an Iron Maiden song.

Monster

(British accent)

Yes darrrrrrling. Yes it is.

(normal voice)

And why shouldn't we play with madness? Why are we condemned to virtue when our vices are such fun!

(to **Daisy**)

I knew you were one of us after all. And thank God I was right, because it would have been the first time I ever was wrong about anything… and besides, I like ya girl, I like ya QUITE A LOT.

(to everyone)

So now. Tonight. I wish to set you all free of the bullshit once and for all. Do whatever you want, be yourselves, because this isn't a test or a school lesson, it's your MOTHERFUCKING LIFE!

(**Almond** looks on with reverence, taking **Monster**'s words to heart, and on "MOTHERFUCKING LIFE" goes up to her and kisses her, **Monster** pulls back, licks her lips, and smiles)

That's exactly what I mean. War paint?

(she pulls a tube of lipstick from her pocket and passes it around to the other girls (offering it to **Daisy** first), who apply it Indian-style to their faces)

Now let's go, tonight we unleash the combined powers of The Sisterhood on the world.

(she opens the apartment door with a flourish and gestures to the outside)

Ladies...

(**Cherry** and **Daisy**, who have been getting into the increasing excitement of the scene exit whooping like banshees, **Monster** follows, **Almond** trails behind, still lost in the ecstasy of the kiss; blackout)

(all three specials come up, and we see little "tableaus" from throughout the night play themselves out through the lights to the tune of 'It's My Life," which may be either Bon Jovi's version or a new version played on the piano like some twisted music box remake; the exact nature of the scenes are up to the actors and the director but they may include such things as **Cherry** dancing on a table, **Almond** kissing **Monster** again, **Daisy** doing shots with a guy in a pink bunny suit, etc. Then, in the middle of the commotion:

Almond

(drunkenly, to Daisy)

I am happy. For the first time I can remember... I'm happy.

Daisy

But Almond-

Almond

(cutoff)

O, I know it wasn't real, I'm not kidding myself, I know she really doesn't see me that way but... I think that deep down she cares, loves me even. Is that stupid?

Daisy

It's not stupid.

Almond

Probably not as much as she loves you but... still, I'm happy. Maybe things will be ok, maybe even ugly people like me can have beautiful things... however fleetingly. I'll lock it up in my heart... and things will be ok. Not better, but ok.

(BLACKOUT, exit all)

Act 7.

Thou Shall Not Kill.

set: MONSTER'S APARTMENT, the next morning. Daisy and Almond lie passed out on the floor, still wearing their "war paint." Almond is completely naked except for a large winter parka and Daisy has "Fuck Me, I'm Crazy" written on her forehead in black Sharpie. The floor is littered with other strange items (ie: a naked man, various empty liquor bottles, a giant stuffed crocodile) that indicated a night either very well or very poorly spent (depending on your personal morals and religious beliefs).

Almond

(waking up and looking around the apartment)

Daisy!

(**Daisy** doesn't wake up)

Daisy!

(she's still asleep)

DAISY!

(**Almond** picks up a random stripper boot that's among the items on the floor and hurls it at **Daisy**'s head)

Daisy

OWWWW! What the fuck?

Almond

Where are they?

Daisy

What... who?

Almond

(as if she is talking to a small child or a stupid person)

Cherry. Monster and Cherry. They still out together?

Daisy

I mean if they're not here then.... Yeah I guess they must be.

Almond

Fucking figures! Cherry's such an immature little bitch how am I the only one who sees it?

(all the commotion wakes up the man on the floor, who looks around, groggy and confused, both girls ignore him)

Daisy

I think she's a bitch too, I told you that. But so is-

Almond

(cutoff)

MONSTER IS NOT A BITCH.

Daisy

Ok... sorry.

(the man on the floor, thoroughly frightened by the scene that's unfolding before him, inches slowly toward the wall and when he reaches it, makes a break for the door, the girls barely notice)

Almond

But she thinks Cherry can do no wrong. Does that not bother you?

(she is practically on the verge of tears)

Daisy

I thought you said that-

Almond

(cutoff)

O what do you care you're next in line!

Daisy

What do you-

Almond

(cutoff)

The new favorite. CHERRY WAS JUST A REPLACEMENT! A new favorite until she found a another perfect, pretty, skinny-

Daisy

(cutoff)

I thought you said that Cherry wasn't the- Almond are you crying?

Almond

(who is, in fact, crying at this point)

No... I don't know. Goddamit Daisy what did I ever do wrong huh?

Daisy

What do you-

Almond

(cutoff)

I try so hard! And I love her! I love her and she doesn't even care.

Daisy

Love... like... real love?

Almond

(ignoring **Daisy** entirely, the tears are angry ones now)

And why should she care? No one ever fucking has. My dad... I saw the way he looked at me... like... like... I'd be the spitting image of his poor, deceased, beautiful wife if it weren't for the unfortunate scar and the roll of fat around my middle...! Fuck it. I don't care. He was right. No one loves a fat girl.

Daisy

You're not fat Almond.

Almond

I didn't WANT to fuck him! Not really! I just wanted him to love me more than that skinny bitchy girlfriend of is! Is that a sin? Wanting your father to love you? I guess if you're fat it is.

Daisy

You're not fat!

Almond

Shut up. I am fat. I'm fat and I'm ugly and that's why Monster doesn't love me like she loves Cherry for the moment. Like she loved Cobra. Like she's getting to love you. And Cherry doesn't even care, and believe me, once you're on top you won't anymore either.

Daisy

Wait Cobra?... I thought you said-

Almond

(cutoff, with tremendous pain and anger)

That she didn't fit in with the Sisterhood? That's a fucking lie. But fitting. She was the QUEEN MOTHER LIAR! Pathological...and a dyke! But she was pretty. Everyone loved her, because when you're pretty EVERYONE LOVES YOU! And Monster... I don't think she cares where her sex comes from...as long as it's not from someone as ugly as me I guess... Does she really hate me that much?... O GOD!

(she collapses on her sleeping bag in a fit of gut-wrenching sobs)

O GOD!

(**Daisy** goes over to **Almond** and awkwardly pats her on the back, unsure of how to comfort her)

I killed her Daisy, I killed her.

Daisy

(pulling back with horror)

What?

Almond

I killed Cobra. O GOD! I didn't mean to.

Daisy

(backing away)

You didn't mean to?

Almond

I... I walked in on them... they were... I didn't know what I was doing until...

Daisy

(dazed, continuing to back away)

And Monster she-

Almond

(looking up with mascara-smeared eyes at Daisy through the lens of a happy memory)

She knows, she was proud of me. Said I was "being myself." It seemed like she loved me then, best even....

But it didn't last. Nothing good ever does. Not for ugly girls.

Daisy

I... ummm... I... ummm...

(**Monster** and **Cherry** enter laughing, but immediately stop when they see the scene in front of them: **Daisy** in a corner looking horrified and speechless and **Almond** looking worn out, angry, and endlessly sad)

Monster

(cooly)

So... she knows.

Listen Daisy, in The Sisterhood there are certain things you have to deal with. We're special and that comes with... certain responsibilities to ourselves and each other.

Daisy

Like... allowing... rewarding...covering up a murder!?

Monster

What happened was tragic... but it happened. Everything's fine now.

Daisy

Everything is not fine! A girl is dead!

Monster

Ok... if that's the way you see it then fine.

Daisy

NO... I don't think you heard me, A GIRL IS DEAD! You call this a Sisterhood? A GIRL IS DEAD!

Monster

And another girl is more alive, more herself, for it! Don't you see the beauty in that?

Daisy

Beauty!?!?! Almond is... she's really unstable... and a girl is dead. DEAD! Beauty?!?!? No. I can't.... I can't... How do I know she won't kill me?

Monster

You don't... but wouldn't that just save you the trouble?

(long pause; she then takes **Daisy** by the shoulders and pleading with her)

Listen to me Daisy, why is killing a bad thing to do? Huh? Because someone once said it was and society listened to them. Let go of the ties of society and open your eyes. You're still one of THEM, show me that you can be one of us. Show me that I wasn't wrong about you. C'mon Daisy. You're not one of them. THEY want you to take pills, THEY want you to be someone you're not. Be who you are.

Daisy

(she stands still for a second, **Monster**'s grip tight on her shoulder, entranced by what **Monster** is saying)

No.

(she tears herself away from **Monster**'s grip, tears in her eyes)

NO! I can't...

YOU'RE A MONSTER.

(while she goes to the couch to grab her journal and then runs for the door:)

Monster

(somewhat sadly)

I know.

And you're not leaving!

Daisy

Yes, I am!

Monster

Where would you go? Not back to your parents? They wouldn't have you.

Daisy

I'll take the pills! It's better than this!

Monster

They wouldn't have you after what you did to that poor girl.

Daisy

You wouldn't.

Monster

I WOULD. You see Daisy, NO ONE leaves the Sisterhood. And if you do I'll tell the police that YOU killed Cobra.

Daisy

And who's gonna believe you?

Monster

Maybe no one, but if Almond and Cherry back me up...

You would do that for little ol me right girls? And of course for the good of the Sisterhood.

Cherry

Umm…

Almond

Monster I-

Cherry

(cutoff)

No.

Almond

(mumbling)

It wasn't her fault.

Monster

I-I-I-

Daisy

That's what I thought. See Monster, you haven't brainwashed them as well as you think you have.

(she reaches for the doorknob)

Monster

Wait, Daze, no. We love you here. We'll let you be who you are. You can't go back.

Daisy

I don't think you know who I am.

Monster

NO DAISY! Please! I need you. I need you to stay.

Daisy

(long pause)

You're… really pathetic, aren't you?

Monster

Daisy, please. We're a sisterhood. You can't leave the Sisterhood.

Daisy

Actually, I can. And Cherry and Almond are coming with me.

Daisy

I'm getting them help.

(**Monster** looks around at the three girls who she feels slipping from her, for the first time that she can remember, she is utterly helpless)

Almond

No, Daisy. I'm staying.

Daisy

Almond. C'mon, what happened wasn't your fault.

(pointing to **Monster**)

SHE pushed you to it. Please.

Almond

Daisy, you know I can't.

Daisy

Almond, I've seen the way she treats you. Whatever happened, it was a crime of passion, a result of the way she MAKES you live, please... please!

(**Almond** just shakes her head sadly)

Almond

I won't tell the cops you killed her though, I wouldn't- you were always real nice to me.

Daisy

Cherry? C'mon. I can save you.

Cherry

But... society. The people that want to-

Daisy

(cutoff, pointing to Monster again)

Those are her words! Not yours!

Monster

(desperately)

And she believes them cause they're true.

Daisy

She believes them because you've brainwashed her. Cherry, do you really want to stay here? To feel like you want to hurt yourself all the time?

Cherry

No, but-

Monster

(cutoff)

You'd rather go back to society, Cherry? Back to getting beat by your foster parents? Back to being told who you are?

Cherry

(getting hysterical)

NO... no, no I can't do that, but, but-

Daisy

(to **Monster**)

STOP IT! You're upsetting her!

Monster

O I'm upsetting her? She was fine until you, you... FUCK YOU! If you want to leave fine, go. You're a hopeless piece of shit anyway. God Daisy, FUCK YOU! GO! But don't ruin their lives too!

Daisy

Cherry, c'mon.

Monster

Cherry, don't you dare.

Daisy

You can't stay.

Cherry

(on the verge)

I know.

Monster

You can't go.

Cherry

I know.

(quietly)

It's my life.

Daisy

What?

Cherry

(suddenly calm, confident)

It's my life. And it's now or never. Isn't it?

Monster

Cherry, you can't leave.

Cherry

I know that.

Daisy

You're staying?

Cherry

No, I can't do that anymore either... I'll be right back.

(she exits into Monster's room singing "It's My Life" by Bon Jovi in a quiet lulling, lullaby way, **Monster** and **Daisy** glare at each other, in a long thick silence that is broken by **Almond**)

Almond

I'm really gonna miss her.

Monster and **Daisy**

(broken from a world in which none other than the two of them existed)

WHAT?

Almond

It's what she wanted though. I think she's brave.

Daisy

Almond, what are you-

Almond

(cutoff)

She went to kill herself. I mean,\ didn't she? Isn't... that what she...

Daisy

(overlap, as realization dawns)

What, NO! NO! Oh my God CHERRY!

Almond

Said?

(she runs after **Cherry**, **Monster** and **Almond** stare after her, unsure of whether or not to follow, blackout, and, over the blackout, **Monster**'s voice:)

Monster

"Madame, all stories, if continued far enough, end in death, and he is no true-story teller who would keep that from you." Hemingway said that.

Act 8.

It Was The Truth Even If It Didn't Happen.

set: MONSTER'S APARTMENT, Monster sits on the couch, as before. Daisy enters from outside looking both harrowed and relieved.

Monster

I guess I should have let you leave when I had the chance.

Daisy

Cherry's going to be fine, thanks for asking. They're getting her help for her depression, which is more than you ever did. Where's Almond?

Monster

O Daisy, Daisy, Daisy, Daisy. I give you two rules, two rules Daisy, and you go and break them. You know, I really expected more from you.

Daisy

My name's not Daisy and you know it! WHERE IS ALMOND!

Monster

It's bad enough that you're too much of a coward to be yourself... but you just HAD to bring Cherry down with you. Was it jealously, huh? Was it? You can't find the strength to kill yourself so you won't let her do it either. Little Miss Sleeping Pills?

Daisy

I saved her life!

Monster

Bull. Shit. You may have saved her body, her breaths, her fucking heart beats... but seriously, do you think that girl will ever really have a chance?

Daisy

Yes. I-

Monster

(cutoff)

Then you're an idiot. And the worst kind, one who denies who she is. Do you think I don't know what a fucking fantasy I've created of my so-called life? Do you think I thought, after my counselor raped me and I ACTUALLY FUCKING ENJOYED IT! Do you think I thought I could ever be normal...

Daisy

Monster I-

Monster

(cutoff)

Hell Daisy, I WANT Cherry to kill herself.

Daisy

Listen, I'm sorry you had a hard life, I really am... but that's no reason to-

Monster

(cutoff)

To what? To let a girl who doesn't pretend to be a part of society like you STILL do have what she wants?

Daisy

I don't think-

Monster

(cutoff)

No, you don't think, because you don't know what's right for her I do! And I know that if she wants to die. then she fucking should! What's worth sticking around for... huh?

Daisy

SHE DOESN'T WANT TO DIE!

Monster

(taken aback by **Daisy**'s sudden boldness)

Yeah princess, and how would you know a thing like that?

Daisy

BECAUSE I DON'T WANT TO DIE!

None of us do, not really. Cherry doesn't want to die and I don't want to die and Almond doesn't want to waste away to nothing and I'm pretty sure you don't want to be a CONTROLLING BITCHY SLUT but those are just the only things we've found so far... and every day I wish it could be different... that I could just be *normal.*

Monster

Normal? FUCKING NORMAL!?!? You're extraordinary Daisy, and you're throwing it all away...

(**Monster** starts laughing coldly)

Daisy

(uneasily)

Why are you laughing?

Monster

Like any of us could ever be fucking normal.

Daisy

Who are you to tell us who we are?!

Monster

Nobody. But you're doing a crap job of it yourselves.

Daisy

So you keep us trapped here like lab rats?! Your own little EXPERIMENTS! You're no better than that world. You don't even know who YOU are.

Monster

(turning away)

I'm a monster.

Daisy

Who lets innocent girls die.

Monster

(turning back and smiling coldly)

She's no more innocent than I am. And you're no less of monster.

Daisy

I'm not like you.

Monster

Letting that poor girl live was the most monstrous thing you possibly could have done.

Daisy

No.

Monster

(smiling more widely and more sinisterly)

In fact, the humane thing to do right now would be to go down to that hospital and hold a pillow over her face until I feel the last breath leave her… call it, ASISSTED SUICIDE.

Daisy

NO!

Monster

Relax Daze, I'm only playin'. I'm not a FUCKING killer.

Daisy

Really? Really? There are lines you won't cross?

Monster

(icily)

Believe it or not.

Daisy

I don't.

Monster

You're all so fucking weak. I don't even know why I waste my time with you.

(singing to herself)

Ring around the rosy,

A pocket full of posy....

Ashes ashes,

We all.

Fall.

Down.

I keep wishing Daisy... I keep dreaming... that one day Almond will finally sum up the courage to stop eating all together, that Cherry will cut her wrists down to the bone and that you'll... finally swallow all those sleeping pills... maybe...

But my dreams keep getting dashed by the fact that you're all-WEAK COWARDS who are AFRAID TO BE... afraid to BE.

And then finally, I catch little glimpses of my dreams: Almond killing Cobra, Cherry trying to kill herself...

AND YOU HAVE TO GO AND RUIN THEM FOR ME YOU STUPID WHORE. Why are you back here anyways?

Daisy

Where's Almond?

Monster

What else about my world do you feel the need to \FUCK UP?

Daisy

(overlap, louder than **Monster**'s words)

WHERE'S ALMOND?

Monster

Fuck if I know. She had some breakdown and ran out. Said she'd be back.

Daisy

How did I ever- GAHHHH! You're unbelievable. Do you actually care about anything?

Monster

Daisy, I'm a lot of a things, ok? A lot of Monstrous bad things, but DON'T YOU EVER ACCUSE ME OF NOT LOVING YOU. You, Cherry, Almond, you're the only things... the only things I ever loved. And- and you don't need me anymore, do you?

Daisy

We never needed you.

Monster

Yes, you did. I gave you exactly what you needed. And the only reason you don't need me now is because... well... Why do you think that you were my favorite Daisy?

Daisy

Because I'm crazy.

Monster

No. Because you're me. I mean sure, there are differences, but-

Daisy

(cutoff)

I'M NOT YOU!

Monster

For your sake, I hope you're right.

(**Monster** exits into her room for a brief second and reemerges with a suitcase)

Daisy

Going somewhere?

Monster

Don't know… California maybe. I've never seen the Pacific Ocean.

Daisy

You're really leaving? You're not even gonna fight me on it?

Monster

I have no reason to stay. You've made your choice.

Daisy

Really, this easy?

Monster

Really this easy.

Daisy

I thought no one ever left the Sisterhood.

(**Monster** just shrugs, long pause)

Monster

I am really gonna miss you though. I hope you believe that, you were, at least for awhile you were… my best friend.

Daisy

I don't think you know what it means to be someone's friend.

(long pause)

Monster

Incapacity to love.

Daisy

What?

Monster

That's what they told me. When I got diagnosed as a sociopath, they told me sociopaths can't love.

(long pause)

Do you have any idea what it's like to have someone tell you that you can't love?

(long pause)

Take care kid, I hope you never realize who you really are. Maybe… maybe you can write a story about me?

Daisy

Maybe…

Monster

Saks 5th, by the way.

Daisy

What?

Monster

That's where Almond goes when she's upset. I called a friend of mine who's a security guard there when she stormed out. She's there, she's alright.

Daisy

O… ok thanks, I'll go… I'll go get her.

Monster

(with a strained smile and a slight nod of "yeah, do that")

Goodbye Chief.

Daisy

(smiling)

Goodbye McMurphy.

(**Monster** smiles as she backs out the door, not taking her eyes off of **Daisy** until the last second when she turns and is gone forever, blackout.)

Act 9.

Epilogue

set: blank stage with three specials, Daisy holds a flashlight

Daisy

(turns the flashlight on her face just as Monster did; special up on **Almond** lying in a hospital bed)

I guess this is the part where I tell you guys what happened, what became of us in the world after Monster… it's not pretty, but as a storyteller, I feel I owe it to you to finish the story.

Almond died in the hospital. A couple of days before her liver failed I visited her.

(she goes over to **Almond**)

I told her…

(to **Almond**)

You look beautiful.

Almond

Do you think Monster would think so?

Daisy

Yeah… yeah I do.

Almond

I'm just eight pounds over my goal weight now!

Daisy

That's great Almond.

(special down on **Almond**, **Cherry** walks back to the front with the flashlight)

Almond weighed 73 pounds on the day she died.

(special up on **Cherry** sitting in a chair)

Cherry got sent to a real mental institution. I visit her there sometimes. They keep all sharp objects out of her room and sometimes she tells me…

Cherry

There isn't a day goes by that I don't wish I had died on that noose.

(special down on **Cherry**)

Daisy

And on the really bad days, she screams, and not just in her sleep anymore either, sometimes the screaming won't stop and the doctors make me leave early so they can sedate her.

As for me, I started taking my meds and moved back in with my folks, I've just had enough roller coaster rides for one lifetime.

Numb doesn't seem so terrible anymore.

And I'm still writing, nothing brilliant but nothing horrible either. I reworked my novel and renamed my main character, gave her the name she should have had all along: Monster.

I never knew what became of her… maybe she found other girls like us, started up a new Sisterhood somewhere. Then again, maybe she's dying of AIDS in some west coast clinic.

She was never the God we took her for, she was simply what we, what ALL of us are at the very core of ourselves.

But I'm trying not to be her. I'm not going to force us on you. If you want to forget this story and how you could relate us sometimes… because I'm sure it's scary to think you could ever relate to us… please forget if you need to, if it makes it easier to live.

And if you need an excuse to forget, to not believe, well, just realize who your narrators were. I mean, we're not exactly RELIABLE, are we?

(flashlight off, **exit Daisy**)

Half-Glass Bed

2011 Winner Carrie S. Galt Fiction Contest

Caroline Wilkinson

The Half-Glass Bed

The window above the bed has changed. The glass looks into a cold frame filled with wisteria. The branches are bare now, it being March. They look like twine tangled inside the box of the cold frame. The tangle seems like part of the bed now. It seems like part of the bed now that this long, rectangular window has turned into a headboard. Last night when Daphne went to sleep, this bed was just a futon on a frame, but now, with this new headboard, it seems more respectable in an abstract, fragile way. This glass headboard could break, but the morning is still and calm, and so is Daphne. Her thoughts are as contained as vines.

Everything beneath the branches is in the ground, the room being half-sunken. The bottom of the headboard marks where the earth begins outside. Daphne doesn't fear the sensation that comes tied up in the wisteria: that she is slightly buried in the earth. It makes sense since her feet are below where the earth starts on the other side of the wall. The feeling of being buried seems insurmountable until she tries to get up from her bed. She finds it easy enough to break through the weight above. Once she does, the sensation of being buried vanishes so completely that it seems absurd. It seems laughable that, only a moment ago, she was lying in bed with such weight pressing down on her, and now she is standing on her futon. She is looking out through a large window above the headboard.

On the other side of the glass, she finds a world covered in ice. The clear layer is sharpening every detail outside: the old hooks of morning glories on the fence and the baby rose. Those thorny branches look both sharp and smooth beneath the ice. Birds are hopping over

them, making their way to a field. Their feathers are the same buff color as the ground. The grass seems to twitch as the birds search its roots for food. Daphne is part of the scene, hungry and searching, and she is shut out too. Her condition is as paradoxical as the sound of the birds taking flight. Their wings are loud and quiet, hard and soft. Her condition is like that sound and not like it at all. The birds are free, while Daphne is stuck in this half-sunk room.

"There are two of us now," she says, even though she is alone. Her lover is in New York working, so why say the "two of us"? It sounds like a line from a poem. It is like the first line from Sylvia Plath's "In Plaster," but Daphne must check the real poem. The words have come to her turned around somehow.

There are two of me now.

"In Plaster," it turns out, begins with a line about "me" and not "us."

Daphne puts down Plath's poems and opens the front door. The dog rushes out. The animal—Ida is her name—begins a delicate trot down the road. She slips on the ice but quickly regains her footing. Most likely, she is on her way to Ruth's on this estate. Ruth lives off the barn in the rooms where cows were once milked. She tests recipes for food magazines in the converted building and is generous with scraps. Ida, coming back from the milk house, usually will be carrying meat or a crust. When the dog reaches the end of the road, she disappears behind some frozen branches.

Daphne envies the dog's freedom. She feels as if she were going nowhere, even when she leaves home. She feels as planted as the mansion that is looking down on her. She is driving to work, and the old mansion is gazing down from a hill. With shuttered eyes, it is surveying its

dominion: the hundreds of acres bought by a rich man centuries ago. His descendants have used up most of his fortune, but some still live in the mansion. Daphne makes her rent from them working at a restaurant about ten minutes away. Coming to the end of the road for tenants, she heads off of the estate. She takes a left onto the county route.

Even on the public road, she feels the mansion's gaze. This stare is smug yet yearning, distant but piercing in flashes. The sun, which is just beginning to set, is flashing in the windows of homes near the road. The mansion is trying to see farther, but Daphne does finally slip beyond its stare. As she drives, she glances to the west at the mountains. The curve of earth seems to be moving, undulating from blue into red. Soon the mountains will slip into black, and the country will become even quieter. It is calm already, being Sunday; most of the people from New York have returned home. As more do, something rougher emerges from the land. The vermillion tuffs on the sumac trees shine with ice. The leaves of the willow are a shocking yellow. Just last fall, Daphne got Lyme disease from a deer tick and has seen the land differently since. She used to be like others who had moved up from the city, enjoying the beauty of the landscape and the lower rents. Now she belongs here and can see not only the land's beauty but its wildness. Its ferocity looks tricky in the red of the sun. It looks like a fever spread across a field—vast and yet as small as a bite from a tick.

The power is out in town, so the restaurant is dark. The refrigerators are warm. The meat is on ice, while the seafood has been cooked in a stew. Daphne is the only waitress. The

one person in the kitchen is Shelley, who preps and washes dishes. Shelley has lined a corner of the room with votive candles and is reading there. Daphne wants to know what is good enough to read in such bad light, but she doesn't want to bother Shelley, who looks sacred among the candles. Her face, framed with large curls, is focused and serious. The candles are glowing in long lines on the pots above the sink. The only other light in the room is the blue flame under the stew.

Daphne cleans the votives in the dining room. She melts the old wax with hot water and then scrapes it into a plastic bucket to go to Shelley, who makes candles at home with the remainders. The bartender Mark is stocking bottles from inside the benches where they are stored. It could be a busy evening at the bar. Many times after a storm, the locals come in to drink and talk about the weather. But no one comes to the bar at first, and the few who come for food leave upon hearing what's for dinner: fish stew and bread. One man from the city comes in and yells about the menu. He is standing in front of Daphne, shouting. She explains the obvious—that the power is out. The candlelight makes their exchange seem intimate. In the dim light, he looks like a fool for yelling at her for what can't be helped, and she probably looks like a fool in his eyes. Now that she truly lives in the country, she is a hick in the eyes of these city people. The man's eyes are dull with condescension.

Mark's gaze seems remarkably bright when she goes to the bar to talk to him. He is in his twenties but looks like a teenager, his features boyishly rounded. Daphne, who is thirty, tries to imagine him aging, but his face pushes back against her efforts.

He starts to tell her about his thumb, a squarish thing. It resembles a toe, and it turns out that it was once a toe. An accident cost him his original thumb. He must have been a cared-for child because, while telling the story of this accident, he betrays no bitterness. Maybe he

received much attention from the grandma who, when he was a boy, took him to Florida to a theme park. She drove him there as a treat that he had looked forward to all summer. He knew all of the characters at the park and was excited to meet them: the duck with the speech impediment, the affable mouse. But what he wanted to do most was to go on a ride with mechanical pirates in caves.

Soon his turn came on this water ride. When he sat in the boat, he gripped the back edge of his seat as if he were about to jump up at any moment. His elbow was sticking out, and his fingers were inside the boat, his thumb outside. He was in the back of the ride in the last boat with his grandma, but he could hear a voice far ahead. A pirate was telling him to hold on tight. They were going down into the cave where there were more pirates. Pretty soon he would see all of them. The boat was moving into a waterfall, but before they could get there, he felt pain in his hand. The pain was too strong for him to believe. Lifting his hand from the boat's back edge, he thought: *But I'm not hurt.*

His thumb was gone. The boat behind theirs, having gone forward too soon, had rammed into the joint where the thumb meets the hand. The digit was lost in the water. Mark screamed, and so did many others since the boat was nearing a waterfall. They seemed to be heading into a mist. Mark's face was wet with tears, but the mist, it turned out, was a dry illusion. His grandma was trying to figure out what was wrong. It didn't take her long considering the darkness of the caves and the freakishness of the accident. She kept shouting, "Stop the ride!"—but the boat went on. Mark screamed until his voice sounded as mechanical as the ride's pace. He passed scenes with robotic pirates running around ships and selling women. The final scene was lit by fire. A prison was in flames, and the light danced across the water's surface. There

were songs about treasure and the boom of cannons. These sounds seemed far away until the ride was over. Once he was outside of the caves, Mark couldn't get them out of his head.

In the middle of the night, Daphne wakes in the half-glass bed, thinking of Mark. His accident is too easy for her to imagine because, like so many people, she has been on that ride with the pirates. She must get the story out of her mind. Not only is it horrible, it can't be repeated, at least not formally in public. She is conscious of where she can repeat Mark's story because she is a writer—or was before getting Lyme. Since her illness, she has only been able to write the shortest fragments of prose, and Mark's story won't help her problem. She can't write about what happened to him with any confidence because of just who owns that theme park. How can she talk about a ride from a corporation so rich and litigious, not to mention so well known? Even if she doesn't repeat the park's name, everyone will know the place she is talking about. To call the park famous is a gross understatement. The characters on its grounds are burned into the minds of millions.

As a child, Daphne was not allowed to watch films by this corporation or use their products. As a result, she never formed feelings for princesses and pirates. It soon became clear that most other children had. Many girls would play the part of the princess, and Daphne would respond with annoyance instead of awe. As for the boys playing the role of pirate, she would fight back when attacked. By the time she went to the theme park as a teenager with an

indulgent aunt and young cousin, she had met most of the characters in an unofficial way: not as a member of a proper audience but as an observer of kids who cast themselves in such roles.

The Lyme disease made her see apparitions similar to the theme-park characters. They would appear close to the bed, seemingly cheerful. The one that stayed the longest was an anonymous lady. Her favorite activities were reading and staring, and her presence, while troubling, could also be calming. The lady has left, but Daphne still can remember how she stared, seemingly at nothing, and read.

Mark didn't know much about Daphne's illness or her thoughts on Disneyland. He had told his story for one reason: to explain why he was dreading sorting empty bottles from the bar. The recycling shed out back would be cold from ice, and he knew his thumb was going to hurt while sifting through bottles wet with drips of beer. When he got the surgery to cut off his toe and put it on his hand, the procedure was innovative. The park paid for the operation but not much else. It didn't have to since it had great power in the local courts. "It owns that town," Mark said of the corporation behind the park. People at this point in his story were pouring into the restaurant like frozen vodka: slow and clear in their intent. They were coming in to get drunk in a town suspended in ice. Soon Daphne had to push past them with her tray held above her. She was delivering drinks and stew, while Mark's words, "It owns that town," repeated in her mind from time to time.

Now another thought returns, one from this morning, but it is colder now. *I am buried alive.* With the thought comes struggle. Daphne tries to move her hands but can't. A new weight is on top of her. It is large and indifferent. She can't breathe until forgetfulness comes. While staring at the headboard, she can recall nothing of the previous moment. What came

before this blank as fragile as the glass headboard? This nothing as convoluted as a toe for a thumb?

When Daphne wakes, she is in a more comfortable bed. The cotton of the futon has given way to springs. The bed is even more respectable now, having not only a headboard but a mattress. Daphne closes her eyes and enjoys the comfort. The theme park seems far off and unreal, like a village in an old novel with a deleted name: "the seacoast town of—," for instance, which appears in some Gothic novel, *Frankenstein* or maybe *Matilda*? Something by Mary Shelley. Daphne is on her way to the bookshelf when the phone rings. It is her sister Meredith. The call is short: Meredith, who lives in Chicago, will be visiting come April. She will stay the weekend with her baby. For the first time, Daphne will meet her six-month-old niece Kay.

Meredith, like the half-glass bed, is abstractly respectable. Unlike Daphne, Meredith has a large home, which she owns with her husband. She and her husband are in the same professional field: mathematics. Since marrying, Meredith has grown accustomed to talking about math all of the time. Occasionally she will catch on to the fact that Daphne doesn't understand what she's saying. In these moments, she will go for the simple anecdote, talking, for instance, about how frogs croak at random intervals. Daphne was transfixed when she first heard about the frogs, not because of the anecdote itself; the whole thing went over her head, but she

liked one of her sister's phrases: "Random ribbits." Also capturing her attention was how Meredith was delivering her lecture: while walking backwards in downtown Chicago. Daphne kept her eyes on Meredith, concerned that her sister was about to back into a person or a bus.

Another time Meredith shared her interest in math by showing Daphne charts. While holding up the graphs, she explained what made them important from a mathematical point of view. Being both older and a professor, Meredith habitually speaks to Daphne with condescension, and it was no different with these charts. The tone when combined with the images silenced Daphne for a moment. Hovering in the axes was what looked like crotch-less underwear. The resemblance was not subtle, and with each page came a fresh pair. When Daphne pointed out the likeness, Meredith implied she was a pervert. How could she see panties where only brilliance was on display? It took the men who had made the charts to vindicate Daphne. It turned out many others had made the connection with some colleagues even referring to the men's work as a lingerie catalogue.

Daphne wants to understand her sister, but then again she doesn't want to think about her at all. Meredith is the one link to the family that raised her, and Daphne doesn't want to remember them. When she thinks of that family, she is broken inside, the pieces as scattered as the papers gathering around her bed. Shards of prose are all around her, just as glass surrounds this greenhouse, the old walls having been smashed fast when the structure was crudely converted. Daphne must create something more coherent than these pieces. She begins to number blank pages. She resolves to fill them before her sister comes.

A week before Meredith arrives, Daphne hears a second story about the theme park. Another waitress, Janice, brings up the subject while the two of them are at the wait station. They have just answered the bell in the kitchen. (The "bell" is actually the lid of a pot that the chef hits with a knife or tongs.) The waitresses brought appetizers to a table. One of the men there—they can see him from the station—has a cartoon bird on his shirt. The bird is found at the theme park as a character that mingles with visitors. Janice says her boyfriend from the city used to work as one of these characters. While talking about it, she peers into Daphne's eyes and moves her head ever so slightly. It looks as if she were searching for something in the back of a cupboard. Daphne finds it interesting whenever Janice looks at her in this way. She imagines that Janice, who's black, is trying to see past some racist nonsense in the front of Daphne's brain.

Daphne finds it strange to hear a second story about the theme park, but then again, the restaurant owner, Samantha, has taken to reciting management philosophy inspired by the park. The other day Sam said something about the power of wishing or of paying attention; as soon as Daphne heard the word *Tinkerbell*, she stopped listening. Her polite smile said, *Be back soon*, but Sam apparently had lost the ability to read such things; her mouth kept on moving.

Maybe Janice is sick of all of the Disney management talk too. She has moved on to describing the costumes that her boyfriend wore at the theme park. These costumes were so hot that sometimes they had to be removed after only fifteen minutes. "And the heads on them?" Janice adds, lifting her eyebrows wearily. She holds her hands up past her ears to indicate an enormous size while keeping her elbows in. It is cramped back here in the wait station, and the

door to the kitchen is behind them with people walking in and out. "Those heads were big. Big and heavy."

The lid clangs in the kitchen. They go to pick up food.

The restaurant gets busy and stays that way for an hour. Janice and Daphne talk to each other in short sentences: "The burger goes to the man"; "I got the door." They are moving from the dining room to the kitchen and back. They show up in the corners of each other's sight. They are careful in the wait station not to run into one another. "Behind" is the word that they say most often, announcing when they are at the other person's back. They have to stay aware of each other, but not too conscious. Each of them must keep a long, shifting list of tasks in her head, so it's better not to have to think a lot about coworkers. Both Daphne and Janice are good at the job, and the shift is going smoothly.

When the first lull comes, they return to the wait station with pint glasses of soda. Standing side by side, they drink through straws while looking out at the customers. Only a few minutes ago, Daphne found out that the man with the bird shirt has the culinary sensibility of a kid. He complained that the vegetables and potatoes on his plate were touching. She tells Janice about it, talking from the side of her mouth while biting down on her straw. Glancing back with a lopsided smile, Janice soon drops her head in silent laughter. Daphne feels the other half of the smile creep across her cheek as she glances down.

When she looks up, Janice is studying her. Her eyes are peering through suspicion to something hard. "Did I tell you about the tunnels at Disneyland?" she asks.

"Tunnels?"

She nods once. "Uh-huh. Tunnels underground. That's how they move the food from place to place. Food and supplies. You wouldn't believe what they got there, and it all goes through these tunnels—"

The lid clangs. The bar manager, Tom, comes out of the kitchen, knocking against Daphne with his wide shoulders. Daphne, ignoring him, takes a step back and says, "I got the window." Janice steps back too, but in the opposite direction. Before going back out to the tables, she says with a look of quiet outrage: "That place is its own world."

Tomorrow Meredith will arrive. Daphne's shift is almost done. Before cleaning her stations, she looks through the front windows. Across the street are old homes that have changed under designer paint in the past few years. The dingy whites and blues have given way to glowing coats of cream and sage. Some of the owners of these restored homes have come in to drink this evening. They are being served by Tom whose style is perfect for this changing town. His wide body says work, while his outfit—a bowtie and suspenders—says work quaintly. He looks like a cliché of a small-town bartender, and Daphne looks like a cliché too. Wearing a short skirt and tight sweater, she resembles a country waitress with a nice disposition who might go home with a customer. From inside the cliché, she is looking out at the world in need of tips. She has yet to pay her doctor's bill from when she got Lyme.

She wishes she could quit like Janice, who gave notice tonight. Recently Janice, who has been waiting tables to pay for her pilot's license, made the money for the last lesson that she needs. Daphne wants to follow Janice out of this place into the air. From high above, she wants to look at the land and river and see the swells of earth and the water's grey. Why must she be

stuck down here with these people? Heading for the kitchen, she walks by customers who look like country folk, but their plaid coats are so vibrant. Their teeth are perfect. They look like country people on TV, and one woman, it turns out, is talking about television. She is describing a commercial while shaking her shiny hair, as if advertizing whatever makes her hair so shiny. Why does Daphne have to be down here among people imagining cameras all around them? She wants to soar high above the pretend cameras and perfect houses. She wants to fly over her own home and look down at the whole estate. She wants to stare down at the mansion rather than feel its stare on her.

Going into the kitchen, she heads over to her station. The counter is dirty with olive oil and crumbs. As she puts away bread, the sous chef, Greg, talks to her. He often does at the end of the shift. This story begins where the last one left off: on Greg's memories of rehab. He had to go there after getting hooked on coke at the height of his career. In the famous restaurant in New York where he worked, the code word to snort more lines was "fois gras." Someone in the kitchen, upon hearing the code, would reach for the plate of lines in the fridge. Greg says that, in rehab, he used to paint the same room over and over to calm his nerves.

As he talks about painting, Daphne's mind wanders. She is thinking of the pages still scattered around the bed. On some of them, she has written about that anonymous lady who appeared when she got Lyme. Daphne wonders what the lady had been exactly—a ghost or a part of herself? Of course, it doesn't matter now; with her sister coming, she needs to think about cleaning up those pages and making the greenhouse presentable.

Greg is in her periphery, talking. Daphne, watching his lips, thinks, *Why are you yammering at me?* He has told her so much about himself: how his mother was a waitress and how his dad owned the deli down in Long Island where she worked. Daphne knows how his

mom fed her cat deli meat until its eyes bulged and how she first revealed the identity of Greg's dad in a single sentence while watching the news. Daphne knows a lot about him, and he knows almost nothing about her. He can't know much since she says little about herself to this man whose eyes are so sad they are desperate, even now. *I have lost the one thing that made me happy*, they say. Daphne doesn't trust him.

But she does want him to get through. His life has been hard, and she wants him to keep going. She likes him. Maybe he senses her affection since he is beginning to smile. Were it not for his eyes, he would look almost cheerful. He is speaking of puppets while—Daphne shudders—talking about Disneyland. It turns out that he worked at the park over the summers in college. The corporation gave him a scholarship for school. As part of the deal, he had to cook at the park over break. The workers there were supposed to look happy all of the time. When they didn't, one of the managers would look them in the eye and make a gesture with one hand above the head. Moving this hand upward, the manager would pantomime the strings of a puppet being pulled. The movement was supposed to remind workers of the park's overarching philosophy: that all of the employees, from the ride operators to the cooks, were characters on the park's stage.

Greg laughs. He tells her how, like thousands of Pinocchios, the workers were supposed to look happy. The managers would remind them to pull up their strings. Pull them up and look happy!

Daphne must pull up her strings. Meredith and Kay will arrive at the airport soon. She must pick them up in Albany. She must get out of bed, but her head is so full of stories; it is as

heavy as a character's at a theme park. She wants to say, like the famous cartoon pig, "That's all folks!"—but the day is just beginning. She must get out of bed. If only she were not anchored to this mattress with a tail curling down from her body like a pig's; her tail is moving into the mattress below as a coil. She has grown attached to this half-glass bed, this thing as respectable and as fragile as Meredith, but of course Daphne doesn't belong here, being neither respectable nor fragile. She is tougher by necessity. She must pull herself up, tail and all.

It is comforting to think that, from high above, the weight she feels in her head is insignificant. From where Janice flies her plane, the distance between Daphne and Meredith is small. And this greenhouse from above is just a thin plank of wood floating on an ocean of land. Daphne, imagining herself from high above, begins to drag herself out of bed, tail and all. One, Two, Three! She is heading into a cloudy morning. It looks as though it will rain soon, but for now the sky is a quiet white. She is heading, tail and all, toward Meredith. She is crossing the distance—just a thin strip of white—between them. One, Two,

Three-

Body Problem. Meredith is talking about a problem with "three bodies," and Daphne wants to understand. The problem has something to do with the actions of "bodies" or mathematical entities. Two of these theoretical bodies will behave in a predictable way, while three will not. That is the problem insofar as Daphne grasps it. Of course, there must be more to it; as it stands, it doesn't seem like a very compelling problem, especially since none of these "bodies" weigh anything or have any dimensions. They seem to have no consequence at all in the real world in

which Daphne is walking with her gaze downward. She is stepping with care since it is drizzling and the dirt road is turning to mud.

She and Meredith are headed back from the Hudson River, travelling on a road through the estate. Kay is in a blue carrier on her mom's back. The baby, blonde like her mother, looks pale but strong with a long body. She glances over at Daphne and then stares at the hairy back of her mom's head. Suddenly Kay seems intent on proving her mother's point about a third body being unpredictable. Grabbing the sides of Meredith's head, she keeps pulling herself forward. "Ow!" Meredith cries and then, "Stop Kay!" But the baby keeps banging her head into the back of her mom's. Meredith's protests only seem to add to Kay's enjoyment. After each butt of the head, the baby turns to Daphne and, shaping her mouth into a square, laughs.

Daphne laughs too, watching bubbles of spit form around Kay's mouth. When the road curves into a thicket, Kay stops her game as suddenly as she began it. Staring up at the trees, she starts to babble. Maybe she is talking to the damp air, or maybe invisible creatures in the branches need to have a word with her. The possibilities seem endless for Kay whose cheerful babble is blending into the wet afternoon. As she laughs, her mom falls silent and looks down at the mud. They look like opposites, this quiet mother and loud child, but Daphne can see how alike they are. They both want to pursue their own interests even when in the company of others. Meredith might as well have been talking to herself for as much as Daphne has understood the Three-Body Problem.

But at least Meredith has tried to keep up conversation. Down by the river, she talked about their mother and father. Life has gone on without Daphne, everything shiner, it seems, and more expensive; the family has grown wealthier in recent years. Meredith talked about houses and vacations, while Daphne stared at the river. Her mind was distant as she watched the

currents push north toward Albany. She wanted to speak with intimacy. She wanted to say something about that anonymous woman, that intense presence she has written about in pieces. That lady, she realized, interested her more than her parents and their money. But when she tried to speak down by the river, shame about her own illness and poverty tightened her throat, and she said nothing.

That ache returns now. She must try to overcome it. The idea of being defeated by shame is as intolerable as those blank pages were, and she did fill them. She must say something—and does. Her voice is surprisingly high. She is talking about the weather. Her tone, light and subservient, makes it sound as if she were speaking to a customer.

Meredith appears to approve of the service. She is smiling vaguely. The angle of her head—a slight lift of the chin—comes off as vain, as if originally calculated in a mirror. Trying to ignore the look, Daphne delves into her subject more deeply. The effect is weird since her subject—how tomorrow might be sunnier—seems superficial enough. She talks about the sun in dense detail. By the time they reach the end of the thicket, she is speaking about rituals involving sunlight.

Stopping for a moment, she turns to glimpse the fields behind her. Gusts are brushing against the tall, brown grass. She looks up at the sky to see what resembles a piece of paper at first. It is torn and going here and there…but it is not paper after all. It is a white bird, charting a course through passivity and willfulness. One moment it is stumbling from gust to gust; the next, it is scooping out a difficult path with its wings. "What's weird about Candlemas," Daphne says. The bird stumbles again. "Candlemas falls in February…it's a ritual for the return of the sun—but why does it come in February? Equinoxes and solstices I get. The brightest and darkest times." The bird slips behind a thicket.

"It's funny," Meredith says. "Sanjay was just talking about spring and how the light returns." Sanjay is one of Meredith's friends, and while Daphne has not met him, his name has come up so much over years she feels she has. "He told me that spring is a sine wave in terms of how the light increases. So maybe Candlemas is that moment when—well—let's take a sine wave, right? And now we need to take the derivative." Meredith falls silent. Daphne looks over to find her sister nodding vigorously at her. "OK? We take the derivative?"

Daphne starts walking again. "I don't know how to take a derivative."

The baby is staring at Daphne with a seriousness at odds with her floppy rain hat. She is bobbing with her mom's increasingly determined steps. Kay looks both puzzled and grumpy when her mom says: "Daphne, you know how to take a derivative."

Daphne's stomach tenses. She has given Meredith a nice day in the country, the sort of quaint time that people from the city like. She has avoided arguments. When Meredith, down by the river, spoke of "her" mother and "her" father, Daphne didn't assert any connection to those parents. And where has all of this politeness led her? To this moment where she must stand up for herself and, in doing so, sound silly. "I don't know how to take a derivative, Meredith. I never did."

With another lift of her head, Meredith narrows her gaze. She looks distant in spite of the fact that Daphne is so close, and the blood in their veins makes them closer. Meredith could help Daphne with her medical bill without giving up a thing. She could keep her appointments to pluck her eyebrows and to brighten her hair. Of course, Daphne would never ask for money, having pride. When she speaks, though, her pride sounds so strange, like its opposite: stuttering deference. "I—I never knew how to take a derivative. I—just guessed."

Branches cross out the sky as the road moves through bushes. Daphne has become kindred spirits with an anonymous lady who is probably nothing but a trick from a lingering illness, a complete illusion. The lady has no history at all, and that is how Daphne feels: as if she never had a family even though here is her sister and here is her niece.

And up ahead in the road is Ida, who is barking and hopping. The animal doesn't recognize her. Only after Daphne shouts several times, "Ida, it's me," does the dog run toward them, her tail circling. She is panting when she arrives. Daphne bends down to pet her, and the dog licks her chin with obvious restraint. She is trying not to slobber as her whole body wags. Daphne pets her, laughing, and says her name over and over.

Kay says, "I...da." The baby is looking down at the dog. She says the name again with the first syllable stranded from the second. "I...da." It is her first word.

Meredith laughs and bends her knees to pet the dog. She is laughing as she often does: with a low chug of a breath as she says a word that feeds the humor, in this case "Kay." Ida sniffs with quivering nostrils the trail of breath that the name leaves behind. Kay, leaning from her carrier, pets the dog. The baby cannot help but pull the fur. It is so soft and warm, and Kay's hand is all rubbery enthusiasm. Meredith says "Gentle," but the baby doesn't understand what such a word could mean. Soon Meredith must stand, leaving Kay to grasp at the air.

With Kay's first word, the predictable ride comes to an end. Nothing is known anymore, not with this baby—this third body—here.

"I…da," says Kay, looking down at a cat. The animal is walking toward a flock of birds in a field. Daphne's head grows heavy again when she thinks of the wreck of the half-glass bed, the past severed with some moments lost and others rearranged. While she feels defeated, Meredith seems more grounded. All traces of snobbery have left her face. On her back, the baby is speaking to the birds on the grass. The dog, meanwhile, is sniffing a pizza box over by some bushes. Daphne stares at her sister's relaxed face. The words *You study chaos. Don't you?* come out of Daphne's mouth too smoothly, as if she were lying or guessing.

Meredith turns quickly. Her face is blank with surprise. "Yes."

The flock of birds in the field takes off. Kay gasps, looking up at them. "Ida," she says with amazement. Her first word has come together. "Ida," it seems, means all animals.

Day Dreams

2011 Winner Andrea Goff Memorial Poetry Contest

Evan Luzzatto

Day Dreams

Safe drivers keep their eyes on the road.
They won't notice the blonde cows
Fucking
In the Saratoga sunset,
Or how sparkling asphalt warms the balls
of your feet,
And the scent of rubber souls melting back into the hills.

I'm looking over her shoulder---
At melodic white fences.
Their splintered rhythms are soft at this speed,
Humming along for miles,
like a song I used to know…

But the words escape me…

"… … … …
…..Baby you may have a mouth like gutter,
but it's so pretty just to see you grin…..
… … …."

I forgot I was driving.
White fences have turned into strip malls.
How much time can pass between two moments?
There's no one in the car but I'm talking out loud
To somebody I used to know…

But her face escapes me….

**Lyrics borrowed from "Twine and Trumpet" by Maxim Ludwig

Clouds I, II, IV

2011 Winner Roger Conant Hatch Poetry Contest

Anna Stalker

Clouds I, II, IV

and still, no-one would remember
this place for the clouds.
The sky only protracts the gaze, sucks up
shadows, bodily water, the possibility of iteration
or self-effacement. On recollection, it was never
the clouds, but instead the way the body
feels in the sun, an essential remnant,
like the oil from a finger-drawing
on a window. And still, she repeated
the clouds to herself in ecstatic form,
they became harmless as molars
on recollection. In the heat my palms
split, the lifeline grew deeper, reddened.
No-one would remember you for the comfort.
The breathing of shuttered stucco,
warm horsehair. The clouds softened
on recollection, became as unthreatening
as tiling. The body overripens
like an avocado. The form and iterations
of the form, a form outside the form.
A catalog of her bones, named
with butterfly pins. A body, like evening,
darkens organ by organ. At night
sometimes the elk would scream
outside like young women, sometimes piss
in the newly planted rosebushes. The underbrush
is full of their teeth, the size of matchboxes.
I flew some back with me once, left them
on the porch to bleach in the sun.
They ate so much from my house,
chewed emptiness like tobacco,
a small rumination. They make meals
of quietness, breakfast the air out of my house.
I become alpine, hypoxic, my lungs habituate
to smaller and smaller portions, my eyes
redden. The veins rise, grow distinct,
the way hair rises in bathwater. I speak
in code, in iterations- *this brute thing,*
this animal, this earthquake, your bones
shake in the drawer. I fill my stomach
with water. *Eat everything*, the teeth say.

The Delusion of Control

The speaker in Sylvia Plath's poem, "Tulips," opens with a complaint: the tulips interrupt the mood of the quiet and dead hospital room. In contrast to the precise and orderly environment of the hospital, the tulips create a sense of ambiguity and chaos that Plath enhances with her use of diction and imagery, metaphors and juxtaposition. Constructing multiple binary oppositions, she intertwines them in such a way that creates an overall juxtaposition between chaos and order. The presence of multiple oppositions--red versus white, noise versus quiet, spring versus winter, life versus death--serves as an overarching theme in Plath's work: the inability to maintain control. This inability to maintain control is reflective of how Plath constructs her notion of identity: a pure self that is decisive and apart from influences of society.

The inability to maintain control partly results from the various opposing ideas that are illustrated in "Tulips". The juxtaposition between white and red that appears throughout the poem reflects the opposition between the quiet and dead hospital versus the loud and lively spring. White describes the hospital room, the walls, the bed, her hands ("Tulips" 4), the pillow and the sheet-cuff (8). The nurses wear their "white caps" (12) and the tulips are in "white swaddlings" (38). The narrator revels in "how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed in/[where she is] learning peacefulness, lying by [herself] quietly" (2-3). The color white is used to describe a wintered, peaceful and sterile environment that has an air of death. The tulips that aggravate her, however, "are too red in the first place, they hurt [her]" (36) and they dominate the white swaddlings that hold them. Unlike the dead whiteness, the redness takes on human elements, "talk[ing] to [her] wound...Upsetting [her] with their sudden tongues and their color" (39, 41). The tulips are lively plants that are "too excitable" (1), "vivid" and "eat [the narrator's] oxygen" (49), filling the room "like a loud noise" (52). She describes the tulips suffocating her as "the air snags and eddies round them the way a river/snags and eddies round a sunken rust-red engine" (53-54). The rust-red of the

engine suggests that, although she is still alive, she's slowly disintegrating due to the chaos that surrounds her. Rather than the chaotic and lively air that the tulips bring, Plath's narrator expresses a longing for order and peace, where "the air [is] calm enough,/Coming and going, breath by breath, without any fuss" (50-51). The tulips exhaust and "concentrate [her] attention, that was happy/ Playing and resting without committing itself" (55-56). The enjambment between these lines places an emphasis on what created happiness--the lack of obligation to commit to play or rest--and shows that the narrator is torn between these two opposites, thus subtly characterizing her as neurotic. "Neurotic" is defined by Plath in *The Bell Jar* through the character of Esther Greenwood, which is considered an autobiographical text. She says, "If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell. I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days" ("The Bell Jar" 105). This indecisiveness is enhanced by Plath's ambiguous word choices and imagery, which lend themselves to a confused, chaotic tone.

The juxtaposition between the cacophony and chaos of the lively spring and the peace and order of the deadened winter is reflected by the exploration of identity. The speaker in "Tulips" struggles with her identity; she resents the imperfections and worldliness of what her environment makes her. She implies she would rather be dead, basking in the white hospital room. *The Deathly Paradise of Sylvia Plath* by Constance Scheerer examines this struggle with identity through the analysis of garden imagery within Plath's corpus of poetry. Scheerer claims that the image of garden that Plath constructs throughout her body of work "swallows up purpose and individuality" while she is trying to establish her voice. This creates a paradox: "the search for an identity means the search for non-identity. The discovery of purpose discloses that there is no purpose" (Scheerer 470). In "Tulips," Plath explores this through the narrator when she claims, "I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions" ("Tulips" 5). This first clause indicates an acquisition of non-identity, and thus the speaker's belief of her insignificance. By having nothing to do with these explosions,

reminiscent of the excitable tulips from the first line, Plath alludes to the narrator's identification with a quiet lifelessness that she feels. She does not identify with the explosive chaos around her. This creates a parallel between identity and control. By identifying with something--even nothing--the narrator maintains some sense control. She then goes on to say, "I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses/And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons" (6-7). By doing this, she gives up all of her identity to these figures in the hospital. Plath also objectifies the narrator while giving life to objects: "The tulips turn to [her], and the window behind me...Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips" (44, 47) while the narrator sees herself as a "flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow...And [she has] no face, [she has] wanted to efface herself" (46, 48). She is robbed of life, of substance, and of identity. Giving up her identity, the speaker is relinquishing any sense of self-importance.

However, by surrendering her identity, the narrator also renounces control, especially over what happens to her. She submits to the nameless figures in the hospital, who acquire the speaker's control. Scheerer analyzes Plath's poem, "The Surgeon at 2 A.M.", that places the narrator in the surgeon's position. Investigating the identity of the "gardener," the figure who has absolute control of the garden (Scheerer 472), the surgeon plays God by "bring[ing] life out of death and sav[ing] the bodies in which the souls, invisible, are anchored" (473). This superior deity, as Scheerer points out, is not the compassionate God of Eden. This man who plays at God only sees "Grey faces, shuttered by drugs," and sees these "faceless sufferers" as a garden he can "control and manipulate at will without himself becoming a part of it" (474-475). This is similar to the hospital that "[has] propped [the narrator's] head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff" ("Tulips" 8), which suggests they are controlling her, "Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut" (9). The narrator is subject to the gardener's--the hospital's--control over her: "[Her] body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water/Tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently" (15-16). The second line emphasizes that the nurses tend to her because its their job, not necessarily because they care, which

further illustrates the narrator's feeling of trivial importance. Thus, identifying with a non-identity raises the question if the speaker still is able to maintain control.

If an acquisition of a true identity is a sign of control, "Tulips" examines whether non-identity is a true, pure identity. For Plath, a true identity is one that she is permanently satisfied with and self-created. Langdon Hammer's essay, *Plath's Lives*, explores Plath's search for identity through writing. Hammer observes that "Plath wrote with a strange urgency, as if her life depended on it...To choose to be a writer was to choose a special way of life...because it was imagined as a process of becoming aimed at total self-realization, which Plath understood as the achievement of a heightened, intensified, permanent 'life'" (Hammer 67). However, as Hammer points out, the poetry that was meant to help her realize this "true image" also placed it out of reach (67). Struggling between the formulaic structure of her writing and the instability of her idea of self-identity, Plath wrote under a paradox: "you must express yourself; you must master formulas to do so" (83). As Plath tried to create an image that she was satisfied with, that she considered "true," she continually "tried to abandon or destroy" these imperfect self-images, as shown by her distaste in her old poetry (85). This struggle is reflected through the speaker in "Tulips."

Needing to settle on an identity in order to obtain control, Plath's narrator attempts to destroy, or kill, her identity. Yet, something prevents her from doing so, and she ricochets back and forth between life and death. Ralph Didlake considers Plath's similar conflict with identity in his essay, *Medical Imagery in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath.* Analyzing her poetry, Didlake claims that "one might consider her disease-associated imagery to be less about life and death than it is about the *boundary* between life and death" (Didlake 140). The narrator describes the relief the hospital can bring as she seems tired and ready to rest:

> They bring me numbness in their bright needles, they bring me sleep
> Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage----
> My patent leather overnight case like a black pillbox," ("Tulips" 17-19)

Implying contentedness in a numb state, Plath shows a partial desire for non-existence. The struggle between the desires wholeness and disintegration, existence and non-existence, leaves the narrator of the poem in a state of limbo, as "[She has] let things slip, a thirty-year-old cargo boat/stubbornly hanging on to [her] name and address" (22-23). The image of the cargo boat, gives an idea of the narrator's weariness, and "hanging on to [her] name and address" implies that she is trying to let go of how the world defines her, which she already surrendered part of in the first stanza (6-7). The last two lines of the poem embodies this border between life and death: "The water [that she tastes] is warm and salt, like the sea,/And comes from a country as far away as health" (62-63). This implies that health is a foreign concept to the patient, but that it may be attainable. It is by "reaching deeply into her extensive repertoire of medical imagery [that she] illuminate[s] the dark borderland of self-definition" (Didlake 142), and defines purity as the reward for crossing this elusive boundary. The border between life and death, in this case, is a gray area, as it raises the question of what defines death: the physical death or the death of an identity.

The desire for purity causes this gray border. While death in the purest sense is a physical death, the reader gets a sense that Plath's narrator is merely looking for a metaphorical death. However, Plath's definition of purity is clarified in the fifth stanza: "To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty" ("Tulips" 30). Plath's idea of purity is to be empty, clean, to be dead, which is implied by the use of the word "lie." The image of lying down was introduced in the first stanza, in which the narrator is lying by herself, the light is lying on the walls, on the bed, on her hands. Lying down is associated with resignation, sleep, even death, much like winter. Plath intertwines purity and death to the point where they are almost inseparable. Purity can only truly be achieved from death because it is what truly frees you:

> The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,
>
> And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets.
>
> It is what the dead close on, finally; I imagine them

Shutting their mouths on it, like a Communion tablet" (32-35).

And as her "loving associations" (24) "Sink out of sight...[She is] a nun now, [she has] never been so pure" (27-28). Plath uses Christian imagery to emphasize the desirability for purity and a sense of order, and thus an imminent death by the commemoration of the Last Supper and evoking the sacrament of baptism, where one dies to a new life and is born again, or purified. The narrator finds this purity in the hospital room, which is described in an orderly way:

The nurses pass and pass...the way gulls pass inland in their white caps,

Doing things with their hands, one just the same as another,

So it is impossible to tell how many there are" (11-14)

and "They have swabbed [her] clear of [her] loving associations" (24). The repetition of the word "pass," which evokes death, and the repetition of white, which suggests a sterile, new environment, demonstrate a desire for purity, and thus clarity and order. Plath's uses the images of purity, clarity and death almost interchangeably, almost making them synonymous. To obtain clarity is to find a pure self, to be pure is to die.

Ambiguity and chaos prevent one from obtaining clarity. Plath associates ambiguity with chaos and liveliness. The ambiguity is emphasized by Plath's diction. This creates confusion in meaning and thus, chaos. In "Tulips", this ambiguous diction is most prevalent when describing lively objects with negative connotations. In the second stanza, the narrator laments, "Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in" (10). The word pupil is ambiguous because of its potential for dual meanings. On one hand, Plath could be referring to the pupil of the eye. If this is the case, this phrase is a laments being forced to take in all of the world's chaos. On the other, Plath could also define pupil as a student, which would be consistent with the "learning peacefulness" from the first stanza (3). In this scenario, this would be a complaint of the information shoved down her throat. The ambiguity of the diction and imagery creates confusion that lends itself to a chaotic tone.

The ambiguity also results from the ricocheting back and forth within the life and death border. On one hand, the narrator wants to submerge into a deathly, sterile environment. However, something is pulling her back, which is illustrated by her family in the third stanza. Closing with a snapshot: "[Her] husband and child smiling out of the family photo;/Their smiles catch onto [her] skin, little smiling hooks" (20-21). By comparing them to "little smiling hooks," Plath gives what is assumably the speaker's family an odd connotation. While smiling has a positive implication, the hooks suggest that the family is keeping her from achieving the purity that she desires. They are of this world; they do not fit into this pure world that the narrator is trying to settle into. This juxtaposition creates an ambiguity that pulls her back, preventing the speaker from fully immersing in the world she longs to desire. The ambiguity presented by this idea further illustrates the conflict that is created by the ambiguity and chaos.

The overall form and structure of the poem is a stark contrast to the ambiguity of the diction. Unlike the unclear diction, the syntax is extremely decisive and structured--almost to the point of obsession. Stanley Plumly's *What Ceremony of Words* note that many of her early poems were "preoccupied with the inventions of rhythm, pattern, and an emphatic, sometimes excessive aural sense of the way words bond within the line or sentence" (Plumly 13). Syntax was something Plath could control. If the form is reflective of the sterile hospital room, and the tulips are comparable to the diction, then a parallel can be drawn that the diction gives life to Plath's form. Each verse has seven lines, and while there are multiple sentences in every stanza, each stanza is end-stopped with a period. These end-stops, coupled with the space between the stanza, gives the audience a chance to pause, allowing the reader to reflect on the idea of the stanza. Because there are no obvious enjambments between the stanzas, each stanza can stand on its own while being a part of a cohesive unit. It reads as prose, and no dual meanings seem to arise because of the syntax; the speaker's meaning is clear. The first stanza serves as an exposition, introducing the narrator's surroundings. She goes on into further detail as she characterizes the figures of the hospital and explains how she

is treated in the second and third stanzas. Introducing the conflict and explaining different aspects of her distaste for the tulips and the desire for clarity within the fourth through eighth stanzas, Plath concludes the poem in the ninth stanza, although ambiguously as the reader is not sure what happens to the speaker after the poem ends. The crisp, sharp, pure order that Plath desires can only be found in the structure of the poem. Despite the fact that the diction is also very specific and decisive, the words are utilized to create ambiguity and dual meanings to create an air of disarray that contradicts the syntax. It is the imagery that creates Plath's unique form that illustrates the struggle between "enclosing rhetoric" and "absolute, open language" (24). The diction fills this form, making it fall into the "narrative, objective category in which the line-into-sentence is extended in time, and connects and continues fully enough to fill the white space" (19), similar how to the tulips "filled [the room] up like a loud noise" ("Tulips" 52). This creates the overarching paradox: no matter how much control you seem to grasp, there is always an element beyond that you cannot completely master. The idea that one can have complete control, be completely pure, is a delusion.

Plath's "Tulips" is a glimpse into a lifetime of struggle, a constant fight that opposed clarity and order versus ambiguity and chaos and, through this, life and death. The various juxtapositions shed light on the ambiguous diction and imagery that works in tandem with the precise syntax and metaphors to form a window for the reader that shows the constant conflict she experienced. Constantly working to find an identity that she found pure and true, Plath struggled, not only with decisiveness, but with setting herself apart from others in order to maintain a sense of control over her own life.

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Why I Write: Slide-Click

2011 2nd Place Winner
Harriet Schwenk Kluver Contest

Jessica Rosen

Why I Write: Slide-Click

The line of the paper is straight. It's parallel, equivalent and perfect. It is smooth along the smooth page, falling off at the edge, but reappearing unscathed a centimeter below. It is mine and it continues on to the next slice of white. It's unstoppable, infallible, a life laid out in light blue. I have seen it, used it, followed it to its future, knowing. I have filled the spaces between it, staying within it, over it, below it. I have turned pages, half expecting to see blank, to see something barren and empty, but my line is always there. I know now that there is nothing more powerful than my line.

Papa and I were playing Hit-The-Penny, an extremely complicated game involving only a blue racquetball and a coin. We placed the bronze piece directly in the middle of a tile and proceeded. When the ball hit the penny, we'd hear a certain muffled sound. A sliding click. Papa hit it, and it flew to the in-between, the line separating our tile from the next. The darkness simply ate the penny up. I remember our frustration when neither of us could make contact. Our anger faded into booming laughter, but I could still hear the sliding-click.

My younger days saw a line that was merely a line. It was there to control me, to make sure that my haphazard words didn't fall hard and crooked. Without it, I imagine a game of Tetris, a geometrical mess, a conglomeration of nouns, verbs, and adjectives building up on the page's foot. I admit that when I reached my teenage years, I rebelled. I was often desperate to create without rigid restrictions. I found that I had built my life up enough so that my words hung evenly and understandably atop its tower. But gravity pounded down, compressing my chest, my heart, my tower.

The wind protested the day. The dark grey clouds joined the wind; their picket signs simply covered the sun. And for some reason, Isaac Newton entered my thoughts because it was he who created gravity. He put a name to why things fall. To why we stay put. To why we wouldn't join the protest in the sky. There he sat, hundreds of years ago, beneath a tree. And so the apple fell before him and it set his mind churning. Gravity is a powerful force, stronger than the force of nature. Everything falls to gravity. But gravity falls to nothing. I cried, and years of memories were tears that fell onto the mud sodden, over-trodden grass. I thought I heard his booming laughter, but it was only the thunder. Papa was gone. As the sliding-click of the casket accosted my ears, I thought only of that lost penny.

And the tower that I had built, collapsed. Words scattered into the barren, un-lined nothingness. I imagined the notebook of my lost loved. There was no darkness in death. I imagined turning his last marked pages and finding nothing there but white oblivion and I was scared. So I returned to the line, and I flipped through my pages, following it. I saw its immortality. I plunged in. It was then when it became mine, when it saved me.

I have mastered gravity now. My pen is attached to the lined paper, the great force gently holding it down. It paces up and down, curving, making sweet scratching noises. It is my heart monitor. The line is not a line, a restriction, a guide. It is a placesaver in oblivion. It is a comfort in my future. It encompasses the path that will lead me. It will not decide for me, or surprise me, but will end with me, the life-line across my palm. And my pen will always rest in my palm, following it. It will beat, atop the line to my future, knowing. And when the line ends, I'll grasp my pen in my hand, and smile as the ball-point disappears. Slide-click.

The Same Insanities

2011 2nd Place Winner
Harriet Schwenk Kluver Contest

Marissa Pomerance

Introduction to Literary Study

Beckett Essay

16 December 2010

The Same Inanities

Through his play *Endgame*, Samuel Beckett mocks his audience's futile quest for meaning as he explores the relationships between his four main characters, Hamm, Clov, Nagg, and Nell. Beckett, who is usually associated with existential thought, refused to provide any insight into the supposed "meaning" of his works, stating that he was most interested in the form and shape of his writing. Readers and critics continuously attempt to glean some sort of universal truth or lesson through Beckett's allusions and simple language. However, they then fall prey to Beckett's game; instead of emerging from their readings with a concrete grasp of his works, an *end*, they emerge only more confused and crestfallen. Beckett never had any intention of creating works with hidden philosophical truths, but rather he was interested in the "quality of the experience that, communicated, can change the quality of another human being's experience" (Esslin 10). This "quality of the experience" relates to the form of Beckett's writing, as his writing is not concerned with content or context, but rather providing shape to his characters' shifting consciousnesses and arbitrary actions. Beckett wanted his audience to read into his literal words, to search for metaphors and symbols, to ignore the literal behaviors of his characters, and then to realize that this search was fruitless. Once the audience came to this

realization, they could then move on from their quest and focus on the individual experiences of the characters.

Through Hamm and Clov's conflicting discourse, Beckett portrays the "quality of the experience" above the content of the experience by emphasizing the actions and reactions of his characters. Their speech circumnavigates the what, where, who, and why of a situation, merely concentrating on their subjective perceptions. These subjective perceptions lead to shifting consciousnesses as the concrete descriptions of a situation that ground a discussion are removed from discourse, allowing thought and speech to seemingly wander. During one of Hamm's "stories," Beckett emphasizes the "quality of the experience" by removing all context and objectivity from the story, allowing Hamm to concentrate on the subjective aspects:

> I once knew a madman who thought the end of the world had come. He was a painter- and engraver. I had a great fondness for him. I used to go and see him, in the asylum. I'd take him by the hand and drag him to the window. Look! There! All that rising corn! And there! Look! The sails of the herring fleet! All that loveliness!
> [Pause.]
> He'd snatch away his hand and go back into his corner. Appalled. All he had seen was ashes.
> [Pause.]
> He alone had been spared.
> [Pause.]
> Forgotten.
> [Pause.]
> It appears the case is...was not so...so unusual (52).

Hamm's begins his "story" in a traditional sense, describing a man he once knew, a "madman," "painter," and "engraver." While these seem like concrete descriptions of the man, the rest of the story continues through a linkage of vague images and arbitrary actions. Hamm does not

attempt to explain how he knew the man or why he would visit the man in the "asylum." He does not elucidate as to what he had been "spared" from, or in what way he was "forgotten." Indeed, Hamm does not even provide a where or a when, the foundations a story is usually built upon. If the audience can only vaguely understand the situation in terms of mere plot, it becomes nearly impossible to assign the story any type of meaning or relate it to the rest of *Endgame*. Although Hamm does not provide the concrete experience, what he does provide is the *quality* of the experience. Through the sensory details, like looking out the window at the "rising corn" and "all that loveliness," Beckett juxtaposes Hamm's consciousness with that of the madman, explaining that he was "appalled. All he had seen was ashes." Thus, this quality of the experience comes from the difference between the subjective experiences of Hamm and the madman; one sees loveliness, while the other only sees ashes. Additionally, this story neither provides the audience with new and relevant information nor aids the understanding of *Endgame*; thus Beckett emphasizes the subjective experience above the context, as the context serves no purpose. The search for meaning in Beckett's work need not go further than the realization that "existence precedes essence, subjective thought is of a higher order than objective thought" (Esslin 6).

Beckett's simple and literal language functions to almost deceive the audience by removing metaphors, irony, and other artificial devices; the audience wants to read into the language and discover "meaning," searching for these metaphors and similes as if Beckett's writing is a series of complex and hidden universal truths. Beckett instead wants the audience to read or listen to the words exactly as they are written or performed, as the literality of the words

provide the quality of the experience. The literality portrays the subjective experience in its purest form, without metaphoric distortions or irony; instead, the characters say whatever they feel at the time, revealing their shifting consciousnesses. However, it is not as if the words are meaningless. Indeed, often "the words do mean something, but the sound of the voice is more important here than actual meaning," allowing Beckett's form to assert its importance over context (Weales 111). The pauses that Hamm takes during his story, the exclamation points after statements such as "All that loveliness!" and the shifting tone that demarcates between Hamm's excitement and the madman's dread serve to bolster the subjective experiences in the story, substituting "for a conventional plot" and resulting "for the audience in a series of epiphanies on the nature of conscious experience" (Haney). During a production of *Endgame* at Amherst College, Helene Keyssar, the director, began to understand the subtle intricacies in the sound of the language alone; the literal words and sound they produce should not be "approached as a set of symbols," but rather focus the audience on the behavior of the characters (232). Thus, if the form of the language itself, the simplicity, literality, and sound of the words, are emphasized above all else, it creates a hollow shell for the subjective experience. One could imagine how the form resembles a house that is being built without the intention of it becoming a home; the foundation is laid and it becomes a solid structure of wood, concrete, and bricks. People may live there, but it is missing the adornment that turns the house into a home- furniture, pictures, and decoration. The house lacks context as the family's story is not displayed in the house, allowing the perception of both the house and family to be exactly what they seem, and nothing more. If either were changed, the perception would be completely different. Even

"hearing the language differently made the world...different. A difference in emphasis and intonation was not simply a change in interpretation, but a change of worlds" (Keyssar 226). If Beckett's language were different, the form he uses to shape experience would change.

While most critics have agreed that Beckett mocks his audience's search for meaning through *Endgame*, some critics have argued that the lack of meaning and the emptiness of existence are what Beckett was attempting to express. These critics suggest that portraying the quality of the experience is not Beckett's goal, but instead it is to teach some universal truth. In Grotesque and the Demonism of Silence: Beckett's *Endgame*, G. Farrell Lee argues, "redemption and transcendence are exposed as illusions in a universe where any hope of meaning is forsaken" (62). Lee attempts to demonstrate that it is in fact this fruitless search for meaning that portrays how life itself is meaningless. In addition, Lee reads far more into the text than the literal meanings suggest, arguing that the story about the madman represents how the madman "alone had been spared the illusion that a created order might exist and that meaning might be possible" (62). Lee does not mention the subjective experiences of Hamm and the madman, ironically falling prey to Beckett's trap; by suggesting that life is meaningless, Lee fulfills his personal quest to glean meaning from *Endgame*. Although Lee does not mention the quality of these experiences, one would agree that from his argument, he would most likely view it as only serving this greater meaning, not the end objective of the play itself. However, other critics, such as Sylvie Debevec Henning would disagree with Lee, suggesting that "regret or despair at this absurdly exuberant flux and general disorderly conduct of the world is not the 'essential meaning' or 'message' of Beckett's 'play,' but merely one especially tempting

response with which he himself is playing in a demonstratively critical, or at least parodic, fashion" (386). Consequently, Henning acknowledges the trap that Lee falls into, as Beckett tempts the audience by creating a connection between the futile quest for meaning and the idea that life is then meaningless. Henning even goes further to quote Beckett: "I am interested in the shape of ideas, even if I do not believe in them...it is the shape that matters" (386). However, while Henning acknowledges the "shape of ideas," she fails to explain Beckett's quote in terms of the quality of the experience, leaving much to be desired in her argument.

Henning's argument breaches a middle ground between Lee's focus on the meaninglessness of life and the arguments of William S. Haney and Martin Esslin, who both delve deeper into this discussion of the quality of experience. Haney, in his work Beckett Out of His Mind: The Theater of the Absurd, focuses on Beckett's use of shifting consciousnesses, asserting that "Beckett shows what it is like to be aware in a single moment, rather than drifting in the slipstream of culturally mediated discursive patterns of thought." By "culturally mediated discursive patterns of thought," Haney is referring to an experience or thought process driven by historical experience and cultural influences, rather than merely by one's own subconscious or subjective feelings. Beckett's examination of the "single moment" and quality of experience ignores these influences by removing context from the experience. Haney argues this bolsters the realistic and unconscious experience, suggesting "Beckett's drama leads to a re-discovery of ultimate realities apparently beyond the grasp of the intentional mind alone. Therefore, he is less concerned with meaning than with the structure of experience" (Beckett Out of His Mind).

By expressing more than the conscious mind intends to express, Beckett's characters reveal their experiences in a way that isn't merely an artificial construction meant to illicit and encourage a deeper meaning. Haney believes this reflects how people act and feel in reality; not every discussion is meant to deeply explore some universal truth or bit of philosophy. Additionally, Haney defers to Esslin in his argument, quoting Esslin's remarks that Beckett "focuses on the individual's basic circumstances rather than on the ideological makeup of his or her social identity" (Beckett Out of His Mind). Haney's argument draws strength from this point, as he is able to acknowledge Beckett's mockery of the search for meaning and relate this to Beckett's structure and his characters' psyches. In contrast, this is where Lee has troubles with his argument, as on the one hand he acknowledges Beckett's game and yet falls into its trap.

Martin Esslin's argument in his "Introduction" in Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays focuses on how a critic should go about reading and interpreting *Endgame*, a work that refuses to provide meaning to its audience. In addition, he discusses Beckett's obligation, as an artist, to express something while paradoxically feeling as if there is nothing to express, leading Beckett to express merely what he perceives. This expression of only perception leads to Esslin's assertion that "the only certain evidence of being is the individual's experience of his own consciousness, which in turn is constantly in flux and ever changing" (9). Thus, in *Endgame*, Beckett expresses what he finds to be most concrete, and that is a person's perception of himself. The context of a situation, the who, what, when, where, and why that most people believe are the foundations of a story, do not exist in all certainty. Therefore, Esslin claims that Beckett's works are, in fact, realistic, as "only experience is a valid basis of truth, generalized statements claiming an applicability outside the flux of time and outside the

individual's shifting self-perception, must necessarily be false" (6). Because, as Esslin argues, these "generalized statements" attempting to claim "an applicability outside the flux of time..." are false, any inherent meaning that an audience attempts to apply to or glean from *Endgame* must also be false. Therefore, Esslin would most likely disagree with Lee and agree with Henning and Haney, suggesting that Lee's idea of the meaninglessness of life as the ultimate truth of *Endgame* would constitute as one of these "generalized statements." Additionally, Esslin contends that these shifting self-perceptions and truth of experience lead to this "quality of the experience," because what matters is "the process in the consciousness of his readers of being able to experience the course of this imaginative process" (10). The audience's ability to experience what the characters are experiencing is only possible by portraying the "quality of the experience," instead of attempting to teach the audience some deep meaning or universal truth. Esslin believes that an audience can connect with Beckett's writing especially through "the elucidation of the structural principles governing each of Beckett's works," which helps to "enter into the experience he is seeking to convey" (12). Thus, Esslin's argument draws particular strength as he relates Beckett's form, his hollow shell for experience, to Beckett's desire for the audience to experience the characters' experiences. Esslin's argument acknowledges Beckett's mockery of the search for meaning, clearly explaining how it relates to his own personal philosophy, his characters, his audience, and his form.

The need to find meaning will always be part of a reader and critic's experience with literary works. Beckett's mockery of this quest does not destroy that urge in his readers, but rather provides an alternative; in a strange way, Beckett simplifies the reading experiences for his readers. Instead of searching through metaphors and complex language, one merely needs to experience what the characters are experiencing to understand Beckett's point-of-view. This

new way of reading more accurately portrays the human experience, as life is not a constant search for a universal truth, but rather a constant flux. As Esslin points out, "the perceived portion of the self, by its very nature, is in constant flux. The voice tells a different story at any given moment, and so the artist's being itself is in constant flux" (3).

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Rainforests

2011 Undergraduate Winner
Norma Lowry Memorial Fund Poetry Contest

Emma Hine

Rainforests

Every year, in May, the smoke seeps up
from Mexico. The orange backs of the monarchs
are dusted with it, even the bats coiling

above the clouds are heavy with ash.
I told you last year that it didn't seem fair,
the bats already buffeted by updrafts,

now gritty with the powder from ten thousand
burning trees. You asked if that was all
that wasn't fair, as we sat under the elms.

We pointed our lawn chairs south
and said the red haze of the sunset could almost
be the seething fringes of the jungle on fire.

This year the smoke surprises me.
The sky spreads above me one morning
like the steady ceiling of a hospital room,

wide and white. I stand on the lawn and see
how the air is filled with microscopic losses:
atom-sized splinters of otter claws, the curling skin

of frogs. I breathe in shards of bark, wisps
of parrot's down, the tender lining of a lizard's
flimsy egg, while my lungs inside me strain

like unaccustomed wings. Miles south,
rainforests are shriveling in heat. I think again
of the bats, that every night tear upward like smoke.

Secret

2011 Graduate Winner
Norma Lowry Memorial Fund Poetry Contest

Marni Ludwig

Secret

I dreamed I swam in a public park
while leather-beaked ducks
at black bread at the edge
of the cool water. I was afraid
to feed them. I was afraid of the sun,
which showed me the original image
of myself, floating on my back.

A dog barked and then another dog
raised its head. I feel I deserve to die
if I have made a mistake. Underneath
the lake: bird music, cold sky
swimming up to meet my hands.

Visiting Hours

2011 Winner
Julia Viola McNeely Poetry Contest

Zachary Amittay

Visiting Hours

Sometimes I wake up
knowing where I am.

Other times
I am a bathtub
gradually filling.

Mostly I lie empty for a long while,
then return to numb sleep
poor as ever.

Don't let voices
outside or drapes
like shower curtains
fool you:

this is a museum,
visitors shuffling quietly,
examining my placard that reads
School of Guercino
(17th Century).
They note the depth
of color and marble ox figurine,
then withdraw
like suns at dusk.

Everyone whispers for art.
Charlie Boy never
whispered when I tried
to read in peace.
Goddamn it.
Where is my book?

Halfway through a sales pitch
I realized the customer
was my grandson sitting
on the edge of my bed
but couldn't stop
since he was smiling
so sadly.

I blinked
and he was gone,
his presence
an echo lingering,
the air humming
after thunderclap.

palimpsest

2011 Winner
James Merrill Poetry Contest

Catlyne Lasser

palimpsest

a hand on the thigh and now what? in the name
of you and I it's unclear, it had a ring, a wax,

a drop. a tolling bell, scrapes in evening. pines
have not been unseen in a while, but the bus

still comes and until again. it crushed the woman
and no one felt anything. who could not even

dream a dead woman in the road. no one
wants to read the saddest thing you have ever

heard. limitless breath of last breath, scripted
on the cheap: weighted, hitting your head on it.

nightmare with doll legs out of the pig's head,
inside a planet's shell, inside an ostrich egg,

resonating with bamboo shoots. too much syrup,
fingernail clippings, eraser heads. when asleep

it's hard to say if he's alive, except for the small
part of him that moves when he does not.

Cutman

2011 Winner
Washington University Fiction Contest

Zachary Amittay

Cutman

My kid baited the Blue-striped shorts perfectly into a reckless uppercut that missed its mark by nearly a foot, then dove into a beautiful combination of jabs, crosses, and hooks, a sequence of jarring blows strung together with the fluid ease of a ballroom dancer, and at that moment I knew why this black youth from Chicago's South Side had old men with flattened noses and arthritic hands whispering at newsstands all across the American Midwest, those few old men who still frequented newsstands and still cared about such things. The bell rang then, interrupting the gloved fists' flowing ballet, and the tightening ring of roaring voices dissolved into a rumbling hum and both men dropped their arms and walked swaggering back towards their corners, Blue-striped shorts stomping like a bull, my kid light on his toes.

It had been a dominant performance of a first round, but Blue-striped shorts had landed a couple solid blows to my kid's right cheekbone, and so—kit in hand—I had started to swing myself between the ropes when Jack Daugherty, former middleweight boxing champion of Yale turned promoter and trainer and cornerman extraordinaire, grabbed my arm.

"Stay on that side of the ropes, Tabs," he said.

"I figured a little enswell on the cheekbone couldn't—"

"Stay, Tabs." he said as he slid his way inside the ring, "Kid barely got grazed by that over-the-hill shmuck. Not a single rising welt on that face; not a bead of sweat for chrissake! Definition of a cakewalk tonight, just be glad you're getting paid to watch."

And so I watched from outside the ring as Jack Daughtery, boxing's incomparable Renaissance man, crouched down and yelled hoarsely into the young man's face that his opponent was less than dirt and the fight was good as finished and now get this done and over with and prize match and money here we come I can smell those greenbacks now. All this to a

kid no older than nineteen, a kid who in a few more seconds would hear the clang of a bell, haul himself up from the small wooden stool where he sat, and trot out to the center of the ring to again risk *everything* that belonged to him.

The kid had lost himself so perfectly during that first round, his world shrinking small enough where there was only the ring and his floating gloves and the man standing square across from him, all drifting together in that gorgeous muted chasm of the moment. But the walk back to his corner and the pep talk from Daughtery dragged him back into himself and into this world, and he was a changed man then, weighed down by reality.

His name was Omari Jones and his life was fighting and this was the biggest fight of his young life. Win and he was signing a contract that would lift him bodily from the low-income public housing project where his friends and family and everyone he knew struggled daily to pay for food and clothes and school supplies; win and he saved himself and maybe even those closest to him in the bargain from this perpetual struggle. But lose—lose and it's back to the soiled streets and stained cement buildings, back to the city blocks that swallow hopes and ambitions whole. Win or lose. And the man sitting in the opposite corner from him was just as desperate and the crowd surrounding him was stirring itself into a righteous frenzy of bloodthirsty craving and a thousand eyes were wishing the worst kind of violence imaginable upon him. And he could win or he could lose.

I saw the change in his dark eyes as they widened and in his thick lips as they tightened and in his jaw as it clenched, and it was like watching a man being shaken from a dream where he had been enjoying counsel with God. The petroleum jelly I had smeared on his cheeks and across his forehead made him look like something sub-human, its skull irregular and pointy.

"You don't think maybe you could have suggested starting his counter-attack with a little more time left in the round?" I said when Jack had clambered back out of the ring, his shouting sermon completed.

"Shut the fuck up," he said, and the bell rang.

* * *

My father raised me to be a fighter and somehow managed to keep me convinced I was one for quite a while; this was in Detroit in the years following the war, after my father returned home from the nose turret of a Flying Fortress to find his fiancé's name on a gravestone and a screaming lump of wrinkled skin waiting for him at his shoddy apartment, dependent on him for its survival. Accountable to the very last, my father committed himself to raising the child as best he could, and named the little thing Timothy Tabachnik. That little thing was me.

Growing up with only one parent you miss out on some lessons and learn some lessons by heart. My old elementary school friend Peter—lost his father to the Pacific, rest his soul—is an example that comes to mind. Didn't matter who it was that had mistreated him, what they had done, or why they had done it, he refused to lift a hand in response. Peter's mother, she hated anger and fighting and war and violence indiscriminately and in all their many manifestations, since it was those things that took her husband from her. I still remember the scowl that took over her face when she first saw me with my boxing gloves slung over my shoulder; I don't think I ever fully recovered from that in her eyes. And she passed that hatred on to a young Peter, who would just as soon cut off his own thumb as step on a worm in the grass. I think Peter forgave me my violent ways because he saw them for the flimsy veneer that they were. I used to shove him off balance walking home from school, trying to get a little red swirling in his eyes, but he always just brushed it off and laughed.

"Why don't you fight back, Pete? They'll stop picking on you if you hit them good just once." I shadowboxed circles around him, the feet of my wiry frame prancing like Cassius Clay's, my fists a blinding blur that would have made Sugar Ray green with envy. I was under the impression that I had just driven off a small crowd of potential bullies with a boxing demonstration, though in truth they had been scared off by thoughts of my father, who was well known around Detroit in those days for his labors in the ring.

"What's the point? Bullies need someone to pick on." he would say, flashing his wry, defeated smile. He had an old face, even then, with dark bags under his blue eyes and deep-set lines across his forehead.

I heard some years later, after he had gone and come back from our jungle war, Peter tried to break apart two men in a Baltimore bar fist-fighting over gambling debt. One pulled out a shiv and stabbed him several times, in the liver first and then the right lung; he bled to death in the ambulance. I guess even bushwhacking through suffocating jungle for month after endless month and watching friends die by bullets that could have just as easily found you doesn't have the power to change some people.

And so I did not have a mother to pack a lunch for me or to tuck me in at night, and the lesson I learned best from my father was to fight well and to fight honorably. With his square jaw set into a square head set on square shoulders, my father reminded me when I was young of something carved out of a block of stone, all sharp edges and dense muscle; he was a man built for the boxing ring. Even as a baby he would take me with him to the gym, and many of the remnants of my earliest memories are from that place: the steady tapping of jump ropes as they glanced off the matted floor on the downswing; the constant drumming of speed bags like the hooves of a stampeding herd, both bag and fists a whirling blur; the intermittent cluster of sharp

whacks as someone struck a heavy bag with a flurry of blows; the booming voices of my father and his friends as they sparred and tested each other, all the while joking; these are the sounds that inhabited my childhood. And so I too quickly learned to love boxing.

By the age of sixteen, with two years of training under my belt and child's lifetime of experience as my father's devout understudy, I was confident that I was on the path to a world title. It was at that point quite clear to most—regardless of how many steak and potatoes meals my father prepared me—that I was not heir to his boxer's body, that I was destined to be a man of unremarkable size and strength. I had inherited the high cheekbones, narrow shoulders, and long, lean limbs of the woman in the picture beside my father's bed. Still when I glanced at the mirror between jabs at the punching mitts my father brandished at me threateningly it was not me I saw in the reflection but my father's son, barrel-chested and muscle-bound.

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The bell rang with both fighters standing toe-to-toe still laying into each other and the crowd of nearly a thousand on their feet and roaring like a dam collapsing, so that the referee had to step between my kid and Blue-striped shorts and shove them both back to their respective corners. Both men's skin glistening like sheer rock faces after rainfall. Sweat dripped from their eyebrows and noses and chins and chests and arms and gloves and the sweat that misted from their bodies after each solid blow was still settling on the canvas and the first few rows of seats. I had my enswells and Q-tips and gauze pads ready, but my kid was in no rush to make it back to his corner. He looked back over his shoulder towards Blue-striped shorts as he leisurely retreated towards his worn wood stool, and Blue-striped shorts knew somehow and turned and their eyes met and the gap-toothed smile blocked partially by Blue-striped shorts' mouthpiece was not hostile.

They had gone five rounds and both boxers had knocked the other down once, my kid in the third with a stunning string of jabs and crosses to Blue-striped shorts' head that sent the older man slumping to his knees, Blue-striped shorts in the fifth with an enormous counter-punch right hook that would have knocked my kid out cold had it landed clean, instead striking a glancing blow that still shook my kid like an alarm clock buzzing, sending him teetering backwards into the ropes and then down to the canvas, his world spinning, arms outstretched in search of something solid and steady to latch onto. My kid had by far landed the more punches of the two, but Blue-striped shorts had a hard chin and a quick cover-up and a face built to withstand sustained abuse. They had run circles around the ring and around each other and exchanged body shots and head shots, all the while blocking and bobbing and weaving, and in moments of utter exhaustion both had leaned clinging to the other as if they were the last tether that held them bound to the earth. They were trying very hard to kill each other.

"This is turning into quite a fight," I said to myself, mostly, but Daugherty heard me and tried his best to hurt me with those Hollywood eyes of his.

Then my kid plopped himself down on the stool and I swung over the ropes and crouched down in front of my kid and the rough skin of his face became my world. With his eyes focused on Daugherty as the man reminded him of everything he stood to lose, I applied an iced enswell to his right cheekbone which at that point was so inflamed and was pulling his skin so tight that I was beginning to worry it would tear. Blue-striped shorts—an old hand who never had the flash essential to catching a promoter's eye but who knew how to fight and win, a man I had a lot of respect for and had seen fight more than once before, a dangerous man to square up against—he knew how to recognize tender spots and exploit them, understood how to focus his attacks there. So when a small laceration had opened up near my kid's right eye early in the third round it had

not gone unnoticed, and despite my best efforts to hide it under a thin layer of Vaseline Blue-striped shorts had harassed the spot relentlessly, opening the cut wider and wider with each passing round. I pressed down on the expanding gash with a cold towel, hoping to slow the blood flow, and followed that up with a Q-tip soaked in epinephrine. After wiping the area dry with a gauze pad, I covered the cut with Avitene and applied what I hoped would be just enough pressure with the pad to have the coagulant do its work.

I had gone through this progression so many times in the past with so many other fighters that it was more of an instinctive reaction to having seen a cut than a consciously thought-out treatment. My kid was doing his best to ignore the pressing cold and the probing cotton swabs and listen intently to Daugherty's misguided conception of advice. Things like *why haven't you put him away yet* and *stop playing games out there* and *don't let him hit you.* I somehow restrained myself from rising to my feet and clocking Daugherty one in the teeth. A cutman isn't supposed to concern himself with strategy; his job is solely that of damage control, and when he watches the fight he looks only for hints of where he might find the damage most in need of his attention. He takes a fighter who's fractured and cracked and on the brink of rupturing like a dropped egg and patches him up best he can. Not to prevent a shattering—no, the shattering is inevitable, even desirable—but to postpone it, to delay it so the broken shell of a man can rise up shakily for one more round and take one more blow and crumple to the ground one last time like a marionette suddenly discarded. And so the crowd can have its hunger sated and think its money well spent. This is why cutmen focus with singular attention on fixing the breaking men who slump before them, try to ebb the swelling and stop the bleeding and send the fighter back to the center of ring rejuvenated, and also why some boxers throw smiles each other's way between

rounds of trying to detach the other's head from his shoulders; there is a wonderful false sense of autonomy in these acts.

I pressed down on the enswell with a little extra force and caught my kid's eye for the shortest fraction of an instant.

"Keep moving those feet, he likes to close in this point in the match," is what I wish I would have said.

"Diiiiing," is what the bell said, a hollow and sour note.

* * *

My father, after he swallowed his disappointment, did grant I had the perfect hands for the job. "Still as a winter night," he said, and made me hold them out for him to survey, my long fingers splayed. Not a tremor. "Even after all those hours in the gym, not the slightest hint of a shake." He managed a smile then. I tried to return in kind from my chair at his bedside, but I could only manage a pained grimace so I returned to a convincing stoicism. This was in the shadowy bedroom of our old apartment back in Detroit, a floor lamp with a tan lampshade stained black sending faint light scattering across the room. A layer of dust filmed the bedside table and the dresser and the room stank of cigarettes even with the windows open wide; it was mid-January and the windows were closed against the cold as best as they could be.

"You'll make a fine cutman, Timmy, very fine," he said, and then coughed up a glob of mucus that reminded me of the slimy membrane of a warted toad. His skin was pasty and pulled tight over his bones like the animal hide on a drum. I took his block of a hand in mine and held it there, a lump of dried clay.

I was twenty-two and had failed at everything I had tried in life. I had dropped out of school even though it came easy to me and it felt good to see those grades because I was a

fighter's son and that meant I was a fighter myself, school be damned. I had stubbornly kept up with boxing up until the month before my twenty-second birthday. I hadn't won a match for four years and had had my nose broken against someone's gloved fist three times. Still, at twenty-one, I was convinced that all you needed for success was an understanding of how to succeed. I would see a hook coming and tell my body to slip with it, but then something would explode against my temple and I'd be looking up from the mat, a messy heap of limbs and broken bones and blood. I'd throw what felt like a perfect cross-counter right and feel the inexplicable crunch of a jab against my cheekbone and my eyes would throb. I didn't realize that boxing was a stone man's sport and I was made of straw, and my father was too kind—despite his ferocious jabs—to open my eyes to the truth.

I finally had them opened by a Latino teenager named Esteban Federico. It took him thirty seconds to turn my face into a bloody pulp, then another seven seconds to shatter my jaw and cheekbone. This is what my father told me at least since I've never been able to remember a single instant from that fight or from the week surrounding it. Sometimes I worry that my father is flattering me with those numbers. I woke up in a hospital bed knowing I could never box again, then turned my neck to see my father sitting by my bedside, his head framed by the colorful floral pattern of the hospital wallpaper.

My friends—most of them boys who only had a mind for violence—had at that point all left for the war, and so I got it in my mind to join them. I went to the army recruitment office the first day they let me get up from my bed. I imagined myself as a marine parachuting into enemy territory and laying an entire network of Vietcong tunnels to waste. I imagined myself a Navy seal performing reconnaissance scuba-diving missions. The recruitment office told me I was 4-F. I stared at him blankly. Flat feet, he said. Automatic disqualification, he said. Guaranteed trench

foot, he said, and steered me out of his office and to the front door like you would lead a blindfolded man. "Appreciate your patriotism, son," he said as he looked back over his shoulder, already distracted, looking for the next potential recruit, and closed the door behind me.

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Blue-striped shorts landed the blow right before the bell rang, and I knew right away it was worse than bad. I rushed out to the center of the ring where the kid stood dazed—how he was still on his feet I'll never know—and, letting him lean his weight against me, we stumbled together back to the corner where Daugherty waited inert, leaving behind us a thin trail of blood.

"What's wrong with him?" he said, managing to sound concerned, and began to enter the ring.

"Stay where you are," I said, and helped my kid slump back onto his stool.

I leaned down so our faces were inches apart. I could feel the warmth pulsating from his body. A steady stream of blood was running from his nose down into open mouth.

"Spit out the blood," I said, and gestured at the used gauze pad bucket. It came out dense and solid like something you could pick up and hold.

"Is it broken?"

He only nodded, his eyes coming into and out of focus with the pain.

I felt along the bridge of his nose as gently as I could and noticed the break immediately. It was not a clean break, and I could feel the jagged bone edges threatening to pierce through the calloused skin.

"You can't fight with this," I said, and started to rise, my eyes searching for the ringside doctor, an old friend of mine from my fighting days. My kid's arm snaked out and grabbed me and pulled me back down into my crouching position.

"I'm a fighter," he said, "It's all I know and it's what I love. Don't take it away from me. Don't leave me with nothing." He stared at me with an intensity I'd never seen before and will probably never see again. He didn't look at me; he looked in me. And I looked back into his eyes for a few seconds stretched long like rubber bands and we shared in each other's dreams and failures. The ringside doctor had started to head toward our corner, but I waved him off.

"Are you sure?" he called over the deafening hum of the crowd. I turned away from him and didn't answer.

I splashed some water across my kids face and wiped away the blood streaming in rivulets from his nose.

"You're sure."

He stared back at me.

I took out a couple cotton swabs and drenched them in adrenaline hydrochloride and Avitene and stuffed them up his nostrils to stem the bleeding. He writhed in pain but it worked well enough, and then I saw the adrenaline start to affect him and his pupils dilated and he bared his teeth like a wild animal. When he jumped to his feet his nose wobbled independently from the rest of his face, but then it settled down well enough, drooping only slightly. Staring up at him from my kneeling position, his figure silhouetted by the bright lights shining down, he looked to me like the perfect image of a fighter; his nose and cheekbones swollen, nostrils flaring, forehead and cheeks glistening from a mixture of sweat and blood. It was a sharp sting deep in my chest, unexpected and for a moment unrecognizable; I was jealous, immensely jealous, of this young kid—his talents, his passion, his unwavering will; he was everything I had never let myself realize I could never be.

They had mopped the mat down so that all the blood was gone and the ceiling lights shining down on the wet surface made the mat shine. The fighters standing on a thin layer of light. And then the bell rang and Omari walked out to the center of the ring to touch gloves and fight.