

2022

Ellipsis Issue 47

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Recommended Citation

(2022) "Ellipsis Issue 47," *Ellipsis*: Vol. 47, Article 1.

DOI: 10.46428/ejail.47

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/ellipsis/vol47/iss1/1>

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Ellipsis

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2022

Issue XLVII

A Journal of Art, Ideas, and Literature



THE UNIVERSITY *of*
NEW ORLEANS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
AND FOREIGN LANGUAGES

University of New Orleans
2000 Lakeshore Drive
New Orleans, LA 70148

For complete submission guidelines, please visit our website:
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Ellipsis: A Journal of Art, Ideas, and Literature is published annually in both digital and print forms by students in the Department of English at the University of New Orleans. We feature the creative and scholarly work of UNO's students, faculty, alumni, and staff. Contributors are welcome to submit fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, short scripts, scholarly essays, and art and photography. Please read our submission policy for full details.

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Cover Art: "Weekend Drive" (Jacqueline Carberry)

About the artist: Jacquelyn Carberry graduated in spring 2022 with a MA in English, and a concentration in professional writing. She created the cover art "Weekend Drive" digitally. She works in journalism and is an aspiring children's book illustrator and writer. She especially enjoys drawing by hand and coloring digitally, as well as painting in watercolors. More of her artwork can be found at jackiecarberrybooks.org.

This publication is also available online at:
<http://scholarworks.uno.edu/ellipsis>.

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ORLEANS PRESS

unopress.org

ISSN: 2331-7086 (print)

ISSN: 2331-7116 (online)

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Editor's Note

As editors of *Ellipsis*, we are in search of gold. We mine through stories, poems, essays, and art created by our fellow Privateers for that sparkling shimmer of promise. For that one story, that one poem, that makes us see the world differently, that makes us understand ourselves and others, that we can find solace or comfort in.

As *Ellipsis* celebrates its 50th anniversary, its Golden Anniversary, we think of all that is golden. Golden children lost to time, golden rings left behind, golden sunlight not seen by human eyes for decades, golden lightning striking silver poles, golden doorknobs and picture frames, golden flowers and memories, golden mushrooms, golden dancers, and golden light from streetlamps. Golden words that shape the stories we need to tell, the stories we need to hear.

Many hands have touched *Ellipsis* over the 50 years it has been in publication. Each year, new voices contribute to the vast library of stories and poems we have built through this journal, and each issue is special and different. Our hope is that this issue means something to someone, whether you are one of the authors or artists featured in Issue 47, one of the classmates who helped put it together, or one of the students who happened to pick it up and found a nugget of gold within the pages.

Issue 47 was made possible by the hard work of UNO's own students. Not only our contributors who lent us their talents, but also our readers who pored over each submission with thoughtfulness and care, and our faculty advisors and guest speakers who shared their insights into the publishing industry with the future editors of the world. We are honored to share the words and artwork of our talented students with you.

If we can leave you with one sentiment after reading this issue, it's to find the gold inside yourself, mine it, and share it with the world. You are golden, you are shining.

CONTENTS

SHORT STORIES

Hovel	13
ANDREW COMINELLI	
Obit_v1.docx	16
ANDREW COMINELLI	
Go	18
ANDREW COMINELLI	
Tea Time	20
FERALUCCE SAVAGE	
Stepping into the Light	25
MARLANA B. FIREMAN	

POETRY

2020: After Six Months in Quarantine	35
JESSICA BOWDOIN	
For the Eleventh MRI: Breathing	36
JESSICA BOWDOIN	
After Rejecting Four Phone Calls From My Father	38
JESSICA BOWDOIN	
After Four Discectomies	40
JESSICA BOWDOIN	
When the Birdhouse Burns	41
JESSICA BOWDOIN	

Fragments from Quarantine	42
NIKKI UMMEL	
And He Takes and He Takes and He Takes	44
NIKKI UMMEL	
Photo of Our Parents, Circa 1992	46
NIKKI UMMEL	
Fantasy of Walking My Niece Home	48
NIKKI UMMEL	
Gretel Returns	50
C.A. MUNN	
She Could Be You	52
MEGHAN SULLIVAN	
A Morning Walk with Lover	53
MEGHAN SULLIVAN	
Our Memories	54
MEGHAN SULLIVAN	
the ephemeral is soft and tough	11
MEGHAN SULLIVAN	

ESSAYS

Magic Mushrooms and Their Medicinal Use	59
LYONS BLUM	
Why is Burlesque Still Relevant as an Art Form?	65
CHRIS EDDY	

CREATIVE NONFICTION

DOA	71
ELYSE HAUSER	

IMAGES

Sediment	32
AYANA SOFIA	
Skeptical Lover	56
KENDRICK K. JAMES	
Ballerina	68
CINDY GUADALUPE AVALOS	

AWARDS

List of 2022 Winners	72
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SHORT STORIES

Hovel

By Andrew Cominelli

The mother and the daughter sit at the same table they've been sitting at since the daughter was a child, a table scarred, and cheap in the first place, but made magisterial by its years of silent witness to their family's shared life.

The daughter picks at the border of a quarter-sized divot worn into the table's surface. The daughter comes to the mother's house on this date, every year. They never make a plan beforehand; the daughter just comes. The kitchen is always lit by the same harsh light and oppressed by the same greasy old appliances. Decades-old dirt lies impacted in the dimples of the floor's linoleum.

The daughter is tired of doing this every year, of coming here on the anniversary of her brother's death and sitting over an unsugared Tetley tea and not talking about it, not even referring to the calendar's date or the reason for her visit, both of them knowing full well but saying nothing about it. The visit is always the same. An hour or two hours of a vigil that consists of talking about anything but him, as the table groans softly under their elbows and the generations of dirt stare up from the floor. The daughter believes he did it in the bathroom of this house, but she was so young that she does not remember, and not once in forty years has she ever felt able to ask.

The daughter picks at the divot and watches her mother's finger growing like a tree root through the handle of a floral teacup.

Over the years there have been people and events about which the mother has said, "We don't talk about that." But then there is *this*, a subject which the daughter does not need to be warded away from. There is not even a language for this lack of talk, not even a settled-upon way of talking about not talking about it. They never say his name.

The mother holds her tea with both hands and describes a neighbor's new car with thinly veiled scorn. The daughter picks at the divot's edges and nods her head.

The daughter does not remember anything. Instead, she has had to conjure her own images from that day, but they are false images. It is maddening to have only this privately made-up version, bloody tubwater and unseen screaming, and it is maddening how it can slip into the daughter's mind and convince her. A false cinematic that plays and replays, decades-old now. It is maddening each time she catches herself believing it.

The mother cups both hands around the teacup and the appliances hum.

Maybe, the daughter now thinks, and not for the first time, maybe it did happen as she imagines it. Maybe bloody water did slosh over the tub's lip and weep down the sides like the tub itself was having a good cry. But most likely it did not. She does not even remember him. He is woven into the falseness, lost in it: a false version of him haunts her false memory.

The mother is saying how they've changed the layout at Stop 'n' Shop, how they've put the produce on the other side of the store. The daughter, though she has barely been listening, agrees with the mother that this makes very little sense, that they should put the produce back where it's always been.

In the daughter's false cinematic, her mother's shocked face is the face of another woman entirely, a woman of different capacities than the one that sits here yearly with her finger sprouting through the teacup's handle. In the daughter's mind, it is a completely different woman who collapses beside the tub, trying to shriek away the horror as the ability to face it ever again starts already to slip away from her.

Each year her mother's finger is the same and each year the questions locked inside the daughter are the same and each year the daughter fails to find the will to ask. To just ask. Each year the dirt pressed into the floor is a year older than it was the year before.

The appliances hum softly. The blood weeps down the sides of the tub in the daughter's mind's eye and a face she only knows from old photographs lolls in shadow while all along the woman across the table holds the real version deep within herself. The mother talks and the daughter picks at the table's divot and nods along until finally, without thinking, the daughter interrupts with a remark about the state of the kitchen floor, the awful state of this dirt-impacted floor. She uses the word *filthy*. She asks the mother how she can live in such a *hovel*. The daughter's voice rises, and shakes. She declares that the floor is enough to make *anybody* half-decent sick to their *stomach*. The mother nods along, not wanting to fight about it. And the daughter, sick of coming here every year to drink tea and pick the divot and not ask, sick of not knowing and not being able to ask, now expresses her total shock at the family's plan to gather here for Thanksgiving, here in this *hovel*, because that's what it is, a *hovel*, a *hovel* that would demoralize and depress any self-respecting family. Which is something, the daughter now muses, that maybe after all they aren't: a self-respecting family.

And as the daughter proceeds to revise the holiday plans for a new location, as she considers aloud the calls that will have to be made and the

logistics in need of speedy correction, the mother nods along, in complete agreement, remaining silent except to say softly, "Whatever you want to do," and looks at her own fingers spread carefully on the table like antiques displayed for auction, heirlooms drained of memory, already become secondhand.

Obit_v1.docx
By Andrew Cominelli

Ella [REDACTED], age 10, of Medford, died—passed away entered the next life passed away on November 9, 2005. Ella was the daughter beloved daughter of [REDACTED] and [REDACTED], and the sister beloved sister cherished younger sister of [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. Ella was born in Medford and lived her short-entire life here. A bright student at Dixon Street School, she was very interested-in involved in many activ-after-school activities. She was the Wee Deliver mailperson for the Dixon's entire fifth grade, she performed choreographed and performed a-her own dance routine for the school's annual talent show, and she served as a Mini Mentor reading instructor for second graders. A gymn Level 7 gymnast at Polly's Gymnastics School, Ella earnedwon a-the silver medal in her age group at the S.C.W.S.W.C. Youth Championships. You should have seen her on the mat! What you really should have seen was Ella at age five, on a nature walk in Roosevelt Forest, coming across a small bird. The small bird was dying—I don't know what had happened to it, but it's chest was ripped open, and we could see this whole network of moist bloody muscles and ligaments moving slowly stretching and relaxing with the bird's labored last breaths. The bird was lying on its back and its chest its chest was torn thrown open like some sort of coat, like something had been eating its It was quite gruesome. You shouldve seen how Ella frowned at the sight of it. I wonder now could she see its beating heart beating. How can I describe how she frowned, how Ella frowned, how her little face fell how the suffering animal suffering caused her eyebrows to tense up and her face her little face to fall. At five years old, how she somehow knew to how to feel empathy for a tiny dying creature. I tried to call her away from the bird. But it was like she didn't hear me. She knelt down beside the bird and she whispered to the bird but when she tried reached to touch the bird I shouted ENOUGH I shouted and took her by the wrist and pulled her to her feet. Her knees were covered in dirt, and I patted off off the dirt and we kept walking, and I haven't thought about this once not once ever since until right now. Ella, oh my god, Ella, if you can hear me tell mommy what you said to the bird. If mommy could only know what you said to that bird. Ella I am so sorry, mommy is so so so so SO sorry, but if you could hear mommy and tell mommy what you said then mommy can maybe feel like she can see you see a little piece of your soul and know you are okay wherever you are. Mommy knows you are watching her as sure as mommy knows she is sitting in the kitchen at the table in the

house but what mommy really REALLY wants to know is what you said to the bird. If you could just tell mommy then All who knew her were touched indelibly touched by Ella's beautiful, loving spirit. She was our angel. She was our miracle child our angel, and now She somehow packed a full life lifetime into her ten short years, and brought such joy to every single person who met her. She is here with us right now She will live on in the memories hearts of those who loved her forever and ever. She is survived by her parents and siblings; grandparents [redacted] and [redacted] [redacted] and [redacted] and [redacted] [redacted]; and many aunts, uncles, and cousins. Services will be held Friends are invited to attend a Mass of Christian Burial on Monday at 10 a.m. in St. Mark's Church at 34 Hawthorne Lane, Medford. Following the service, Ella will be interment will take pl

Go

By Andrew Cominelli

If he can get the circuits to work and the train to run—if he can set the train running and get the boy who is lost in the woods back to the town, back to the father waiting at the station—then, he thinks, something in him will change, or start anew.

He sits up each night surveying three different model railroad forums, posting questions about his circuitry issue. His idea is for the train to go into the hills and slow in the woods, and for the boy who's been lost in the woods to see it, board it, and for the train to go full steam ahead back to town to reunite the boy with his lonely and shaken father. But the circuitry is complex, and he cannot get the train to go.

He sculpts huge foam blocks into the shape of the Naugatuck Valley. It is long, slow work, but soon the hills rise and fall, the rivers run. With an Exacto knife, he scallops the river surfaces, then paints them high-gloss green. He conceives an angle for the sunlight and hangs a tennis ball from the basement ceiling on a string, to remind himself. He glues miniature trees along the riverbanks and paints their soft reflections on the water.

He sits the father on a train platform, on a bench. He stands the boy in the woods, facing the town but maybe not seeing it? Maybe not knowing how close he is to the town and to the father.

He lays the track all through the valley. He wires the circuit board according to the train set's instruction booklet. But when he tests an engine it will not go. He puts a post on the forums titled "Inexplicable short circuit!" and gets some replies, but when he tries the advice the train will not go.

He paints in fine detail a library, a city hall, several dozen houses. He places feel-good people on front porches, a collapsed drunkard in front of O'Flanagan's pub, a Dalmatian on the firehouse lawn.

Gluing tree after tree to the hillsides, he makes woods.

The train will not go. He repaints the father's hair and mustache gray. He replaces the figurine of the little boy in the woods with one of a grown man, but this is too unnerving, because a grown son is seldom lost but instead chooses to stay away, so he quickly switches it back. It is better, he decides, if the separation is a mistake, the result of some lapse or misunderstanding, no one's fault. Having decided this, he drops the grown version of the boy into a wastebasket.

He gives the Reynoldses a pool and the Romaniellos a tire swing. He paints, sculpts, glues. He troubleshoots the wiring. He makes forum posts

titled “VERY IMPORTANT!” and “URGENT!!!” He paints the words FOR-GIVE ME on a tiny sign, and sets it on the bench beside the father. He puts small fine lines of age in the father’s forehead and cheeks. He troubleshoots and checks the forums. Sometimes he stares at the train and says, *Why won’t you go*, and curses, his thumb pink on the remote’s hammer, saying,
Go.

Tea Time by Feralucce Savage

I gotta tell you, it's difficult being single and childless in this day and age. Seriously, people get downright offended when you don't have children. And what's worse, they tell you just how offended they are. In great detail. At length. Without ceasing.

"Imagine if your parents didn't want you!" they say.

For me, this one is easy. My parents *didn't* want me. They put me up for adoption as soon as I could survive without my mother's milk. That doesn't stop the comments, though. Those who were blessed with crotch fruit have many gambits to play against the childless.

"There's still time!"

Not for me, there's not.

"Kids add meaning to life!"

I am an artist, writer, filmmaker, physicist, and philosopher. My life has meaning.

"Having children is the best decision I ever made."

Good for you. It would not be for me.

"I didn't know who I was 'til I had kids."

That would be because you have never been subjected to any significant amount of stress. Trauma has a way of showing us just who we are. I've seen my share of stress and trauma. I don't need a child to know who I am.

"You'd be such a great parent, though!"

No. No. I would not. I would be a horrible parent. I have all the parental instincts of a soggy Ritz cracker.

"Who is going to take care of you when you are older?"

Considering the sheer amount of weird medical things wrong with me, I don't think growing old is going to be an issue. And, if by some weird twist of fate, I live to be geriatric, I would not want to saddle kids with changing my diapers.

"You're missing out on the best part of your life."

Really? Okay. That's a risk I am willing to take.

"I said the same thing when I was your age. You'll get over it."

Oh, you poor, sweet, summer child. You are five years my junior. I will not "get over it." This is a conscious choice.

"Being a parent will teach you to be less selfish."

Listen, Karen, you don't know me. I am not, by any stretch of the imagination, selfish.

“What does your significant other think about that?”

When I am asked this one, I turn to my dog—a 232-pound bullmastiff—and ask her. “Roux? What do you think of that?” She is just excited to be considered.

“Children are *magical!*”

No. Unicorns are magical. Harry Potter is magical. Penn & Teller are magical. Children are children.

“What do you have against children?”

That’s it. That’s the one. I don’t have anything against children, *per se*. It’s just that, as these things go, children and I are not compatible. My particular flavor of autism renders the thoughts in my skull a chaotic, boiling mass of oatmeal. I have spent most of my life learning to wrestle my thoughts into a coherent pattern. All of this is to say, I tend to be exceptionally logical.

Children... are not.

I have arachibutyrophobia. Some people say this is the fear of peanut butter sticking to the roof of your mouth, but that isn’t right. It is a fear of stickiness in general. I know! I know! I know it’s silly. But phobias are like that. They aren’t rational. I have worked long and hard to overcome this fear. For the most part, I can deal with it, but if I grab a bottle of soda that is sticky or walk into an spider web, I react in a way that drastically betrays my generally cool exterior.

And here’s the thing. Children are sticky. I don’t know what it is about them, but they are *always* sticky. It’s like they have these glands in their skin, the kind that let snails and slugs stick to everything. You think I’m exaggerating, but it’s true. I once sat in the living room as my best friend bathed his child. He dried his spawn off with a towel, and then it toddled towards me and reached for me.

Guess what?

It.

Was.

Sticky.

Then people ask, “Hasn’t your biological clock started ticking?” The thing is. It hasn’t. I am gender nonconforming, asexual, and aromantic. I don’t think I *have* a biological clock, and if I do, it was certainly broken in shipping. I don’t feel the need to engage in romance or sexual activities. I’ve never had a twinge of thought about being a parent.

It is just not who or what I am.

“Don’t you want someone to carry on your family lineage?”

I don't have to. My brother has spawned several times. My sister also gave birth to one girl, my niece, who now looks up at me after answering the door.

"Untie Max! I didn't know you were coming over today!"

"Well, you know now!"

Over the years, people have insisted that if I just spent time with children, I would change my mind. I spend a lot of time with this child. While she is an exception to the rule, I have never even come close to changing my mind.

Her name is Maria. She is, well, child-sized. Like my sister, she has a tangled mass of black curls and piercing green eyes. I think my sister put headphones on her belly and played the collected works of Charles Babbage for her during the pregnancy. That is to say, Maria has never been illogical.

And best of all—*she's never been sticky!*

My sister and her husband deserve some time off. I have watched as the rigors of parenthood have worn them down from generally energetic people into the tired, shambling wrecks they've become. My sister used to be effervescent—practically perky—but now she is listless. Kind of like cabbage left out in the sun for a couple days.

Once a week, I give them a night off. My niece and I spend a pleasant, non-sticky evening together. We watch movies, play board games, play video games. You know, kid's stuff. It's been difficult to figure out, but Maria has made it relatively easy and pleasant.

This evening, she presents me with the handset of her Fisher Price phone and says, "It's for you!" I don't care who you are. I don't care how little parental instinct you have. When a seven-year-old presents that red plastic handset to you, you answer the phone.

"Hello?"

Maria smiles. "It's Nannette. She wants to have a tea party. I told her she would have to ask you."

"Why not your mom?"

"Because this is *our* night, Untie Max!"

I wink at her and wiggle my ears, an ability that she and I share, and say into the phone with my best British accent, "Nannette, your presence is requested at the behest of her most serene and dignified highness, the Duchess Maria. Tea and crumpets shall be served 15 minutes henceforth and forthwith."

Maria serves tea with a dignity that rivals the Queen of England.

The three of us, Maria, Nannette, and myself, dine on peanut butter and jelly finger sandwiches, tea, and crumpets. Evidently, “crumpet” is the word the nobility use for Twinkies, but they’re delicious, nonetheless. My sister had anticipated the tea party and purchased banana Twinkies. She knew these were my favorite. I was advised that the tea would be real if I believed hard enough, and that it was not the responsibility of the chef if I could not taste it.

I suspect that Maria enjoys my presence because I let her get away with things that my sister wouldn’t allow. After we have eaten our fill, we hold an impromptu salon, during which we watch a few episodes of *Bob’s Burgers* on my laptop. I do not think my sister would approve of such things, but she shall never know.

After that, I tuck Maria into bed. She’s asleep as soon as her head hits the pillow.

I walk back down the stairs, and open my laptop on the kitchen table. My sister and her husband aren’t due back for several more hours, and I plan to take advantage of the time to write. I have a story due soon, and I always seem to work better anywhere other than my office. I’ve hammered out about 500 words when the phone rings.

I stand and cross the kitchen in a couple steps. I pick up the phone as it finishes the second ring.

“Hello. Belcher residence.”

There’s a dial tone. People can be so impatient. Before I can hang up the phone, it rings again. No. It isn’t ringing again. The plastic Fisher Price phone is ringing. That seemed odd, but it isn’t the classic Chatter phone I had as a kid. It’s a newer model. Maybe that is something it can do?

I pick up the receiver, expecting to hear some cartoonish voice, but there is nothing. The receiver doesn’t seem to be heavy enough to have any real technology in it. I turn it over and look, but there are no speaker holes, either. I flip the phone over, looking for a battery compartment or switch. There is nothing like that. Weird.

I drop the phone when the doorbell rings. In and of itself, the doorbell is not a scary sound, but I was distracted by this silly, plastic phone. It rings again. Somehow, when it fell, it managed to land right side up with the handset on the cradle.

I shake it off and rush to open the front door. Walking away from me, toward the street is a woman in a dress that I can only describe as... well... decadent and ridiculous. The dress looks like a lavender pile of whipped cream, roses, and glitter.

“Hello?” I call out.

The woman looks back at me over her shoulder. If someone were to ask me what a princess looked like, it would be her. Her face lights up when she sees me standing there. "Oh, thank goodness! You're still awake. I was afraid you would be asleep!"

"Do you need help?"

"Oh, no! I just left something inside." With that declaration, she gathers up her excessively fluffy dress and brushes past me.

"Wait. No." I raise my voice, but not too loud, lest I wake Maria. "Stop!"

She is already standing in front of the table, which still has a couple Twinkies and Maria's tea set laid out on it.

"What?" she asks, seeming genuinely confused.

"Who are you?"

"Oh! You don't recognize me?"

"Should I?"

"Well, we did just have tea! But I understand. I removed my makeup. I'm so frumpy without it." She looks down at herself and lets the ruffles drop as she mutters, "Though, how anyone can mistake this dress for anyone else's is beyond me."

I laugh loudly. I've never been fond of my laugh. It sounds like a rhinoceros crossed with a car horn, and I snort when something strikes me as really funny.

I snort.

"You are telling me... you're..."

"Nannette. Yes. We had lovely finger sandwiches, crumpets, and the most delightful tea. I set my ring aside, so I didn't get it sticky. When I left, I forgot it on the saucer."

I look down, and there is indeed a ring laying on the saucer. I bend down and pick it up, turn it over in my fingers. It seems impossible, but this ring matches her dress: Dainty, red gold, featuring a lavender rose with a purple diamond in its center. What's really confusing is the inscription, which reads "Nannette."

I hand Nannette the ring without saying anything.

She slips it on her finger and sweeps from the room. The vacuum of her passing pulls me along with her, and before I know what is happening, we are on the porch outside the door.

"Thank you so much for the tea!" she says. "We really must do this again soon. Please tell Maria I will call her in the morning."

With that, she is gone, into the night.

Stepping Into the Light

By Marlana B. Fireman

Gerda leans in close. Her lips are slightly sparkling in the dim light that casts horizontal beams through the air vent. The tip of her nose almost brushes mine. I consider the distance, how her nose is wider and more snug against her face. It doesn't create a barrier between us. Mine does. It protrudes into space. It casts shadows, it is prominent. It keeps us apart.

Gerda tilts her head, and then my nose fits right next to hers. It is that easy, just with the tilt of her head. Her bouncy brown curls tumble over her shoulder and brush against mine. Goosebumps trickle from my collarbone to the tips of my fingers. Her lips are so close to mine, not touching, but so close. Her lips smell like mint lip balm, and her breath smells like warm, fresh coffee. Her perfectly shaped Cupid's bow traces where my top lip ends.

"Are you afraid?" she asks. Her lips brush against mine with this question. I breathe in through my mouth, filling myself up with whatever comes out of her.

"What is there to be afraid of?" It sounds like a quip, but it is not. In our situation, some feel overwhelmingly terrified. I can understand where they are coming from. We might all die very soon. But we might also live and die naturally, and our next generation will inherit the knowledge that the world will in fact end with a fortuitous crash. We inherited it from our parents, who inherited it from our grandparents, who inherited it from their grandparents. Those people, our great-great-grandparents, were the ones who learned of this impending death. Not the death of humans. The death of all things. Their clergyman saw it in a vision; the sun dancing closer and closer to him and his people until they all burned alive, scorching from the outside in.

They believed they could outrun it. I believe we cannot. But since I am young and the people in charge are old, I am stuck here. We are stuck here, underground, existing within the confines of strictness. Protection, as they call it.

That is why I shimmied into this air vent. Because outside of this air vent, everything is beige and smells like surgical gowns. Because in exactly 59 minutes, Gerda and I will need to say our prayers and be accounted for in our respective blocs.

"This was all created by fear," I say, "and it doesn't seem to serve us very well."

“Do you hate it?” Gerda asks. She shifts her body against mine, and there is electricity in my guts.

“I’d like to burn it all down,” I say. And then I tilt my head and press my lips to hers. I can feel her smile. She smiles so big she has to stop kissing me back, like when you cry so hard you just can’t close your mouth.

Inevitably the conversation turns to the death of all things. We cannot avoid it, no one can. There is no self-actualization in this situation. Not when we are all waiting to die at any moment. Not when we are reminded all the time that everything we know was built as a response to fear. I kiss her. My nose is cold, and I shift away with the thought of what it might feel like to have the sun touch my skin. I lean in and our noses squish together.

“Sorry,” I say, feeling my cheeks flush. Instinctively I try to shield my nose with my fingers. I can’t because we’re in an air vent, and one of my arms is pinned beneath my body, asleep. And the other is resting on the small of Gerda’s back. Moving it would be self-flagellation.

“I like your nose,” Gerda says, tapping it with her finger. I gently lead her hand back to my shoulder because the spot where her hand had been is freezing cold now.

“I like yours,” I tell her. “But I can see you’re spending too much time in the imitation sun room.” Gerda just smiles and taps her finger to her own nose, which is so red it makes her look like a nymph who fell asleep in the light.

“I don’t know why you’re so self-conscious about your nose.” Gerda runs her finger from the space between my eyebrows down to my Cupid’s bow. I can feel where her nail trails and trips up at the bridge of my nose.

“It makes me stand out,” I say. A troubled look sprouts on Gerda’s face, and she leans in, pressing her lips to the tip of my nose.

Ah! A Roman nose! My history teacher had proclaimed when I came into the classroom on the first day. *Like King David. Like Josephus!* Every pair of eyes in the room twisted toward me, pointed, narrow. I’d put my fingers up to my face, like I’d done a thousand times before, to avoid further embarrassment. I kept my hand there until everyone was finished craning their necks to look at me. My fingers smelled like graphite, and then I was equally worried about having graphite on my face. The teacher had lifted his finger, as if to touch my face, and then recoiled at the last moment.

“That’s why I like you,” Gerda says. And her smile makes me wish I didn’t feel so terrible, because I want to love it, if not for her.

Attention. Evening roll call will commence in fifteen minutes. Please be in your designated blocs. Thank you.

“We never get enough time.” I push my face toward the grate and peek out of the air vent. People are milling up and down the halls, bidding each other good night and moving with intention toward the sleeping quarters, scriptures in hand.

“What if we went somewhere else next time?” Gerda asks, beginning to shimmy herself out of the vent. “Like outside.”

“*Outside* outside?” I ask, astonished. No one in this shelter has ever been outside. The last of those that had died years ago, and now we only have stories. I’ve never seen a tree before. “I might know a way,” Gerda says, holding her hand out to help me climb down the rungs of the ladder that lead up to our vent. I can’t say anything, I just stare at her. “I thought you weren’t afraid.” She says it with a teasing tone, but she is not smiling. She is backed against the door, looking up at me, her eyes stony and determined. She is so still; her beautiful wide-set eyes are dark, squinting, unflinching.

“I’m not. If you know a way... okay.” I resign. I trust Gerda with my life, despite the chaos.

“Okay,” she says, her mischievous grin blooming. I love the gap between her bottom teeth. It can only be seen when she smiles in the biggest way; when she’s elated, or laughing loud and hard. I bend down, and she takes a moment to run her fingers through my very straight, very black hair that always finds a way to tangle itself in my necklace. Then she kisses me quickly and says,

“I love you.” Before exiting and shutting the door behind her, she leaves room for me to breathlessly climb all the way down and count to the predetermined 72 seconds before going my own way.

Tucked into my bed, wrapped in a beige blanket and feeling like a pea in a pod, I stare up at the ceiling. I am unlucky enough to sleep right below one of the status lights. It blinks, green, green, green, green, forever, until we die. *If the light turns red*, they tell us, *it’s happening*. *You know what to do*. We’ve done it a thousand times before, drills, for when the light is yellow. *It’s happening* echoes in my head. I’m not so sure I know what *it* is anymore. They say we might never feel it, we might not know when it happens, but the light will always know. Sometimes I look up at the light for hours, willing it to stop blinking or even turn red, just to know that maybe all of this hasn’t been in vain. It never changes though. It just blinks green forever.

Often I will drift off to sleep and then wake up again, still on my back. My eyes find the light immediately, and it starts all over again. I watch it until I can’t keep my eyes open, and then I watch the imprint of it on the inside of my eyelids.

Tonight, I don't will it to change. I just accept that this is it, green until I'm dead. Green until the last thought I ever might think about Gerda, how she somehow creates her own internal light in this place. Maybe I'll be dead at 100 years old but hopefully more like 80 or 85. My mind begins to spiral about my future. Thinking about if I'll have to marry a man, if I ever want to be married at all. Gerda is really all I want, but it's not allowed. Even though I think we would be great at raising a kid, if they'd ever assign us one. And if I don't marry but I'm good enough to raise someone, which I'm sure I'm not, I could be like Alison. Just raising someone on my own, meeting Gerda in the air vent until one of us dies. No, no, no, they just keep having us all procreate so there are people to take care of us when we get old, if we get old, while we all wait to die. We could just die off. It wouldn't be so bad, if they're so sure *it's* happening.

Red.

I lay even more still and hold my breath. Is that what I thought it was? My eyes search the ceiling frantically, but it's all black. And then I see it flash again, red. The three of us, together, in silence. There is a moment of absolute stillness, like what I imagine a black hole to be, between me and the red light and whatever is coming toward us.

What happens next is nothing short of chaos. Sirens blare, forcing my ears into pulsating pain. The room is quickly bathed in a spinning red light. Everyone is flipping their blankets back, slipping their feet into shoes, hustling children down the hall. The sirens cry and cry, and then the children start too.

"Alison? Alison?" I call. Alison is my FPF—female parental figure. Everyone's faces are black and then bright red, black, then bright red. The air has been sucked from the room while I try to search the faces for Alison's beauty mark. It sets her apart, high on her cheekbone. Whenever I see a face, the room goes dark again and when the red returns the face is gone. Replaced by the side of someone else's head, someone's arm reaching for another's hand or nothing at all.

"Let's go!" someone says, slamming a hand against the doorframe.

"Alison?" I call again. "Is this real?" I ask no one and everyone. In perfect time, an automated voice booms above the chaos.

This is not a drill. This is not a drill. Move to the nearest perma-shelter. This is not a drill.

"Eiza!" she calls back. I reach through the dark for her and she finds my sleeve, pulling me through the crowd. Everyone is rushing, like a river swelling in a thunderstorm. Children wail on the hips of their parental fig-

ures, clutching at tiny fistfuls of fabric. We all fall into the crowd. The main hallway is filled with people. I've never seen so many people in one place, everyone jogging and breathing shallow, terrified breaths. I whip my head around desperately searching the crowd from face to face to find Gerda. Her sleeping quarters run perpendicular to mine and so I did what I would do if I was unafraid.

"I love you!" I shout to Alison. I squeeze her hand and look her in the eyes. And then I let go and turn away. The crowd begins to carry her with them down the stairways that lead deep into the bowels of the shelter.

"Eiza!" She shouts, I can see her round, moony face popping up through the crowd, eyes huge and shocked and deceived, until she is ushered down the stairs.

I sidestep down a narrow service hallway and find the entrance to Gerda's family quarters.

"Gerda! Gerda?" I say into the blackness. Whatever happens, I want to be with her. The room looks empty in between flashes of darkness and red. "Gerda?" I call again. I am stricken with dread. Perhaps she abandoned everything and went down with the crowds, or maybe she went without me. I wonder which one is her bed. If I could just find it, I could smell her hair one more time. Just as I begin to kick myself for risking it, wondering if I can make it down the stairways before we're all burnt to a terrible crisp, a hand wraps tightly around my wrist.

"Oh my—Eiza!" Gerda almost smashed her face into mine, our noses pushing against each other and our lips parted in shock. "Let's go."

I follow her down another service hallway where we see a young man ushering people through an inconspicuous door marked *Cleaners' Closet*. Gerda runs toward the man and grins at him.

"Gerda," he says with a smile.

"This is my girlfriend, Eiza," she says. She swoops her arm through the air like I am a fancy gold trophy on a stand. I try to smile, but I'm afraid I might vomit.

"Hello," he says with shocking ease. We follow the others into the closet and down a dusty cellar hatch that looks as if it had never been opened.

"Down?" I yell over the continuing sirens. "Is out down?"

"No!" Gerda says, laughing. "But we have to go down to go up!"

At this point, nothing makes sense. I follow her, almost tumbling down the stairs, fast with buckling knees. I hear the cellar door shut above us. We are in absolute darkness. The only thing keeping me from falling

down the stairs is the repetitive tapping of everyone else's feet and pure adrenaline.

"That's everyone!" The man calls.

"Heard that," the others echo. We all end up in a cluster at the bottom of the steps. In front of us is a heavy vault door with a circular knob. A couple of the men pull at the knob until the door creaks open, revealing another set of steps.

"Let's go!" The man calls. We begin to ascend, many of us taking the stairs two at a time, yearning toward whatever is at the top. I've pulled ahead of Gerda, and I look back. She is right behind me, leaping up the steps with a luminous grin. She has tears running down her face.

"Are you okay?" I ask over my shoulder, terrified to break our stride.

"I'm so happy," she says, her voice breaking.

Those in front of me begin to slow, and soon we're grouped at the top of the steps. It's almost completely dark, except for a lighted square above us.

"Is this—are you sure? Is this real?" I ask Gerda. Her face flushes. She reaches around and grabs onto my hip.

"What does it matter?" she asks, grinning. "We could die either way..."

"Who's the tallest?" someone calls.

"Eiza," Gerda whispers. "It's you."

"It's me!" I say, emboldened by the thought of choosing death for myself. I throw myself up the remainder of the stairs and see the man gesturing to a lever. I pull on it hard and the square of light breaks open, showering us in gold. We help one another up, grasping at wrists and elbows. Last, they pull me up, and my feet leave the dusty ground for the last time. The outside is incomparable to anything I'd ever seen. It glistens, it's gold. Gerda takes my hand. The sky is not a ceiling, it's endless, and it's blue. Just then, water begins to fall from it. From nowhere, from everywhere, like magic. It feels icy cold and magical on my skin. I've never felt something so exhilarating.

"This is amazing," I say, beginning to choke on my words. To my right there is this thing, absolutely gigantic, so high up in the air my eyes cannot focus on the top of it. Nothing has ever been that big, nothing can be... But, it's there. Right there, luscious and stretching and a green I could never describe, a green that moves. Tears begin to fall from my eyes. I squeeze Gerda's hand even harder to remind her that I'm here. To remind myself that she's here, next to me, because I can't take my eyes off the sky. This place, a vast kaleidoscope of color. Colors I'd never seen before, only heard

of. Colors sort of like what we had before, but so much richer and brighter. So bright, they must taste like candy. I look at her for just a moment, and she glows in the sunshine. Her sunburned nose makes her look perfectly at home with her face stretched upward. She opens her eyes and looks at me in a way I'd never seen. Like there is no way that anyone else could feel love right now because I have it all. She gestures up again, and I turn my face back toward the sapphire blue beyond.

“Hey,” she says. “Don’t blink.”



Sediment

AYANA SOFIA

POETRY

2020: After Six Months in Quarantine
by Jessica Bowdoin

Seasons are noted: the loquat fruit falling from weighted trees, the azaleas in bloom, the silver silence warbling back and forth in search of echoes. 695,353 total.

April. I left my birthday card in the augustine and the heat of the pine needles, forgotten, like most everything else. 1.8 million

on the list when the fireworks buried themselves behind fences and oak, alone. In some backyards, single sparks thrust themselves upwards. A child claps. A faint singing of "Oh Say Can You See"

stirs a quiver of consciousness. On our day of labor, we sleep through 4.7 million ringing alarms. The husky smell of brisket and fire sits warm in our mouths. My neighbor laughs as I decline a pool party.

Three months—a rise. I notice the browning leaves that gather in the corners of my porch to jostle for a place to rest. 8 million. My neighbor has a skeleton wreath, asks me: Are you handing out candy this year?

2022 Vassar Miller Poetry Award

For the Eleventh MRI: Breathing
by Jessica Bowdoin

I lie in this cusp,
this curve of cold, and float between
(eggshells, pale-painted magnets),
a lone body tucked-in by paper sheets.

They roll me out, gloved hands
that tighten slack. They align
their skeleton over mine;
a thermoplastic ribcage coils
over asymmetry, over meat and fat,
the jagged bones of body, to immobilize
a broken spine. Roll back,
roll back inside this shell and listen.

Rasp—a radio, intermittent: the technician taps
tongue into microphone. Tells me:
Be breathless! Refuse lungs.
Even when lips spasm,
corral in your laughter. Stifle reverberations
of oxygen and carbon molecules held
in swollen cheeks. Now, breathe—
a set rhythm, only, in ten second holds.
Control—the diaphragm-driven timpani

of oxygen, the definite clarity
of radio waves that penetrate
everything but bone
to create this imagery.

And, if I can't hold air,
will my lungs make sheet music?

Will the molecules, freed, turn
into pixels of black splatter that blur
on film, like the speckle and grain
of old movies?

Will these illegible, celluloid bubbles
of dirty and dotted slush nest between bones
and scar tissue and sinew to become
dots and brushstrokes of something, almost
Pollock-worthy? Perhaps

this shell gives birth
to this body's oxygen,
and delivers a canvas of silver bromide,
and this metamorphosis, it derides
the idea of accuracy. Brokenness

has more potential as art in a gallery
than any form of accurate,
any film of radiographic
truth.

After Rejecting Four Phone Calls From My Father
by Jessica Bowdoin

I think of you:
the blood-shot webbing of brown eyes,
the tight grasp of the half-empty
Taaka tipped generously into the glass,
the vodka barely pinked with cranberry.

I remember:
the last day I spoke to you
when you said: *I'm sober. 60 days.*

And, you quietly raised a glass
of water. Was it water? I wanted to say
I was proud like I believed it. I wanted
to encourage, I promise. For the hundredth time: *I*
will support you (is what I wanted to say).
What I wanted
was my voice not to break
over the phone into staccatos.

You have taught me this silence
all my life. I'm practiced in holding it close
in my hands like soft wool. I'll caress
the woven space that protects
thoughts from becoming words from becoming
erasure.

So I left
this silence suspended.

In the blur of breaths, I counted seconds
between a voice and a memory:
yours, not long ago, almost whispering:

"We both know
I think AA meetings are for quitters.

And love, maybe it exists,"
you say, slightly bitter,
"but only in Christmas movies,
the black and white ones that flicker,
not that new shit."

2022 Vassar Miller Poetry Award

After Four Discectomies
by Jessica Bowdoin

Throbbing, I am the drumbeat
of sciatic nerves where rhythms meet.
Under the electric thrum of neuropathy, skin
breathes like lightning. Legs adjust to tension
like sprung tight guitar strings on repeat.

I rust like bolted locks on unsold acreage left for weeks
to sit and listen to the cicadas singing in the mesquite
trees. Four surgeries sway lamina into apprehension.
Throbbing, I am the drumbeat.

I dance on shaky legs into our narrow street,
rattle to my car in shifts that shake the jangle of keys,
like bells. Bitterness at doctor appointments and reprehension
for this: storm dance of tight hips and spasms within
the gradation of a bittersweet
throbbing. I am the drumbeat.

When the Birdhouse Burns
by Jessica Bowdoin

No one questions the lightning,
its attraction to the bent steel pole
of the antique bird house. The bent Victorian roof folds
its turquoise tiles in shambles, its empty that holds
the bird nest: all straw and fluff and wood shambles
tucked in a way we won't see it. Blind
love is the straw that always ignites.

So, let the lightning hit. See the scatter
of fragmented slivers, the charged electricity, the slivered
dopamine in the field consuming itself. Revel.
These neurons: they will zing their electric breath,
and spark more than just fire—this burning we breathe,
this bird house collapsing, the torched roof pulled inwards,
the remnants of “we”: a steel pole, bare, standing.

Fragments from Quarantine
by Nikki Ummel

1.

the house boomed me awake
a quake in the hands of a construction crew

2.

outside my bedroom the sky
turned sideways took flight while a dove perched upon the
foreman's finger
pointed at the concrete mixer

3.

a statue in my living room i watch houses spring like daisies from
the damp dirt

4.

blue blue so much wet blue
it drips from bruised sky from the shingles

5.

every one of us borrowed from heaven

6.

solitude rots my mouth as the neighbor boys press their ears
to my cage

7.

but
sun
i will not pucker for you

8.

i bottled love for years
it shivers when held
the light shines straight through it

9.

don't mean to be selfish don't mean to be
fuck forgive me father for i have

tongued the doorknobs in search of touch

2022 Vassar Miller Poetry Award
Honorable Mention

And He Takes and He Takes and He Takes
by Nikki Ummel

Tessa marks time with her daughter's body:
bones grow in cadence to the
hourglass slip of sand grains wind carried,
they lodge in cuticles,
swirl the tub as she rinses suds from her daughter's skin
after an overcast beach day.

Elah: the valley where David slayed Goliath. עמק האלה *Emek HaElah*
named for overcoming, for the slaughter of giants. Elah's hair tickles
kneecaps,
swishes like a skirt.

Tessa braids her hair thick every morning, lays hands
on every inch of coarse curl,
ropes the braid around her daughter's waist,
tethering her to her five-year-old body
as old as Tessa's father is dead.
Elah grew strong
as he withered & scabbed
on a worn futon cushion.

Tessa prays for the strength
to raise her אֶבֶן *eben* stone of help
take aim at her גִּלְיָת *Golyath*.

She bore her daughter in mourning, in a black maternity dress,
finger-painted Elah with afterbirth,
forced her to bear witness as גִּלְיָת *Golyath*
the revealer, the giant-who-uncovers
lingered in the corner.
Grief stitched itself into pituitary, coaxed forth a manic rush of HGH.

Elah is large for her age. The x-ray
reveals a skeleton two years too old—

עצם *etsem* bones-substance-self
too big for her body.

She is five. Her skeleton is seven, a cage fit to burst.
Her ribs bars of iron, her bones of bronze.

Tessa stuffs her mouth with fig leaves until she chokes on:

תפארת *tipharah* Glory Be

Glory Be Glory Be

Photo of Our Parents, Circa 1992
by Nikki Ummel

They were unhappy,
my sister says,
our bare feet on cold tile
as we squint at the photo
of our parents.
She tilts it
as if that angle
might improve
what we know.

At the stove,
flipping pancakes,
I nod. I know this photo.
How their arms wrap
around shoulders,
no child in sight,
how my mother's braid
tickles my father's
left elbow as they lean in
to fill the frame.

It makes sense,
says my brother
from the corner chair,
assuming his classic
coffee cup pose.

After a few years,
they felt trapped.
What they wanted
was not each other.

We stare at the photo,
absorb the shock of our parents
in matching Jimmy Buffet t-shirts,
tube socks draping their noses
and dangling from their ears,
casting shadows over their crooked smiles.
No child in sight.
No child in sight.

She takes a pine cone, shoves it
in my pocket, deep.

She says,
We will make a home for them.

2022 Vassar Miller Poetry Award
Honorable Mention

Gretel Returns
by C.A. Munn

The way you know it's an obsession is if it returns, recites Gretel
as she plucks the lint from her toes
on the train seat. No passengers nearby to watch; it's not a heavily
traveled line.
She's always looking for patterns,
like the one on the seat upholstery—Dixie cup squiggles, stuck in the
nineties—
or like the ones her body makes.
One, two, three, four, five toes. One, two, three, four, five
valleys between them. Repeat.
It's interesting that toes have exact replicas of themselves. Fingers
too.
She paints her nails next,
black and metallic. Absorbing and reflecting. Her fingers are—*what's
the word*
Mother used—shapely.
Maybe it's a euphemism because they are not slender. She thinks of
chicken bones passed through cage bars
and other life-saving items. She thinks of calling her brother to tell
him about this trip
and to remind her she's not alone
after all. For imagined excuses she puts it off. She counts pillars on a
bridge
as they pass by the window,
out of habit. *Ch-ching, ch-ching, ch-ching* goes the train. The space
between
each judder a pregnant suspension
of breath. It only makes the perpetual pulse more emphatic when it
returns.
The passing pillars make looking
out the window like watching an old film as it winds up to speed.
Sometimes Gretel thinks life
is like that, like watching a movie reel. The space between the frames

so small you don't notice it,
but without it there'd be no motion at all. If you look at the film stock,
it's all just snapshots, little unstuck pieces of time.

Gretel likes to take photos with an old Leica M3 that belonged to her
mother.

Develops the negatives herself
in a darkroom. You can make infinity copies of a negative,
theoretically speaking.

She checks her daypack.

Camera. Phone. Extra battery. Water bottle. Trail mix,
which she has always assumed

is so named because it is perfect for leaving a trail when you are lost
in the woods.

That's why she buys the kind

with the brightly colored knock-off M&Ms. The trip is short
but it feels like a lifetime

before she disembarks in a one-road town. She laces her sneakers and
sets off

down a familiar path. Still,

she is shocked when she finds the cottage exactly where she
remembers it.

No one lives here but it is not empty.

She walks the dusty rooms and stops in the kitchen. There squats the
oven,

bulging, obscene, expectant.

Click. She snaps a photo—to show Hansel, she thinks—

but she will never develop

this roll of film. It will sit in the bottom of her bedside drawer next to
hair ties

with the elastic worn out

and the pack of cigarettes her mother doesn't know she smokes,

and when she is feeling

around for her lighter her fingers will stumble on the canister

and she will pull it out,

forgotten negatives coming to light when she least expects it.

*2022 Andrea Saunders Gereighty/Academy of American Poetry Award
1st Runner-Up*

**She Could Be You
by Meghan Sullivan**

Holding forehead in palm and licked finger turning pages,
she could be you: shea moisture scented hair, clear lip gloss on lips
smack
on that bus down to Tchoupitoulas.

The fear of strangers on a bus is not present. My fingers pinching your
ear and my nose sitting
where your neck meets your curls, our first time in New Orleans.

We went to that diner and everything felt like TV.
The way you popped your pink bubble gum
you couldn't look me in the eyes
I bit my tongue.

I still didn't say how sorry I love you I am.

What were those fruits, womb of shade giver, to be split open and
made partner to mason jar- a
satsuma! It didn't smell like you, it smelled like a new home!
And what about all that chill in the air, the two layers of jacket worn
to distance self, I kissed you
on the head saying goodbye and god, my heart has never been so
hard and cold as when I
closed that door.

I'm back to work tomorrow.
And so, to the bus driver who nods my ticket onward,
Please say good morning.

A Morning Walk with Lover
by Meghan Sullivan

Green anoles scurry to the side,
roll out the blue cloud carpet,
to drum in the arrival of love.
Southern Louisiana plant glossary in hand, lover introduces herself to
plumeria,
tropical hibiscus,
prepossessing fragrant flowers,
smell so good you wanna taste 'em!
Angel trumpet, cued in by the streetcar's lizard conductor, squeezes
out a scent. The brass vibration sends you skipping and tickles the
question you've been courting. Spit it out already!

"Do you love me diamond and gold?"

Lover spots a cajun chorus frog,
takes its croak as her call to respond,
with two hands, grabs you by the waist, kisses you on your forehead
and cheeks. Neighbors, leaping off the edges of rocking chairs,
abandon their haint blue bug nets,
roll into a fais do-do.
Now, love, it belongs to the city!
It belongs to the babies and the lizards.
The lizards!

Our Memories
by Meghan Sullivan

Our memories are just that, ours.
So many things can be taken by others.

So please, kiss my fingertips, for they file
through brain fabric, massage hippocampus,
press breath out of my chest and make moments
real. Like that memory of Grandpa.

When he was dying, I didn't know it yet.
I smiled. I sniffed his chest and pressed

his cheek to mine, mine, plump and pink, his,
purple and mottling. His fake teeth

sucking on a pretzel. The salt, the flour, the
butter, the mustard he loved and licked—

but not any longer. Not any longer.
Co-opted into the living's recollection,

maybe it wasn't a pretzel, maybe
he feigned vitality, maybe

our memories are just that, ours.

the ephemeral is soft and tough
by Meghan Sullivan

Hurt heart was red and blue when
put in hand so to bruise it would be cruel,
but to kiss a frog would be even worse.

Shove a rock down your throat every
time you long to say *I love you* or
regret having to cut the cord first.

The countless choices include lunging
at eye, removing some teeth, grooving
to bite your very chubby tongue.

Soon, your mouth, swelling canker
sores, will taste like hot iron while your
handkerchief will be wet with options.

Choice can make you feel down.
Like the sky, crumpling up clouds,
while a poised and pretty sun shower

enters, tosses vapor in a wastebasket.
A wounded heart is delivered to say,
remember—



Skeptical Lover

KENDRICK K. JAMES

ESSAYS

*2022 Ella V. Schwing Award
for Best Essay in First-Year Writing, ENGL 1158*

**Magic Mushrooms and Their Medicinal Use
by Lyons Blum**

Our house sits on a brook that branches from the Wolf River. Like most kids around the neighborhood, my siblings and I were drawn to it almost every day. We would get up early and try to catch the morning bass as the tide dropped. However, I became drawn to another early-morning creature. As the dew settled on the grass and the forest came to life, large red polka-dotted mushrooms—called *amanita muscaria*, would peek their heads out from the ground. When I learned these mushrooms were psychoactive because of a chemical called muscimol, I decided I would eat one. So, I picked one up and took a big bite out of it. About thirty minutes later my stomach sank in my chest and the mushrooms came right back up. However, as I lie sleeping that night, my dreams took me to a different world, they were vivid and magical. I remember feeling different after that day, it was less of a spiritual awakening than it was an interest in the idea that fungi have the capability of creating powerful psychological effects on humans. One of the most interesting chemicals I investigated was psilocybin, produced by mushrooms of the genus *Psilocybe*, and how it has the potential to transform how a person sees themselves. This of course could be considered more spiritually awakening than muscimol, as it has proven to change someone's whole concept of life. Some recent studies have proven that psilocybin can aid in decreasing depression and even help patients break an addiction. However, psilocybin is currently illegal and listed as a substance with no potential for medical use. Psilocybin should be administered in a therapeutic medical setting because it has proven to be very effective at reducing depression and even helping people to stop smoking.

Though magic mushrooms have been popularized as a party drug used for recreational purposes, these mushrooms also possess a very important medicinal side. In the early 1960s, Dr. William Richards, a psychologist at Johns Hopkins University, began giving cancer patients psilocybin as he noticed it was reducing their depression and helping them cope with anxiety. Unfortunately, all research on the drug was halted due to the counterculture use of the drug during the 60s. The funding for research went dry. As Dr. Richards described, "We were learning so much, and then it all went to an end" (Jacobs). Imagine how depression could take over someone's life after

being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness like cancer. Though there are many feelings involved with the shock of this diagnosis, the greatest fear is no doubt the anxiety of death. Erinn Baldeschwiler, a 48-year-old mother of two given only two years to live, described her feeling as “if someone came up to you, put a gun to the back of your head, whispered, ‘I have a gun to your head and I’ll have a gun to your head for the rest of your life. I may pull the trigger, I may not.’” Baldeschwile went on to say that she has been seeking psilocybin treatment to help deal with her depression and anxiety for a long time now. However, gaining legal access to psilocybin is still a significant obstacle as it is still classified as a schedule one drug. Baldeschwile was not only fighting her own cancer, but was also fighting to spread awareness of the medicinal benefits of the drug (Aleccia). As seen in Baldeschwile’s case, knowing she could drop dead any minute or not wake up tomorrow became a lifelong burden for her, but she is not alone in her fight to raise awareness for psilocybin. Scientists like Dr. Richards and Dr. Griffith at Johns Hopkins University have been researching the drug for the past few years, and their results continue to reveal that these drugs can be very beneficial for people with severe depression and anxiety.

Griffith and Richards acquired approval to conduct experiments to better understand the effects of the drug on depression and anxiety in the early 2000s. In 2016, they published a randomized double-blind study that they conducted on 51 cancer patients diagnosed with severely life-threatening cancers as well as depression and anxiety. The participants went through two sessions with a five-week interval between each session and were monitored by session monitors. About half of the patients were given a very small dose, which acted as the placebo group, and the other was given a very high dose. During each session, data were collected by the session monitors, and then once again after 6 months to see how the potential effects would last. The results showed that after the first session 92 percent of the high-dose patients showed a noticeable difference in their depression, whereas only 32 percent of the low-dose patients showed a response. After a six month period, 79 percent of high-dose participants continued to show a change in depression. Psilocybin’s effects on anxiety were similar after the first session, with the high-dose and low-dose patients exhibiting 76 and 24 percent, respectively. The overall decrease in depression and anxiety for the high-dose and low-dose group was 65 and 57 percent, respectively (Griffiths). These results show a substantial decrease in symptoms of depression and anxiety for cancer patients. This proves that not only can psilocybin be medicinally beneficial to people like Baldeschwiler and help them cope with the idea

of coming to the end of the road, but it can also help people with severe anxiety and depression.

In 2018, another study was published that observed four cancer patients with symptoms of depression while they underwent a psilocybin trip. One patient named Chrissy, a self-proclaimed atheist with stage four breast cancer, put the revelation she had into words. She described seeing a Ferris wheel during her trip and understood it to be a sign that “life comes from death and death comes from life.” During her experience, she also reported feeling a pain in her chest where her cancer was and described it as her “umbilical cord to the universe.” She went on to say, “this was where my life would be drained from me someday and I would surrender willingly when my time came.” Like the previous study, psilocybin had a noticeable reduction in depression and anxiety. Not only did Chrissy experience less depression and anxiety, but she was also more open to the idea of death. She reported that though she was ok with death she “chose to live” until her time came (Malone). Learning about Chrissy’s experience is extremely profound because it gives a personal feel for the type of experience these patients have during their journey. It seems almost like the drug psilocybin can act as a teacher of a sort to help people navigate the darkness of their lives. Making this drug legal for medical purposes may also help people’s physical health as it has been proven to be effective at reducing substance dependency on drugs like alcohol and nicotine.

In 2015, at the University of New Mexico, the effects of psilocybin on alcoholism were examined. Ten patients with mean alcohol dependence of 15.1 years were selected out of 70 individuals to take place in this study. The individuals were given twelve psychosocial intervention sessions to help motivate them to change. Amid these intervention sessions, they incorporated two psilocybin sessions. The sessions were lined up so that four intervention sessions occurred before the first psilocybin session, four before the second psilocybin session, and another four after the second session. Data were collected during these twelve weeks by asking the patients if they had a “heavy drinking day” or just a “drinking day.” Heavy drinking days were described as a day in which five or more drinks were consumed whereas drinking days were described as just one drink consumed (Bogenschutz). The results showed a drastic decline in drinking for most patients. More importantly, the biggest declines seemed to take place after the incorporated psilocybin sessions. A patient in this study named Jason described one of these sessions, saying:

I just thought yesterday was really good for identity, and it kind of secured how I've been feeling for some years, and it made it more stable. I'm still gonna have a lot of challenges; I don't think so much of drinking as much, because I know I have to be clear-minded a lot more. And, uh, those are things that just sidetrack me. So, it, believe it or not, you know, it benefited me. It was medicinal. It wasn't something recreational where I just stayed there laughing. So, you know, it helped. It did help. It's kinda... It's gonna help me, just, go forward and remember, you know... the insight that I got was— it was worth it. You know? It was really deep (Nielson).

The fact that Jason noticed a reduction in drinking says a lot for the psilocybin treatment alone. Based on this quote, it also seemed like the treatment allowed him to examine his own identity and perhaps see the flaws he couldn't see before. It's hard for a lot of people to realize how addiction has been affecting their lives because a lot of the time they don't notice it unless someone tells them. In Jason's case, it may have been his realization that drinking had been preventing him from thinking clearly or that drinking was making him "sidetracked" and preventing him from achieving his goals. This study shows that psilocybin has the potential to help millions of people who suffer from drug-related dependencies. Psilocybin could potentially even help society become more productive by ridding people of these issues. Not to mention, the health benefits of not drinking are undeniable. Another health potential for this drug is a reduction in smoking tobacco. Psilocybin's ability to detach someone from addiction has also been seen in cigarette smokers.

From a study conducted by Mathew W. Johnson at Johns Hopkins University, 15 patients were treated with psilocybin during cognitive behavioral therapy for smoking addiction. The patients received two to three psilocybin sessions throughout the study and their cessation was measured on the amount of cotinine (a component of nicotine) levels found in their urine. At a six-month follow-up, 12 reported no biological trace of nicotine in their system. This shows extraordinary decline in smoking whereas the best drug to treat nicotine addiction has only shown a cessation of 35 percent at a 6-month follow-up (Johnson). The fact that psilocybin is more effective than the leading drug administered for smoking shows that it has the potential to help millions break their addiction. It may even improve health all over the world, especially in European countries where smoking is more prevalent.

The drug psilocybin is categorized as a schedule one drug with no potential medical use, though a great deal of research on the chemical suggests otherwise. If psilocybin was legal and administered in a medical setting, it would open up many new doors for research and allow people to reap the benefits of happiness and even tackle addictions. Depression and substance abuse are two of the most abundant issues in the world right now and often co-exist. Psilocybin has been called a breakthrough drug by many drug administrations, and more and more people are becoming aware of its potential. Soon enough, there may be specialists in every country to help guide people through their psilocybin experience. The medical use of this drug could allow people all around the world to benefit from psychotherapy and overcome any obstacle in their way-- whether it be depression, anxiety, smoking, drinking, past childhood trauma or any of the many other mental health issues it has proven effective against.

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2022 Ella V. Schwing Award
for Best Essay in First-Year Writing, ENGL 1157

Why is Burlesque Still Relevant as an Art Form? **by Chris Eddy**

I was covered in sweat beneath my skimpy costume as I walked through the dingy Texas dive bar to the stage. As I stepped into the blueish miasma of cheap LED lights and cigarette smoke, the band blasted into my number with ragged aplomb. A sea of rowdy bikers, cowboys and random tourists hooted and catcalled at my silver lame shorts and football pad sci-fi armor. My dance partner, a tremendous man clad in a glittering tunic, his face smeared with black and white makeup, lumbered on to the stage. Pointing his plastic laser pistol at me, he exclaimed, "I am Lord Xanthor the Chaste! Bow before me Chest Blasterson!" The audience roared with laughter. Counting off the steps, we performed our mock battle, stripping off most of what we had on in the process. Finally, reaching the climax of the act, our characters realize they are in love and share a passionate kiss. Before the stunned audience can recover, we are out in their midst, gyrating at their tables and collecting dollars in what is left of our costumes..

It was 2013 and I was pinch hitting for a regular cast member in a touring burlesque show. Though I was already an experienced actor, having been in scores of stage productions since I was a child, I learned a lot about performing during those two weeks. Today, my burlesque career is long over, but my partner, The Vivacious Miss Audacious, is an internationally traveling burlesque performer and producer of several popular shows. As a result, I spend a lot of time in the community, watching performances and sometimes helping out backstage. I have observed these shows becoming bigger and more numerous through the years, and I have sometimes wondered; what is it that makes burlesque so relevant to the modern audience? Before we get to that though, let's take a quick look through burlesque history.

The best place to start is with the career of Lydia Thompson, a British actress and producer who revolutionized burlesque in the late 1800's. In *Burlesque {and the New Bump-n-Grind}*, author Michelle Baldwin states "Thompson and her company shocked and delighted with their brief costumes, portrayals of classical male roles, and integration of witty satire between lines of respectable text" (1). While daring in the early 1900s for the combination of risqué dances and pointed social humor, its popu-

larity waned during the 1950s and 1960s, as audiences flocked to grind-house movie theaters and strip clubs. Historian Alan Trachtenburg, in the foreword of *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque ad American Culture*, speaks of burlesque in the 1960's and its "...decline into seamy, quasi-pornographic theater for almost almost exclusively male audiences" (xi). The 1990s revival turned this around, with an influx of female producers such as Lorelei Fuller, Michelle Carr and Billie Madley, whose focus was on reclaiming the legacy of satirical burlesque in the tradition of Lydia Scott, but with a nod to the performers of the 1950s and 1960s.

But what really happens at a burlesque performance? Let's take a look at the interaction between performer and audience in a typical show. In order to keep the energy level high, the audience at a Burlesque show is expected to cheer, holler, and toss money on to the stage during the performance. This reciprocal relationship with the dancer benefits both watcher and watched. The performer gives more to the audience creating the brouhaha, because it is exhilarating to hear the roar of approval and see money landing on the stage. The audience, given a space to express themselves with wolf whistles and ribald encouragement, is drawn in to the action. The result is a kind of entertainment that not only fulfills its purpose as a diversion, but creates and sustains a vibrant community of artists and fans. We need only to look at the recent popularity of interactive theater such as murder mystery dinners, or *Tony and Tina's Wedding*, productions that integrate spectators into the action, to see that the trend in live entertainment is audience participation, and lots of it. Yet, this is not the only way the audience and performers draw upon one another in burlesque.

When thinking about the relevance of this form, we should also explore the ways that burlesque has increasingly focused on the inclusion of Black, Latino and Asian voices. Calamity Chang's *NYC Asian Burlesque Fest* and Jeez Louise's *Jezy's Juke Joint* are examples of long running and successful showcases for performers of color. Current day producers are also curating shows to mirror their diverse audience, because they know that we love to identify with the performers on stage. Additionally, that thought that a vital American art form should represent Americans of all kinds extends to the increased visibility of transgender and non-binary people in the community. As the genre develops a greater vocabulary of viewpoints it is better able to reflect the audience. Greater opportunities for these performers to be heard and seen is essential for burlesque as we know it now to grow, both as an art form and a source of income for performers of traditionally marginalized groups.

Although there is no shortage of classic fan dance acts or amazing acrobatic feats in burlesque, the tradition of mixing humor with striptease will always keep people coming back because there is nothing quite like it in live entertainment. Where else could you see a sleazy Bob Ross, a stripping Sta-Puft Marshmallow man, and the lusty Mario Brothers in a single night? Stripping becomes a vehicle for comedy, thus transforming what we often think of as a transgressive act (stripping or watching a stripper) into a socially acceptable, even positive, activity. This is at the heart of what is so fascinating about this type of theater. As a performer, you have the ability to fuse the sensual and grotesque with slapstick comedy, as in the popular Halloween act where we see a zombie strip off their clothes and then strip off their skin. It's an intoxicating brew for adventurous artists that is unlike any other kind of performance. Like the classic film comedy, *Some Like it Hot*, or *The Benny Hill Show* television program, much of the evergreen appeal of burlesque is this playful interaction of comedy and sexuality.

So why has burlesque, as a form that has been around for more than a hundred years continued to find purchase with modern audiences? Is it the diversity of the performers, who draw a wide spectrum of people into the community? The humor that transforms a striptease act into something more? These are both important in the genre's ability to survive cultural changes, but the real magic of burlesque is the synergy between performer and audience. As a performer, the act I rehearsed so many times didn't come alive until I was in front of an audience, improvising based on their feedback and interacting with them. As an audience member, I found burlesque to be fulfilling because the energy at these shows was unlike anything I had ever experienced. This is an art form whose stock in trade is outrageous humor and over the top glamour, so the fans match that intensity, filling dive bars and theaters with cacophonous roars and sending dollar bills raining down on the stage. Between watcher and watched, a space is created for adventurous improvisation and risk taking that constitutes more than the sum of its parts or the subtraction of its clothes.

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Ballerina

CINDY GUADALUPE AVALOS

CREATIVE NONFICTION

DOA
By Elyse Hauser

He was about to move away anyway, so what was one more \$30 cab ride to go to his house and make-believe we were lovers? A small price for one more chance to pretend that he was staying in Seattle, that we had a future. To imagine that the mother of his child hadn't found a rich husband way out in the suburbs of southern California, that she wasn't leaving and he wasn't following. That things were different.

It was summer, but it felt cold, and it was very dark out. A storm was just blowing over, the sky purplish with shredded clouds. Even in the car, the air was shiver-damp. As the cab driver pulled onto the on-ramp for I-5 going south, a raccoon crossed the wet and shiny street in front of us. She had something limp in her mouth and she was shaking it over and over again. I looked closer—the limp object was a baby raccoon. It was dead.

I knew then, without knowing that I knew, the answers to the questions I hadn't yet learned how to ask myself. What was between me and him was already gone. I was trying to shake life into a dead thing.

The cab driver saw it too. "She's saying wake up, wake up," he said. "Wake up, wake up."

—2022 Award Winners—

2022 Vassar Miller Poetry Award

Judge: Grace Bauer

The Vassar Miller Poetry Award was created by revered New Orleans poet, Maxine Cassin, in memory of her lifelong friend, poet Vassar Miller of Houston. Since Ms. Cassin's death in 2012, the award continues to be sponsored in memory of her by her son, Daniel Cassin. The winner receives \$100.

**WINNER: "FOR THE ELEVENTH MRI: BREATHING"
AND "AFTER FOUR DISSECTIONS" —JESSICA BOWDOIN**

**HONORABLE MENTION: "AND HE TAKES AND HE TAKES AND HE TAKES"
—NIKKI UMMEL**

HONORABLE MENTION: "GRETTEL RETURNS"—C.A. MUNN

GRACE BAUER is the Aaron Douglas Emeritus Professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, where she taught Creative Writing for 25 years. Professor Bauer is the award-winning author of numerous books of poetry, including *MEAN/TIME*, *The Women at the Well*, *Nowhere All at Once*, *Retreats and Recognitions*, *Beholding Eye*, and most recently, *Unholy Heart: New and Selected Poems*. She has also co-edited (with Julie Kane) two anthologies: *Nasty Women Poets: An Unapologetic Anthology of Subversive Verse* and *Umpteenth Ways of Looking at a Possum: Critical & Creative Responses to Everette Maddox*. Her awards include an Academy of American Poets Prize, the Idaho Poetry Prize, and the Society of Midland Authors Book of the Year Award, as well as Individual Artists Fellowships from the Virginia Arts Council and the Nebraska Arts Council.

2022 Andrea Saunders Gereighty/Academy of American Poetry Award

Judge: Mackie JV Blanton

Generously funded by UNO Alumna Andrea Sanders Gereighty, the winner receives \$100 and recognition by the Academy of American Poets in New York.

**WINNER: "FANTASY OF WALKING MY NIECE HOME" AND OTHER POEMS
—NIKKI UMMEL**

**FIRST RUNNER-UP: "SHE COULD BE YOU" AND OTHER POEMS
—MEGHAN SULLIVAN**

MACKIE BLANTON, a linguist, poet, therapist, and scholar of world religions, is the author of *The Casual Presence of Borders* (2020), a volume of his collected poetry. He has also written extensively on linguistics, poetics, scientific and technical discourse, Louisiana dialects, Sufi and Hasidic sacred languages, and most recently, "Sacriture," the contemplative thinking that underlies the language of scientific discourse and literary language. A native of New Orleans, he holds a B.A. in French from Xavier University of New Orleans and a Masters and Doctorate degrees from Illinois Institute of Technology. Besides serving in the Peace Corps in Tunisia, Professor Blanton has been a Senior Fulbright Lecturer at both Ben M'Sik University (Casablanca, Morocco) and Ege Universitesi (Izmir, Turkey). From 1980 to 2005, he taught at the University of New Orleans, where he served as Associate Dean of Diversity Programs. Also a trained therapist, he has designed and conducted training classes and workshops in psychotherapeutic techniques, grief therapy, self-awareness, career development and mental health, and the psychodynamics of mixed-belief therapy groups. He lives in New Orleans and Mandeville.

Ella V. Schwing Award

The English Department sponsors this award, which is given to the best essay written in a freshman composition course during the previous calendar year. The winner is chosen by the Freshman English Advisory Committee.

**WHY IS BURLESQUE STILL RELEVANT AS AN ART FORM?
—CHRIS EDDY (ENGLISH 1157)**

**MAGIC MUSHROOMS AND THEIR MEDICINAL USE
—LYONS BLUM (ENGLISH 1158)**