

THE WAKE REVIEW



2025

THE WAKE REVIEW

literary magazine and club

Mission Statement: The *Wake Review* is a student-run creative journal at Wake Tech Community College which seeks to provide a forum of the students, faculty, and staff of Wake Tech to express themselves through literary and artistic means such as poetry, fiction, non-fiction, and visual or audio arts. At the *Wake Review*, we believe Wake Tech should always have a place for its creative voice.

Submission Policy: The *Wake Review* accepts content in the following categories: fiction, non-fiction, poetry, photography, and multimedia arts. Example submissions include short stories, essays, poems, screenplays, pictures, sketches, paintings, computer design images, videos, music, and more. If you are interested in submitting your work to be published, visit our website at <https://www.waketech.edu/divisions/liberal-arts/wake-review>.

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Only a small portion of the quality writing and art submitted by the students and faculty members of Wake Technical Community College can be selected for publication in the physical edition of the Wake Review.

The online version of the magazine allows us to display the works of students and faculty that were not chosen as finalists but still deserve exposure.

To visit the online edition of *The Wake Review*, visit the following website:

<https://www.waketech.edu/divisions/liberal-arts/wake-review>

Cover art: "Queen Liwi" by Myles Brown (faculty submission)

Letter from the Editor-in-Chief



Wake Tech is a community full of unimaginable creativity, passion, and talent. The Wake Review prides itself on being able to display the artistic endeavors of student and staff members. The opportunity to serve as editor-in-chief for this year's publication of *The Wake Review* is an honor and a privilege. I have always had a deep love for the arts—not only has it inspired me throughout my journey, but it has also introduced me to a community of creatives who have become friends and family alike. Art, whether it is an oil painting, or a nonfiction essay, has the remarkable ability to connect people.

This is precisely why *The Wake Review* and other artistic platforms must continue to exist. It is through community, connection, and collaboration that we fuel progress and growth. Allow me to give a heartfelt thank you to everyone who was brave enough to submit their work and take that bold step of self-expression. It is no small feat to share your creations, especially when they are deeply personal and intimate.

Thank you to the entire Wake Review staff and advisors for their dedication and hard work in bringing this collection to life. Without the passion and commitment of the students and staff who poured their time and energy into this publication, it would not be possible.

Lastly, thank you to our readers. What is art if it is not seen and appreciated? We encourage you to enjoy every piece, reflect on the emotions they evoke, and perhaps even consider creating and sharing your own work.

I am immensely proud of this year's publication, and we all hope you find inspiration and joy in the 2025 Wake Review.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Sydney Russo". The script is fluid and cursive.

Sydney Russo
Editor-in-Chief (2024-2025)

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FIRST-PLACE POETRY

Where are the homes for those not brave?

Malika Aster Mobley

Where are the homes for those not brave?

To crawl my way into a walk for you to say
my strides break laws written into stereotypes,
to sprout and bud a beautiful flower only to
bloom a “sissy’s” color means that my growth
is forever a mutation
to you.

I punish myself for my missteps,
but my hips sway with a cadence echoing
my mother’s. I engage in things I’m taught
to pursue only to watch my mind drift
into a sea of temptations.

You have not given me much room to breathe,
and yet my dying wish is to share my breath
with a man whose love is forbidden.

I want to feel his touch to place myself
in a world away from law. I mean to say
I want to run someplace else.

For what kind of life have I?
Always on the brink extinction at your hands,
your careers built atop my ancestral graves,
what remedy do I have for your malevolence?

Houses enumerate while thousands are immiserated
by dispossession. And joy, simple joy
is as decadent as ever. In the home of the brave,
the bravest girls I know are buried.

Where are the homes for those afraid
of you? Every “safe space” out there
is within reach of your gun. Lord knows
nowhere is safe for boys who aren’t boys,
and nothing nor no one can outrun a bullet.

So how do I magician a life out of this death?
How do I poem a refuge when even my language
is alien to me?

I write words to erect a shelter, but your violence
has left me only broken language that can never
illustrate my broken heart.

Where are the homes for those not brave?
They lie within the rubble and ruin of your dream.

We've made peace with the never-ending rage
to avoid the backlash to our discontent.
Only now the edifice upholding the closet in which we hid
has cracked under the pressure of your bigotry.

The fear has paralyzed me before. Perhaps
my complacency has limited my vision.
But now the terror has infuriated me,
for even fear has its limits.

No, I am not brave. I am not evidence
of your transcendence over history.
I am a queer scared that I'll never find a home:
in shelter, in family, in a lover.

I am a girl who is not a girl to you,
and in this land I am certainly not free.
What I need is a sanctuary only love can
yield. But I'm afraid that that love
is foreign to me.

FIRST-PLACE FICTION

Today, Today, Today...

Harley Campbell

Good evening Zippy's shoppers! It's a beautiful Friday here in Woodbend and we would like to extend our sincerest thank you to all our loyal customers...

The volume of the intercom announcement snapped me out of my daydream. I had lost track of time while staring into the lobster tank at the grocery mart my mother works at. I have always been fascinated with the lobsters here—wondering what life would be like for them if they were able to get out of their squishy little tank. I often pictured myself opening the lid to set them free. I'd imagine them causing a frenzy while running to their freedom down the supermarket aisles as the old women dodged them with their shopping carts. Instead, they are trapped here at Zippy's Supermarket until they're doomed to be stuffed between two greasy Hawaiian buns at some family's seafood boil.

It is the last week of summer before 5th grade, and lately, I have felt trapped inside this supermarket too. My mother has, begrudgingly, dragged me with her to work every day this week because her new boyfriend, Ted, has been crashing at our trailer. Ted is the kind of guy who leaves his dirty toenail clippings in the sink and chugs the milk straight out of our milk gallon. His breath reeks of Marlboro cigarettes, and sometimes, when I eat my Cheerios, I can taste the remnants of his breath in the milk. Ted has been staying at our house a lot lately—sleeping in the same spot my father used to sleep, eating our food, and making cigarette burns on my dad's favorite couch. I hate his guts, and he hates mine.

I would much rather be spending the last week of summer break in my room playing with the action figures my dad bought for me or creating houses for the lizards and bugs in my backyard. Instead, I've been forced to pace the floors of this florescent hell—trapped here just like the

lobsters.

Today, however, is going to be a great day because my grandmother is rescuing me from this stupid hell so we can go visit my dad. Despite what Dad did, she still loves him. I wish I could say the same thing about my mother. She doesn't even seem to care about my father anymore. These days, she only cares about how her permed hair sits when it touches her shoulder pads or what shade of eye shadow she is going to wear. Today, she is wearing purple eyeshadow with a little line of baby blue at the top. I keep catching glimpses of her staring at herself in the little mirror next to her cash register—a habit she developed during her high school beauty pageant days.

#

She is still looking at herself when I pass her to walk out to the parking lot. She doesn't look up. I step outside into the sticky summer heat. The sun is going down, and the sky is starting to turn the same shades of blue and purple as my mother's eyeshadow. Unsurprisingly, my grandmother hasn't arrived yet. She is always late to everything. Late to pick me up, late to her nail appointments...late to tell my dad she loves him. She blames her lateness on trying to take life "slow." She always says in her kitschy Southern drawl, "You's gotta live life slow or it'll pass ye by before ye know."

While I wait here swatting mosquitoes on the curb, I take time to think...slowly. I try to think of what I am going to say to my dad today. I haven't seen him much since everything changed, but today I am bringing him curly fries from our favorite diner. Do I tell him about Ted? No. Maybe I will tell him about the lobsters at Zippy's or about the *Friday the 13th* movie that just came out—*Friday the 13th: Jason Takes Manhattan*. We have always enjoyed going to the cinema each summer to see the new additions to the franchise. We started our trend four years ago when the fifth installment, *Friday the 13th: A New Beginning*, came out. It was only my 7th birthday at the time and my father had to practically beg the attendant to let me in. Afterwards, we discovered a diner down the street—Lucky 7 Diner. It was there that we shared our first milkshakes together and two

steaming hot baskets of curly fries. My dad smothered his fries in mayonnaise, and I smothered mine in ketchup from the concerningly slimy bottle that was sitting on our table. A squirt of it got on my dad's favorite shirt. So, he pretended he had been slashed by Jason. He has always been great at making the best of every situation. We spent the rest of the evening breaking down our favorite moments of the film and slurping down our milkshakes. Ever since then, it has been our favorite tradition. We have done it together every year aside from this year. Unfortunately, he has not been in the right spirits this year. So, I had to see it with my friend Billy and his parents.

#

Just as I get swept up in my memories, my grandmother pulls up. "Evenin' Curly! Whatcha sittin on the nasty curb for? Git in here, kid!" I was given the nickname "Curly" after me and Dad's first time at our diner. He watched how I devoured my curly fries like it was my first and last meal. "We should've named you Curly, my boy," he chuckled with his dimply grin. The name stuck and has stayed with me ever since that day.

As I approach my grandmother's car, I notice she has a cigarette hanging from the side of her lips—about to fall out as if it didn't want to be wasting away in her decaying mouth. She promised to kick the habit years ago, but those cancerous little shits always had a way at pulling her back in.

The door to her car is sticky like the ketchup bottles at Lucky 7. As I lift myself into her car, I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the rusty passenger side mirror. I hardly recognize myself lately. My baby face is falling away and beginning to appear rusty like the mirror. My eyes are starting to look more grey than blue, and my hair looks ruffled like untrimmed bushes in front of our trailer. My t-shirt is dirty from neglect and stretched thin and saggy at the collar. Ted is supposed to wash the clothes when he crashes, jobless, at our place. He doesn't. As a matter of fact, my clothes always appear dirtier after Ted folds them into my dresser than they were before being tossed into the hamper.

I notice that I am tugging at my collar again— an anxious habit I have developed since my dad left us. A puff of my grandmother's cigarette smoke knocks my focus away from the mirror and I redirect my attention to the sleepy streets of Woodbend. Nothing about Woodbend has changed since I was born. It is a tiny, rural town here in the Southern regions of North Carolina—lined with towering pine trees, mosquito infested ponds, mom and pop convenience stores, and two blocks which create Down-town.

Mother always says, "Woodbend is a place where somebodies turn into nobodies and where nobodies go to die." Growing up, she hated Woodbend. Her dream was to move to a big city after high school and become a famous supermodel like Jerry Hall. However, that dream was crushed on homecoming night in her senior year of high school when she found out she was had become pregnant with me by her boyfriend—River. River was a nobody—born in Woodbend and destined to die in Woodbend. He was the exact opposite of my mother—unpopular, rough around the edges, rebellious, and the bottom of his class. He was the perfect recipe for everything my mother's mother thought she should avoid, but he was kind, selfless, and extraordinarily handsome. My mother treated him like one of her accessories and planned to dump him the day after high school graduation, but I got in the way of that.

He did everything he possibly could to support me and my mother until he discovered she was having an affair last year. That dreary afternoon, he came home early from work to find her tangled up in their bed with some half-bathed, sweet-talking lowlife from the dive bar down the street.

Despite his efforts to preserve our family after that, the affair hit him hard. He began to rely on his bottle of medicine to make it through his days at work. He began to act and look different. He was still kind, still selfless, but...different. His unblemished face became imbedded with creases like a wrinkly bedsheet. The warm colors of in his skin washed away like the dirt from my hands after playing outside. He became unfocused in his conversations with me, and he could hardly down the last milkshake we shared together. I didn't understand what was happening to him. My grandmother said Dad had developed a condition which he had

no longer been able to control. I didn't understand what his condition was until I snuck a sip of his "medicine" one night when he was at work.

That was the night he never returned home. It was the first night I ever saw my mother's perfect makeup dripping in clotted streams down her powdered face—perhaps a sign of her guilt for what she did to him. Perhaps they were tears of relief. It was the first night my grandmother set down her cigarettes to take a wailing breath from the wicked winter air. It was the first night the innocence of my childhood began to slip away. It was the night Woodbend suddenly felt like the smothering trap that my mother always claimed it to be.

The roads my father and I used to drive on suddenly became endless mazes that led to nowhere. The pond we used to swim in became stagnant and stale. The walls in our home seemed to close in on themselves—as if they had solely been held up by his love.

#

Today, as my grandmother and I make our way to visit my father, I think about how he always taught me to be strong. Today, I am forced to be strong because today is no ordinary visit to my father. Today, is the first time I am visiting my father in his resting place in Woodbend Cemetery.

Today, today, today...

That was my father's favorite word. "Today," he would always say to me. "Today is our day, Curly. Today, I am going to teach you how to ride a bike. Today, we are going to have a boy's day at the lake. Today we'll go see Jason slice up some campers. Today is my favorite day, Curly, because today I get to be with you."

Today, Today, Today...

I hear these words repeatedly as I stare at the approaching cemetery on our right. I make my way to his headstone, place a basket of fries next to his name, and then take a bite of my own. They have grown cold

in temperature, but they are warm with the memories of our times at the diner. As I sit here in silence, I realize that “today” is also my favorite word. Today, I do not feel trapped in the lobster cage. Today, the stagnant ponds of Woodbend ripple with memories of diving in them with my father on sticky summer days. Today reminds me of the precious joys of yesterday. Today, I listen to my grandmother’s advice and take life...slow.

Today...

Today, is my new favorite day. Because *today* I get to eat curly fries with my dad again.

The End

FIRST-PLACE MULTIMEDIA

Arachne

David Rjukeros



FIRST-PLACE NONFICTION

Everything is Connected: Similarities in the Human Body and Nature

Debanhi Gonzalez

The human body is a remarkable and complex system, composed of intricate components that researchers continue to explore and understand. Over the years, significant progress has been made in uncovering its internal structure, yet its complexity and multitude of elements continues to create a barrier for scientists when attempting to replicate the genetic composition, despite the advances in modern technology and science. Further research into the uniqueness of this extraordinary system will deepen the understanding of its crucial role on Earth. Drawing connections between human biology and other natural systems not only enhances the appreciation of biology but also emphasizes the responsibility to preserve the delicate balance of life on the planet. The interconnections between human anatomy and natural ecosystems reveal profound symmetry in structure, function, and life processes, showing that both humans and nature share fundamental patterns that sustain life.

The epidermis layer within the human body and the Earth's "skin," represented by soil, highlight how both systems are structured with components that offer protection. The human skin is the largest organ in the body, underscoring its vital role in the overall system. Hani Yousef, a specialist in internal medicine, explains that the skin has properties to protect: "the body's initial barrier against pathogens, ultraviolet (UV) light, chemicals, and mechanical injury. This organ also regulates temperature, and the amount of water released into the environment." Specifically, the epidermis contains keratinocytes and melanocytes, which produce the pigment of the skin and act as a barrier against environmental damage. (Yousef) Without these cells, humans would be vulnerable to a range of health problems and diseases. In the research article "Skin of the Earth,"

Tam Mankei interviews soil scientist Naoki Harada, who states, “On this soil, life of the Earth is being nurtured, as though it were skin that regulates the environment of the Earth.” This suggests an interconnection between human life and the environment. While the human body has a surface layer, the Earth has a crust, where a thin layer of soil lies. This soil can be considered the “epidermis” of the Earth, serving as a protective barrier against environmental issues. Mankei explains how experiments conducted by Harada demonstrate that soil functions similarly to human skin. In one such experiment, farmland in a severe snowy season showed a reduction in radio cesium contamination after a thin frozen layer of soil formed and was later buried in ditches (Mankei 49). This experiment suggests that soil, like the epidermis layer, plays an essential role in supporting life, especially in areas affected by drought or vegetation loss. The richness and abundance of life that soil provides parallels the role of the skin cells, which nourish and protect the body.

The human’s circulatory system mirrors the flow of rivers in structure and function, resembling the intricate networks of watercourses on the Earth. Observing the pattern of a river from a satellite view, one can recognize a branching structure that is parallel to the human body’s arteries and veins. The circulatory system is a network of blood vessels, it sustains life by distributing blood from the heart to various parts of the body. Similarly, rivers distribute water across land through a network of waterways, shaping ecosystems and landscapes while sustaining life in much the same way that blood sustains the human body. Joshua Sokol, in his article “Universal Law for the ‘Blood of the Earth,’” he elaborates on this connection by citing the work of French mathematician Pierre-Simon Laplace, who discovered a phenomenon known as Laplacian growth. Sokol explains the following process: “patterns grow when a bump develops from an imperfection on an otherwise smooth boundary.” This phenomenon can be observed in snowflakes, bacterial colonies, trees, and even in natural systems such as rivers and the human circulatory system. The structure of blood vessels and rivers demonstrates a symmetry dictated by similar laws. Louis Gross, a distinguished professor of ecology, evolutionary biology and mathematics at the University of Tennessee, explains that “a given blood pressure, increasing the radius of the cylinder, leads to a linear increase

in tension.” This principle applies to both waters moving through rivers and blood circulating through veins. Just as rivers require circulation to prevent excessive water accumulation, blood circulation must be regulated to prevent fluid buildup, which could cause complications in bodily functions. These characteristics highlight the deep connections between rivers and the human circulatory system.

The skeletal system exhibits remarkable visual similarities to the structure of a tree, with its specific parts and supportive framework. Earth is covered by forests and trees that provide essential carbon dioxide for the human respiratory system, and without them, humans would not survive. These trees, despite their variety in size and form, share certain internal similarities. Trees consist of trunks, roots, twigs, branches, and leaves, while the human skeletal system is composed of bones, cartilage, ligaments, and tendons. These structures show remarkable similarities in their function and design. Lindsey Biga, in the article “Bone Structure,” supports this idea by stating, “If you look at compact bone under the microscope, you will observe a highly organized arrangement of concentric circles that resemble tree trunks.” Bones provide stability and support for the human body, just as tree trunks support trees. The growth patterns of both trees and bones are organized into circular rings. Tree trunks show these rings when cut, representing the heartwood, which has a parallel structure in the microscopic organization of compact bone. Both bones and tree trunks grow in rings, reflecting a shared pattern of growth that offers strength and stability.

The root system of a tree closely compares to the human nervous system, especially in terms of its complex structure and function in transmitting signals and supporting growth. Both systems feature branching structures that facilitate the movement of essential nutrients in trees and electrical impulses in neurons. The connection between the tree’s roots and trunk mirrors the relationship between a neuron’s axon and the transmission of signals throughout the body. The Cleveland Clinic explains, “The axon is like the tree’s long trunk,” as the axon channels impulses much like the trunk channels nutrients. Similarly, axon terminals release neurotransmitters to communicate with other cells, akin to a tree’s buds, which release pollen to generate life in new areas (“Myelin Sheath”).

Analyzing the imagery of tree roots and diagrams of the human nervous system reveals striking visual and functional parallels. Both systems feature intricate branching patterns, with tree roots extending outward and downward to absorb nutrients, while neurons extend axons and dendrites to transmit electrical signals across the body. Both systems also exhibit adaptability: roots grow in response to soil conditions, while neurons form new connections through chemical transmissions. This shared design principle in nature demonstrates the interconnectedness that optimizes survival and communication.

The reproduction of organisms on Earth is intrinsically tied to their life processes, where renewal and regeneration are crucial for the growth and survival of all living things. These cycles, which span birth, growth, maturity, and death, ensure the continuity of life and the stability of ecosystems. In the video “Why Trees Look Like Rivers and Also Blood Vessels and Also Lightning,” produced by the Public Broadcasting Service, the interconnectedness between nature’s structures such as trees, rivers, and the human body, is explored through their shared branching patterns. The video sheds light on the common design principles underlying these natural systems, revealing how such patterns are not random but rather function to optimize growth and distribution. Benoit Mandelbrot, a pioneering mathematician from the 1970s featured in the video, identified these patterns as part of a larger mathematical phenomenon. He coined the term “fractals” to describe repeating structures that emerge from self-similarity at different scales, often found in nature. He argued that fractals reveal how complex systems grow, replicate, and self-organize through antiquated processes. The branching patterns in trees, rivers, and blood vessels, for example, are manifestations of fractal geometry. These patterns allow living systems to expand in an efficient way, preserving the overall functionality and proportion of their structure. In nature, these branching mechanisms are “the most efficient way to scale up while staying basically the exact same size,” as explained in the video “Why Trees Look like Rivers.” This proportional growth enables both trees and human bodies to maintain optimal functionality while facilitating processes like nutrient absorption, water distribution, and signal transmission. These branching systems serve to ensure that each part of the organism receives

the necessary resources for survival. Beyond their aesthetic similarities, all living organisms, including humans, animals, and plants share one fundamental characteristic: they all undergo a life cycle that includes birth, growth, maturity, and death. This cyclical process of life is essential for maintaining equilibrium on Earth, which allows different species and systems to coexist in harmony. Historian Nick Hopwood and his colleagues, in their analysis of biological cycles, he notes that “A heated debate among anatomists and physiologists, zoologists, and botanists over ‘alternation of generations’ focused attention on the cyclic features of the life-course.” This historical debate emphasizes the shared understanding among scientists that life processes in varying form and function across species are ultimately connected which continues to cause questioning throughout history. This observation helps determine that organisms not only share similar developmental processes but also rely on these cycles to maintain the balance of ecosystems and sustain life across the planet.

The similarities between the human body and the natural world highlight a profound interconnectedness in structure, function, and life processes. From the protective roles of skin and soil to the branching patterns of the circulatory system and rivers, and the parallels between the skeletal and nervous systems and trees, both biological and environmental systems share fundamental principles that sustain life on Earth. Recognizing these connections emphasizes the importance of preserving balance in nature and deepens the understanding of how all living systems are interdependent for the health of the ecosystem.

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SECOND-PLACE POETRY

Streetlights in the Evening Rain

Malika Aster Mobley

As I sit next to you side by side gazing out at the streetlight above
where the raindrops glisten in the dim twilight,
I feel your hand rest gently on my shoulder— fits like a glove.
A tear falls from my eye and glides down my cheek.
Still, I try to concentrate on the rain, the way
little droplets collect on the window before descending down
the side of the car. It hasn't rained in weeks.

Memories too are a kind of rain. seemingly banal moments—
the exuberant way you wave hello (so warm)
the way your arms bridge to hold open a door
or how swiftly you turn your head to look at me—
they begin to form clouds. What is love if not a storm?

All the feelings collected in a well of memories. I carry that weight
every time I see your face.
No wonder my eyes rain every now and again.
It feels like fate

but it hurts to look at you sometimes. A glimmer in your solemn eye
glows radiantly like a couple faraway stars in the night sky—
looking at you is like staring directly into the sun.
You tell me it will be alright, and most of the time i believe you—
but when i think about you and me
I wonder how the skies are clear in your mind. I hate to think
you don't carry this weight like i do.

Then I turn and see you beside me and notice your face is heavy, too.
with a weary look you say I mean the world to you.
It is clear there is another kind of storm in your heart. As you pull me gently
into your arms and hold me tight, it begins to rain furiously.

SECOND-PLACE FICTION

Magnolias in Bloom

Jin Young Kim

Most people don't realize how often you move when you're poor. We must have moved every month that year. Except for that year's summer. The cool winds of May whispered their goodbyes as the sweltering heat welcomed itself—becoming a faint memory as the summer gusts carried warm air and pollen from distant trees. Free from clouds that once loomed over, the deep, cool shade of blue the sky wore each morning failed to soothe us during those hot and humid days. Even the shade of emerald green that colored the leaves hurt to look at. Blinded frequently by the sunlight and vibrant colors, I found myself wishing for the season to quickly pass.

That summer, we moved to the second floor of a one-bedroom apartment we found through a friend of a friend's sister. We packed what little we had in our two backpacks, our muscle memory carrying out the grunt work we were so used to, and set off by bus. Only having two passengers, the bus driver allowed himself to chatter away endlessly and only started to probe us with questions as we approached our destination.

"Your backpacks sure are packed. Are you two going hiking?"

"No, we're moving," I replied.

"Ah— really? Fresh start huh?"

The fresh starts had started to grow stale. They began to mold and that mold spread into every crevice of our lives, drenching each day in its stench and rotting the paths we took. No matter where we moved to or what new jobs we took, when the time came to flip over the calendar page, we would have our belongings packed, ready to go.

The bus driver eyed our luggage, or rather yet the lack of, before speaking.

“Bringing in the last few items? I know that area well. Tell me, where are you moving to?”

“We’re moving into the red building.”

“That one?” he asked, despite himself. “Isn’t it being demolished soon?”

The news of its scheduled demise wasn’t very surprising. Not only had the land around the apartment been bought by a large company, but the apartment itself looked about finished. The tacky red bricks clashed with the sleek, modern white buildings that surrounded it. A measly two stories high, it stood around like a bored child loitering around adults while waiting for his parents to finish talking. To match the building, the apartment had red brick walls that surrounded the walkway to its entrance. Nailed onto the burgundy wall facing the bustling street was a square, blue metallic sign with white numbers painted on it, a relic of the past. What was once used to differentiate itself from the surrounding red brick apartments had become obsolete: the others destroyed and replaced. Somehow, that one apartment had managed to withstand the passage of time and the quick, busy nature of the city—its existence a testament of an older life.

In fact, the demolition was the only reason why we were able to move there at all. The location was good, and prices there had started to rise. We wouldn’t have been able to afford someone’s closet in that area had it not been for the previous tenant’s sudden passing. Nobody else wanted to move into a place set to be demolished so soon. But for us, those few months of rest we would be granted compared to the monthly moves we had made up to that point seemed like bliss.

Having seen the old buildings fall and the new buildings rise, most of our neighbors had already resigned themselves to their fate. During our stay, we watched as they began to leave one by one, all except for a stubborn old man. His age had given him an endless amount of complaints to tell and had taken his hair in exchange. Hot-tempered, the man would shout until his entire head keenly resembled that of a cherry tomato when cursing the company employees, who would come with their plastered smiles and pitiful offers for them to move out, refusing to budge from the place he called home.

When I look back on that summer, it's not the building I think of or the people who lived in it. The image that comes to mind is of a great magnolia tree that had been planted in an unfilled, square plot of dirt past the concrete walkway towards the entrance of the apartment. I was surprised by it when we first visited the place. Surrounded by red brick walls and gray concrete, the lone tree looked striking and out of place. I couldn't understand how it had survived in that cramped, lifeless area. Despite its harsh environment, the tree appeared healthy, like it would live forever. Our neighbors called it a nuisance, complaining about how dirty its petals looked when wilted and how difficult it was to clean the fallen magnolias in the fall. Like them, I too simply saw it as a bother.

But that summer, it bloomed flowers bigger than my palms stretched wide. Docile, its buds unfurled as commanded by the change of season to reveal magnolias that glowed white under the sun. Whenever I closed my eyes to concentrate, its scent would play notes of cherry blossoms accompanied by a musk, wooden smell—a sweet melody. As though dancing to its tune, the flowers would gently sway back and forth as the tree waved its branches to the rhythm of the oncoming breeze. I was in awe of its beauty. The magnolia tree was too majestic, too dignified to be living by that apartment. Coming home after a grueling day to see that mesmerizing tree stirred emotions in me I couldn't place. It was as if something inside of me had bloomed as well.

Maybe it was those flowers that made the time we spent there seem so magical. Opening the window facing east allowed soft winds to carry the fragrance and petals from the magnolias all the way back to our bedroom. Every day smelled sweet and every night felt special. During those humid nights of June, we would sit on those worn-down steps of the apartment entrance while eating and rating the two-for-ones and other discounted snacks we bought from the nearby convenience store. Even though they were so dry and bland, something about the night made them bearable, tasty even. It felt nice sitting there even as the city continued to bustle past the red brick walls. Bright lights flickered throughout the night as cars drove by and people walked briskly without noticing the two of us. It was like time had come to a stop in that tiny, sectioned-off world of ours.

“Here, take these,” said the old man, scowling.

We ate a lot of peaches that July. The old man visited the second floor often, while bickering, to give us peaches he received from distant relatives who owned a farm. He had a surprising soft side, and I discovered that this side of him was the secret behind the magnolia tree. Turns out that every afternoon, the old man would care for it. Some days he pulled back mulch from its trunk. Other times he watered it. Most often, after tending to the tree in some way, he would sit on the entrance steps and admire it, leaning against the red walls and whistling as the magnolias swayed. Those days were so hot that we would open the door and let the coolness of the stairwell seep in, along with the old man’s whistles. With the old man’s peaches and tunes, the days were sweet, and the summer felt endless.

We moved out by the end of August. By then, the demolition date was finalized, and there was no other choice on the matter. A friend of a friend’s aunt had an apartment vacant for about a month while she renovated it, so once again, we packed our backpacks as we did before. But this time, our arms felt heavy. Each step we took down the stairs rang in the hollow apartment as we made our way from the second floor one last time, its echoes chilling.

The old man sat at the bottom step. During the last few days before we left, he had stopped caring for the tree. I guess there wasn’t any point. When we said our goodbyes, he didn’t acknowledge us. Unmoving, the old man continued his blank stare like he could somehow see the red wall and the brown walkway through us. The fallen petals had started to rot and the concrete walkway resembled a muddy brown. With the recent bouts of rain, the brown clung onto everything around it. Our neighbors were right. Looking at the walkway one last time before we left, I felt repulsed—the cold gray of the concrete was preferable.

The apartment got demolished sometime in September, the tree with it. Where it once stood now stands an apartment fourteen-stories high. I doubt anyone passing by where it used to be remembers the apartment at all, much less the tree.

I’m not even sure why I still think about that place. The water pressure in the shower was frankly pathetic, and we would have to pour

water into the toilet to get it to flush. The kitchen was worse—one of the cooktops on the stove wouldn't turn on, and the kitchen faucet was always leaking. The endless drips dripping during the night would drive us insane.

There really wasn't anything special about that place. It was just another apartment. But each year, the heat creeps in from its hiding spot and cicadas scream out their serenades from the trees above and the shrubs below, and walking past the kids free from school, I'll come across a familiar white figure. And memories begin to unfurl. When I see magnolias in bloom, I smell their scent and am reminded of that summer we spent at the place we called home.

SECOND-PLACE MULTIMEDIA

Quilombo

David Rjukeros



SECOND-PLACE NONFICTION

The Four Times Higher Statistic: Men and Loneliness

Mitchel Stillford

What does it mean to be a man? For the past couple of decades, this question has been answered by society. The definition given to men was to be someone who can lead, provide, be competitive, and showcase emotional restraint. To be called a masculine man was to embody all these things, someone who embraces the social expectations of manhood, including the roles and behaviors assigned to them. However, as times have changed, gone was that unfairness found in traditional masculinity, but also gone to the answer to this question. The roles in society have changed, leaving many men who are now growing up in this modern society without a clear sense of what it means to be a man. Each man must find out for themselves, which can be disorienting and lead to feelings of confusion and loneliness. Loneliness is the result of the isolation many men are beginning to feel, as they lack friends or companionship. This feeling has been ever-growing inside the male population as a silent epidemic. Research found in *Men's Mental Health* reveals that "over 6 million men suffer from depression per year, but male depression often goes underdiagnosed." These statistics show an increase in depression among men, yet there are few discussions surrounding such a topic. The male loneliness epidemic can be attributed to three major causes: social expectations, vulnerability stigmas, and unsatisfying friendships.

Looking at how social expectations have influenced the male loneliness epidemic; traditional gender roles have often imposed rigid social expectations on men. Society promotes qualities such as "hyper-independence, stoicism, strength, control, and rationality" (Urbanski). From an early age, these rigid expectations are placed on boys. This can be seen as such as "young men are encouraged to build 'shoulder to shoulder

friendships' in team sports or group activities, rather than one-on-one relationships" (Ryan). These boys are socialized to learn that one must avoid showing signs of weakness or dependency, hindering one's ability to form connections. If a man is expected to embody these traits, how can one admit to feelings of loneliness? These traditional gender norms inhibit men from forming deep intimate relationships characterized by emotional vulnerability and open communication, they feel as if they are "problems to be solved" (CBC). Men may feel pressured to maintain an act of toughness and emotional disconnection internalizing those emotions and finding it difficult to connect with others on a meaningful level. The lack of emotional intimacy can contribute to feelings of loneliness and alienation, even in the presence of superficial social interactions. When considering how society believes boys should behave, there is also a sense of stigma towards the relationships boys can form. Society can be accepting that a "loving friendship between boys is usually allowed up until a certain age in our culture, but homophobia takes hold and creates a deep stigma around boys who love each other" (Ryan). There is a sense that boys must choose between staying within agreed social bounds of what a male relationship is and surviving or having one's heart be open to others and being cast out of society for doing so. Society has conditioned men to view closeness between each other as being something of a sexual nature, labeling it as "gay" for two men to be close with each other. It can be seen that "we're so unused to seeing that intimacy in a platonic way that we immediately sexualize it" (Ryan). The unspoken rule for men is that they must not have close relations with another man. The intimacy we see between men is frowned upon in modern society as it does not adhere to the social expectations. To address these issues of social expectations, it requires challenging these traditional norms and homophobic stigmas within society. By challenging these notions of masculinity we can create a more authentic expression of gender, with society providing examples of male love and vulnerability to nurture such an idea. If there are no examples of these intimate friendships, then the message that this is healthy and normal will stick in society, perpetuating the issue. With this knowledge, society can understand that social expectations have created a negative environment that promotes males to be solitary figures with no connections to others,

leading to loneliness.

A significant barrier to addressing the male loneliness epidemic is the stigma surrounding vulnerability and mental health issues. According to the American Psychological Association, stigma is defined as the negative social attitude attached to a characteristic of an individual that may be regarded as a mental, physical, or social deficiency. Due to the stigmas surrounding mental health, many men may feel discouraged from seeking help for feelings of loneliness or emotional struggles because social norms equate vulnerability with weakness. For men there is the pressure that “men face to “man up” and “tough it out.” The stigma of men speaking out is that it is seen as a form of weakness” (ADAA). The idea that vulnerability equals weakness has been a prevailing ideology in society for decades and is one reason why therapy and mental health are often looked down upon. Society often views therapy as a sign of something being wrong with an individual. Individuals fear judgment, change, and the unknown that may come from therapy, and may be too prideful to admit to needing help. There is a fear that one will lose credibility if starting therapy and admits to not being in a sound state of mind. The result of this is a culture that is dominated by silence within men. Many men will suffer in silence but will feel unable to seek help or connect authentically. The reluctance to seek out help leads to an underreporting of this feeling of loneliness and may be heightened by untreated mental health conditions. Conditions such as depression and anxiety can further isolate individuals from their social networks, leading to a cycle of loneliness and deteriorating mental health, possibly leading to one assuming the only way out is by taking one’s own life. This information is backed by the CDC as they have found that “the suicide rate among males in 2021 was approximately four times higher than the rate among females. Males make up 50% of the population but nearly 80% of suicides” (*Suicide Data and Statistics*). It is not just a small group of individuals committing suicide but according to statistics found in the Mental Health Commission in Canada, it is “the second cause of death for men age 15-39”, alongside “death by suicide most frequent in men age 40-60” (CBC). Addressing the consequences of vulnerability stigmas in the male loneliness epidemic requires challenging those exact stigmas causing individuals to keep to themselves. Vulnerability does not

equal weakness; without vulnerability, people will never share their issues with others. Being vulnerable means to muster up the courage to admit to oneself and to others that one is susceptible to negative emotions and suffering. By challenging the notion that vulnerability equates to weakness and promoting mental health awareness, we can create an environment where individuals can openly converse about their emotions and feel comfortable doing so, fostering empathy and understanding. Altogether, the stigma surrounding vulnerability and mental health has created a society that undervalues mental health, and the humility needed to be open with others.

Even with the prevalence of social media creating the most connected world in history, there is still a struggle to create genuine relationships, resulting in unsatisfying friendships. The impact of unsatisfying relationships on men can be seen as “in the United States, 1 out of 4 men have zero friendships in their lives, while in the United Kingdom, this rate is 1 out of 3” (Urbanski). American friend groups have been shrinking in size over the past few decades, and when these friendships lack depth, they may fall into a perpetual cycle of isolation and loneliness. Without genuine connections, men may withdraw from social interactions, leading to a decline in mental health and perpetuating the cycle of loneliness. This cycle can become difficult to break out of on one’s own and may require intervention from another individual. Though saying this, even finding that individual to have a connection with in the first place is challenging enough. Finding individuals to connect with is becoming increasingly difficult, as evidenced by the fact that “fifteen percent of men have no close friendships at all, a fivefold increase since 1990” (Cox). This should not be the case, as society has created the most connected time in history with the use of technology. The technology society has given individuals keeps them connected to one another with the ability to communicate instantly with anyone, anywhere, but this technology has not necessarily fostered deeper connections. Individuals text more nowadays and due to this, “a lot gets lost in translation, because we just don’t have that physical connection” (Bennett) which pertains to that genuine feeling being gone. These kinds of friendships can be found to be less fulfilling overall compared to traditional face-to-face relationships and may lack the emotional support

needed to navigate life's challenges. Research shows that "only 22 percent of young men lean on their friends in tough times. Thirty-six percent say their first call is to their parents" (Cox). With men's need for emotional support and not being met by those friendships, one can struggle to cope with life's challenges. The surface level of interactions in friendships leads to shallow interactions and meaningless engagement with one another, providing for neither's needs. To address the issues stemming from unsatisfying friendships, it is crucial to prioritize creating satisfying relationships that encourage and foster quality connections. Open communication and showcasing vulnerability can help create a deeper connection that provides the emotional support each individual needs to combat loneliness. Men must not downplay the significance of each other's friendships and must make it clear that both individuals need each other to thrive in society. It's important to note that "you can't neglect a friendship and expect it to just grow. You have to work at it" (Bennett); it requires work from both sides. Individuals must find the time and mental connection with one another to create a successful friendship. Alongside that, society needs to be intentional about male friendships. Society must create spaces for individuals to interact with one another. Unsatisfying friendships leave men feeling unfulfilled, lacking a genuine connection with one another, and perpetuating a cycle of loneliness in a world that feels less connected to each other.

The male loneliness epidemic is an ever-growing issue that can be understood through three major causes: social expectations, vulnerability stigmas, and unsatisfying friendships. Men are struggling more than ever to express their needs to others. Increasingly too, men are finding it difficult to adapt and define their roles in modern society, as traditional expectations no longer apply. The social expectations that society has created for men often promote homophobia and patriarchal masculinity values, creating a barrier for men to express themselves without shame. Vulnerability stigmas further compound the perpetuating misunderstanding society holds towards men's mental health, falsely equating vulnerability with weakness. Unsatisfying relationships result from men not forming close enough connections with each other to cultivate genuine relationships. The needs of modern men differ from those of the past, and to thrive

today, men require understanding and support for their struggles, rather than being pushed away. Be masculine enough to be there for others.

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THIRD-PLACE POETRY

Before Cupid shot his arrow

Eliza Strong

My heart had already pooled blood,
Even before the arrow was drawn
It is not something that can be denied,
But maybe if I tell you, you'll confide.

If you wish to know why my heart bled before cupid shot his arrow,
I would tell that I found love,
In a place, where many would deem unfit.
Like Cinderella's shoe refusing to match anyone but her,
That is how I am convinced.
That I am the last ace in a deck of cards,
So save me, keep me in your heart.

Many have viewed my scars before they knew *me*.
My soul, my words, and everything in between,
The things that made me, me.
They took me, with a judged eye, without even asking me, *why*?
So I kept my mouth shut for those who refused to listen to the story,
What others judge is a unknown karma
That I believe will bite back,

But they don't realize that yet.

So I spilled, how my soul poured out for another,
An electrifying love, so vibrant in color it could paint this gray world,
Saw it for what it was, and told me not to give up

So I stand trial, already bleeding before Cupid had shot his bow,
How do I tell him I found love without his help?
Have I gone against his spell?
Am I a criminal? For loving when everyone told me to give up?

I think it makes my stride strong, my resilience solidified,
Because I know who I am, inside.
I know, and I love, every scar,
And I know that my love, loves every part.

So I collapse onto the marble floor,
And I implore,
As the arrow shall be shot,
I refuse to change course,
I shall stay, meeting the same pair of eyes of once before,
Because this love,
Will forever be my favorite metaphor.

THIRD-PLACE FICTION

War of Hearts and Roses

Paige Curtiss

The cannonball dug its body deep into the dirt, where the earth no longer grew, fifty feet away from the Kingdom of Roses. Only a few inches from hitting Evania as she gripped the handle of her sword tightly. The blade skidded against her opponent's sword, edging closer towards her face. Her opponent kept on pushing forward as Evania's heel dug into the dead dirt, almost making her lose her balance. Her eyes glanced towards the Kingdom of Hearts walls where a knight reloaded the cannon that pointed in her direction. Evania quickly shifted her blade on its face resting on her right palm, she used all her strength to push her opponent back a few paces. Glancing back at the cannon, the cannonball was no longer in its holding place. She slightly panicked trying to find where it went. Before Evania could move out of danger, a high-pitched squeal rang in her ears. She watched the big ball of steel fly across the grey sky flattening her opponent's body in front of her. Her eyes widened at the scene. Standing for a moment as she breathed heavily trying to regain her strength. What was once a field full of luscious grass, now a battlefield of a century long war, full of the dead or injured. Those who were still alive kept fighting until their final breath. The Kingdom of Hearts had the advantage as the number of Evania's people decreased, but they kept fighting. A small smile crept from the corner of Evania's mouth as she watched them run into danger with their armor still intact and their swords held up high. She respected her people for their bravery against their greatest enemy. Evania held up her sword above her head yelling, "For the Kingdom of Roses!", as she ran through the battlefield past those who she used to know, who she used to call friends, who she would keep fighting for. Those who were un-

der her enemy's rule screamed with one swing of her sword mimicking the reaper with his scythe. Evania's bright brown eyes reflected in her enemy's armor of all the anger and sadness that had come before her. With every swift counterattack, her long black curls loosened from her braid. One of the many knights caught her eye, he was covered in black armor from head to toe. The knight lunged forward, swinging his mighty sword, aiming for her neck. In a single heartbeat, Evania bent her body in half away from the knight, as his sword graced her cheek leaving a small cut. It felt like time stood still once the blade brushed against her chestnut skin, yet fury ignited a fire inside of her. Before the knight's sword hit the ground, Evania crept like a snake behind him, angling his blade as she cut his head clean from his shoulders. She stood up, watching the body fall forward as his blood had splattered over her chest plate along the same cheek where he had made his mark. The sight of so much blood would have brought up Evania's breakfast, nothing matters now. Her mind was set on one thing and one thing only. The sounds of galloping hooves stomped against the land, edging closer to her. Evania slowly turned around facing a white horse that took its final step between her feet. She cocked her head to the side peering at its rider; a young man meeting Evania's gaze,

“So...you're once again, in my way.”

“Nice to see you too, Dear.”

THIRD-PLACE MULTIMEDIA

Designer Skateboards

Jolie Nusbaum





THIRD-PLACE NONFICTION

JJC—Naked and Bare

Amarachi Ekwegh

JJC: Nigerian slang for “Johnny Just Come,” a term used to describe newcomers—especially those unfamiliar with their new environment, often naive, unaccustomed, or adjusting to a different way of life.

You don’t know what to write, but you once tweeted that for a writer to express how they feel, they must first express what they feel.

You feel this absurd tightness in your chest as you are about to recollect from this *failed* memory—your experiences in the land of the free.

For some weird reason, you cease to remember whether you had expectations before you flew—not just flew, but surged through continents, away from what you once knew as home. Maybe America is your new home, but some part of you conflicts with that. More often than not, Americans applaud you for leaving all that you know—or rather, knew—to come and start over. However, you don’t see it the way they do because, at the moment, you’re not sure what you know anymore, what you hold dear, and your convictions are shaking, rearranging. The rearrangement doesn’t scare or bother you anymore because it has grown into something you wear—like clothes or, rather, the feel of your own skin. It’s not best suited for you, but you wear it anyway.

Maybe you did have expectations, but you were so used to being blown a great deal that you made sure they were **tabula rasa**—a blank slate. This had become your new coping mechanism because you could only afford to be hurt a few times; anything more was stretching it. The jet lag in the

first few weeks made you feel like anything was possible—you would be up so early and asleep by the third watch of the day.

You experienced your first racist interaction, but it flew right over your head because blackness was an alien concept to you. *Africanese* meant that you came from a place of least privilege, so you would hold your head up high—but not too high—because the land on which you tread is not entirely yours. It also meant that you would take the barest minimum in the land of the free because the minimum was your absolute maximum in Africa, and so complaining at all meant you were ungrateful. To this very day, you are not as angry or as effervescent as those whose fathers' blood worked this very land. You can only observe what they feel, but you cannot feel it. Neither can you express a sense of belonging with what they feel; that would be **faux**.

You move in with someone you thought you knew, but the wonders of life lie in the fact that split seconds are enough to change a person. We underestimate things like that as humans. Then you realize you never really knew this person—despite sharing the same parents. You feel like you are walking on eggshells because you don't know how to sympathize with her over the fact that life as she knew it was no more. But little did she know that life as **you** knew it was no more either. But yours was different. Everyone thinks it's different. Surely, it cannot be the same thing. Then you think to yourself—this cannot be the land of the free; it must be the pity party Olympics.

Looking back, you wished you had loved yourself enough to speak up and say you did not understand, nor did you like how you were being treated. Maybe you did speak. Through your silence, all you muttered was *Africanese*. You wished you had been treated with more kindness and patience. Because, in essence, you were just a **JJC**. Rightly so, you still are.

This is not to say that you never wore your flaws on your finger like a ring; rather, you don't even know where this is going. Somehow, you don't wish things were different. You are content with how your lived experiences

have toughened you.

But you didn't die.

Your African parents and brethren would say you didn't die. But you recall that you once tweeted, "**Just because you are not dead does not mean that you are alive.**"

You also recall writing a diagnostic paper for your English class, themed "**What do you consider the most overrated virtue?**"

You thought the most overrated virtue was **strength**. Because you couldn't fathom carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders when you could simply lean on others. And now, it makes perfect sense to you—it must have been a curse that the virtue you think is overrated is now the very thing you constantly lack.

In fact, you witnessed how helpless leaning on the wrong people could feel. Or leaning on the right people at the worst time. You had never been raped, but you somehow feel the far-from-gentle thrusts of helplessness. But you can't take back what you said because, even to date, you lean; your life depends on it.

Who are you **not** to lean?

Leaning felt like asking your favorite uncle for money; you had to be calculated—to avoid getting on his nerves. You are the underprivileged. No one else could help, so you had to be careful. You had to find a balance—leaning, but not too much. Not too little either, or else you'd lose them.

We—yes, we. **You and I**. The same person.
We were focused on the wrong things.

If, in the process of newness and settling in, we had already lost ourselves—what else wasn't there to lose? What dignity were you trying to preserve?

You'd lost it all.

Come undone.

Yes, **come undone**—because you know what it's like to not have a single dollar to your name and to **lean** for everything, down to your food, your sanitary pads.

Come undone—because you know what it's like for due diligence to feel like someone wielding power over your life.

Yield.

Because you have experienced fright within your own body—it felt like a cluster of spiders asking you to jump out of your own skin and let them occupy it.

Look at you, thinking you could speak any other language but *Africanese*.

Where would you have gone?

Who or what did you know?

Maybe you thought it was the devil keeping you quiet and letting you feel these things. It felt like you stepped out of your body for a moment and watched yourself fall apart.

Stepping out of your body would have been nice—simply put, a **luxury**.

One that you could not afford.

POETRY HONORABLE MENTION

Am I the Monster?

May Golla

You molded me out of
Broken pieces of former lovers
Your own personal
Frankenstein
But soon enough you saw
Too much of them
And of her and of
Your past to see
To make a future with me.

But I stayed alive
Like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde
I've become two faced and I don't know why
My heart screams yes but I start to cry
When they ask if I'm stuck
Inside my mind.

They call me crazy
But am I crazy or am I just alone
Bitterly so
Afraid to choose someone to call my own
Because what if they see

The real me
And realize the monster inside
Wasn't a monster derived
From the pain and creation of
Another man's mind
But of my own.

The monster under my bed
And hiding behind
My closed closet door
Was never anything more
Than the backwards thinking
Of my so called "immaturity"
Did you realize that
When you tried to change me
Was I too broken to trust your disease
Was I the monster or were you
The savage who tore me open
And ripped me apart to create something new?

To call yourself a god
You'd have to create
But all you ever did was demonstrate
How to destroy God's creations
Calling them monsters
For existing exactly how we were
Fabricated.

So now I'm like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde
Hiding behind your own personal
Frankenstein
Hoping that one day someone else
Will see the real me
For what I was
And not what you made me
To see through
My personality
The heartache that they'll get from me
And know I was just a girl
Tired of my monsters hiding
Underneath and inside of
My past
That you so carefully replicated.

MULTIMEDIA HONORABLE MENTION

A Curious Fellow

Harley Campbell



NONFICTION HONORABLE MENTION

Analyzing Feminist Themes in *Silence of the Lambs*

Jute Melich

In a time when most films didn't dare to cover feminist themes, one psychological thriller, of all genres, dared to break the mold. *Silence of the Lambs*, a film from 1991 directed by Jonathon Demme and adapted from a novel of the same name by Thomas Harris, tells the story of FBI Agent Clarice Starling in her chase of violent serial killer "Buffalo Bill." During her pursuit, she acquires the assistance of famed cannibal and psychologist Hannibal Lecter through her work studying criminal behavior. In the 1990s in a field such as the FBI, there was a miniscule amount of women, causing Clarice to face many difficulties in her professional life. In the film adaptation of *Silence of the Lambs*, these difficulties are shown through themes of objectification, patriarchal power dynamics, and Starling's attempts to rid herself of her feminine qualities. *Silence of the Lambs* successfully demonstrates themes of feminism and the struggles of working women in the 90s that still apply to working women today.

Examples of objectification that women in the workplace might face are abundant in Starling's experiences in *The Silence of the Lambs*. For instance, Agent Starling is often outcast and belittled by her male colleagues. One scene that demonstrates this is when Agent Starling is jogging with her fellow female colleague as a part of their training regimen. When they pass by their male colleagues, who are also jogging, the men do a doubletake to ogle at their coworkers. Greg Garrett, a professor of creative writing at Baylor University analyzes that "the film shows how Clarice is often the unwilling object of the male gaze; she is appraised by male trainees on several occasions, most noticeably when a group of jogging trainees turn for a doubletake as Starling and her roommate Ardelia Map jog past" (5). Another scene that demonstrates this objectification

is when she is training with her mostly male classmates in boxing at the FBI academy. Even though it is necessary for her to train in the same way as the rest of her class, she is the one made to hold the strike pad for her classmates to punch. This is a very literal form of objectification as she is being made into an object, a punching bag, by her classmates. Yafei Ying, a PhD at Zhejiang University, summarizes “In the film, the image Starling hoped herself to achieve was ‘strong,’ ‘reliable,’ ‘professional,’ and ‘tough,’ all the words are all relatively masculine words in patriarchal discourse, so Starling . . . objectified herself by acting as a battering ram in class” (265). Through the probable self-objectification of becoming an object for use by her male classmates, Starling demonstrates one struggle in her professional life. Both of these examples of objectification in the film are representative of a greater patriarchal struggle still faced by women today, to be seen as more than just a sexual or useable object.

Another struggle made very evident by the film is the patriarchal power dynamics existing between Agent Starling and her male colleagues, particularly her boss. Namely, in interactions with her boss, Dr. Chilton, Agent Starling struggles to be seen as an equal and not sexualized. When she is sent to consult with Dr. Chilton, this sexualization in the workplace is made extremely evident by his advances onto her. He says, “You know, we get a lot of detectives here, but I must say, I can’t ever remember one so attractive...Will you be in Baltimore overnight...? Because this can be quite a fun town, if you have the right guide” (*Silence of the Lambs*). This dynamic is furthered by his later comment that Crawford must have sent her as an object to turn Lecter on. Greg Garrett suggests, “Chilton remains her nemesis because she not only rejected him sexually but has achieved results with Lecter that he has not” (3). This evidently demonstrates the power dynamics that exist between Starling and her boss as due to her refusal to reciprocate Chilton’s advances Chilton aims to ruin Starling’s career, as shown by his later attempts to blame unfortunate happenings on her actions when there was no possible way she could have been involved. Another example of a power dynamic demonstrated in the film is that between Starling and her male colleagues. Although Starling is their equivalent, having the same job title, training, and education, they gaze her upon as an inferior. Ying Yafei analyzes that “under their gaze, to avoid the

discriminatory, she had to refuse her female identity, and on the contrary [sic], emphasizing herself in a man's way, as well as making an exceptional effort to reach the same status as the men" (265). Agent Starling must make an exceptional effort to prove herself, which in contrast is much more than the effort any of her male colleagues need to make. Obviously, this is a patriarchal power dynamic as shown by the large difference in the amount of power held by Starling and her colleagues, with Starling holding significantly less even with the same, or even more, qualifications. Power dynamics between Starling and her coworkers and boss within the film impact Agent Starling's ability to advance professionally very much and illustrate a struggle that all women face in the workplace. To try to advance herself professionally at the same rate as her male counterparts, Starling goes through a process through the course of the film that many other women do in real life, succumbing to self-masculinization and letting go of parts of her femininity. However, she only really excels in her career when she utilizes her feminine qualities. One example wherein this self-masculinization to gain even ground with her male colleagues is prominent is in her responses when being harassed. When Dr. Chilton accuses Dr. Crawford of using Agent Starling to turn Dr. Hannibal Lecter on, Clarice responds by saying, "I graduated magna from UVA, Doctor. It's not a charm school" (*Silence of the Lambs*). Yafei Ying analyzes that "Starling repeatedly stripped [sic] her femininity consciously or unconsciously, and masculinized . . . herself by . . . emphasizing her commonalities with men while being harassed." (265). To gain respect and be taken seriously by Chilton, Clarice must list her scholarly achievements, thereby emphasizing her commonalities with her male colleagues and that she is no different from them in her credibility. The fact in itself that Agent Starling needs to tell Chilton her academic achievements to be taken seriously is a demonstration of a power imbalance between her and her male coworkers, as they do not need to do so. However, when Starling does use her feminine qualities she is able to make significant progress in her pursuit of Buffalo Bill. When investigating her first victim, her male colleagues are unable to deduce details of the victim's personal life. On the contrary, Agent Starling can recognize the vital clues of her origins by seeing her three ear piercings, deducing that she is not from the small

town in which her body was found. After further examining the victim's nails, Starling further concludes that her chipped, broken polish and the grime existing underneath her nails suggest she was attempting to escape from somewhere, a vital clue for the investigation. Yafei Ying concludes "These victories prove that in the process of gaining power and recognition, women should not rush to imitate male power, losing their own characteristics, and being assimilated by male power. The 'negative' vocabularies given to women in the past are also female's advantages" (266). Earlier in the film, Starling's femininity and the fact that she is a woman causes her boss, Chilton, to assume her incapability and lack of intelligence. Yet, her analysis of the victim from a woman's perspective is what leads to this discovery that in turn leads the team to capture Bill. Her previous disadvantages (as perceived by Chilton) are of great advantage and help the FBI greatly in their progress. This self-masculinization demonstrated by Starling and later utilization of the same rejected feminine qualities demonstrates a struggle, and further action to dispel said struggle, that many women of the time and still today face in the workplace.

The Silence of the Lambs effectively shows themes of feminism and the struggles of women in the workplace that apply to both women when the movie is set and still today. The themes of objectification, patriarchal power dynamics, and self-masculinization present in the film all convey various struggles that women under the patriarchy face within their professional lives. The way that Starling responds to these struggles, her verbal retaliations and changing of her own identity, is expressive of responses that many women have in similar situations. These issues are still prominent today, as women still struggle to climb the professional ladder at the same rate as men, due to preconceived notions by their male colleagues and higher-ups. *Silence of the Lambs* is not just a film, but also a telling of experiences that all working women can relate to, providing a feeling of being seen. This was especially important in the 90s, when the movie was released, as these types of struggles were not discussed as openly. Not only was this film important in the past, but today as well. Women still lag behind men professionally and face workplace discrimination that still needs to be discussed and stopped.

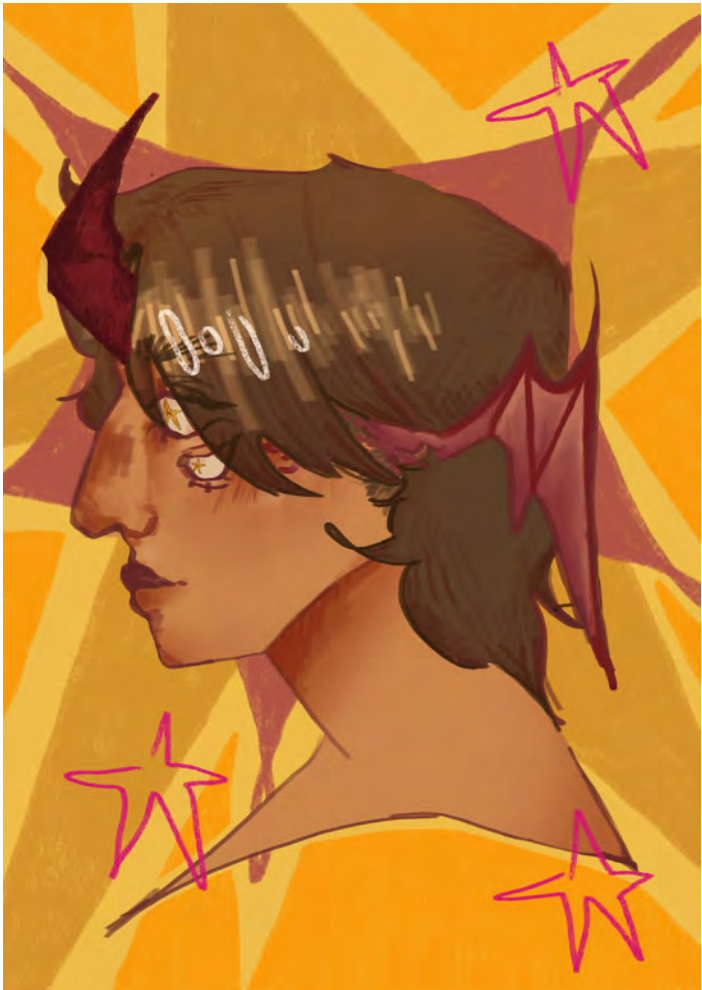
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MULTIMEDIA HONORABLE MENTION

Demon

Leslie Ledesma



POETRY HONORABLE MENTION

Earth

Analise Mitchell

So let me return to the earth,
The place I knew I'd go since birth.

Let my lungs overflow with rain,
Breath no more and forget their pain.

Allow my heart that's turned to stone,
To be claimed by moss, overgrown.

Let my bones lay down their burdens,
To forever rest in gardens.

My body's for the earth to keep
When the songbirds sing me to sleep.

Now let me return to the earth,
The place I knew I'd go since birth.

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE MULTIMEDIA

Mocha

Jose Rangel



ONLINE EXCLUSIVE NONFICTION

Gilded Armies and Warrior Women: Scythians According to the Greeks

Kaitlin Sulym

Before the Mongols or Vikings ever set foot on the Pontic Steppe, a nomadic culture built a near-mythical legacy through blood, gold, and wicked poison. The Scythians were an Indo-European nomadic culture that lived throughout the Eurasian Steppe from the 7th to the 3rd centuries BCE (Smith). They hunted and warred across modern-day Ukraine, Russia, Mongolia, and the Middle East, following animal migration patterns and leaving bloody tales in their wake. Where the Scythians came from is unknown, but as Patrick Smith, an independent researcher, concludes, “While [the Scythians] origin is debated, a general consensus identifies Scythian cultures of the Eurasian Steppes to be mostly comprised of four main groups. [...] All four had a common cultural identity expressed in their warrior nomadism, their form of government, and unique art and dress.” Despite having a rich, shared culture, the Scythians didn’t have a written language. What historians know of their culture comes from writings and paintings of the people they interacted with, namely the Greeks, and the contents of Scythian burial sites, called kurgans, in modern-day Ukraine and Siberia. Filled with gold masterpieces, tattooed bodies, and elaborate horse armor, these kurgans are proof that the people the Greeks wrote into their myths were, in fact, real. There were three unique aspects of Scythian culture and warfare that showed the relationship between the Greeks and the Scythians: Scythicon, goldwork, and the Amazons.

One unique aspect of Scythian warfare was Scythicon. The nomadic life of the Scythians was suited to building a vast knowledge of how the natural world works. They understood how to best produce the effects they wanted from the plant life around them, which is evidenced by archaeological findings supporting Herodotus’ descriptions of how the

Scythian tribes burned hemp seeds to get high. Intoxication, however, was not the only effect the Scythians could pull from their environment. Scythicon, named by the Ancient Greeks, was a poison designed with a long and painful death in mind. To make this poison, Scythians slaughtered vipers and left them to rot alongside pots of human blood buried in feces. Once putrid, the rotten vipers, spoiled blood, and feces were mixed together to form a poison both noxious and deadly. In addition to fermented ingredients and blooms of deadly bacteria, fear was another powerful component of this poison. Adrienne Mayor, a research scholar in Stanford University's Department of Classics, explains, "The fact that the Greeks knew the ingredients suggests that the Scythians advertised it widely, to spread fear" ("Nature's Armory" 37-38). The Scythians also painted their arrows to look like serpents and used barbed arrowheads to mimic fangs, adding another level of terror to the Scythian's already ruthless poison. As Mayor vividly illustrates, if a victim of one of these arrows survived the initial wound, the next hours of their life were a grueling affair:

Forensic physician Steffen Berg suggests that the poison would take effect about an hour after entering the system. Victims would go into shock, and gangrene would likely set in within a day or two. This condition would cause a black secretion to ooze from the wounded areas, similar to that described in ancient myths of poisoned lacerations produced before the walls of Troy. A few days later, tetanus would almost certainly kill the victim. ("Nature's Armory" 37)

Scythicon, with its deadly legacy, is one of the more brutal practices of the Scythians, striking fear and terror even into the hearts of the Greeks.

A second unique aspect of Scythian culture was goldwork. The Scythians were known for their love of gold throughout antiquity. Doug Stewart, author of "Scythian Gold," notes, "[Scythians] were among the ancient world's most extravagant art patrons. Nearly all their treasure, most of it finely wrought gold, was small enough to wear, befitting a people on the move" (1). Older specimens of Scythian goldwork, before contact with the Greeks, have been found throughout most of the territory the Scythians occupied. These gold pieces are decorated in a distinct, animalistic

style, many featuring one of three animals: a leopard, eagle, or stag (Stewart 3). These earlier works were a reflection of Scythian pastoral life; few human figures were seen in these works and animals took on whimsical forms. After touring the Scythian Gold exhibit, Stewart remarks, “Often, the antlers and hooves of stags mutate fancifully into bird heads or spiral motifs” (3). This distinct animalistic style was well-established among the Scythians, but beginning in the 5th and 4th centuries BCE, that style began to change (Villard 32). Once the Scythians began interacting with the Greeks—in a friendly manner that didn’t involve horrific poison—Greek motifs became more common in Scythian goldwork. Griffons, dragons, and animals entwined in combat painted a violent and powerful picture of the evolving Scythian lifestyle. As Marquita Villard, a frequent author featured in the *Parnassus* journal, artfully states, “From the Greeks, [...] the Scyths adopted the heraldic grouping of juxtaposed animals and the dragon motif in the Vth and early IVth centuries. [...] After this period the animal style degenerated considerably in Scythia, but not permanently” (32). These new motifs strayed from the natural themes of previous gold pieces. What had once been an expression of the beauty and peace of the natural world became fantastical and violent, perhaps a reflection of the growing conflict in Scythia. As the Sarmatians, one of the four main groups of Scythians, began to war with the Pontic Scythians around the Black Sea, those who had the closest trade relationship with the Greeks, an Ionian art style featuring animals in combat became more prevalent. Without a written language, the goldwork left behind in kurgans offers valuable insight into Scythian culture and shows how a nomadic tribe absorbed the art style of their neighboring trade partner.

A third unique aspect of Scythian culture were their warrior women. The Greeks were fascinated by the warrior women of the far east, who appeared in their mythology and art as the fearless, man-hating Amazons. Sources about the Amazons are disputed. Adrienne Mayor, in her book *The Amazons*, observes, “[Greek historians’] accounts commingle fact and fancy, legend and history, but all identify the women called Amazons as Scythians” (44). Although these ancient authors were certain of the fact that the Amazons existed within Scythia, their accounts were dismissed for centuries and the stories of the Amazons chalked up to fantasy, until

more recently, when archaeologists were able to determine the sex of osteological remains in the burials throughout ancient Scythia. According to Mayor, nearly 37 percent of more than a thousand steppe burials constructed by Scythians and similar nomadic cultures contained armed females buried with the same honors as male warriors (*The Amazons* 63, 65). Compared to the conservative stance that the Greeks took on how women should behave, Scythian women, whose lives were so grand and respected that they were laid to rest in extravagant burials, must have seemed fantastical to the Greeks. Greek historians like Diodorus and Herodotus tell tales of warrior queens, who led hordes of Scythians to battle, in their writings. Taking a more mythical approach, Greek authors also wrote the Amazons fighting alongside heroes like Heracles and Theseus. Not only were the Amazons real and astounding to the Greeks, but either through fear, admiration, or lust, they were immortalized in Greek mythology. The Amazons of myth were real, according to the Greeks, and they lived in Scythia.

War defines most nomadic cultures. Some ancient accounts report that the Scythians were barbarians; in others, they were idolized warriors—but to the Greeks, Scythians were a multifaceted people with a rich and fearsome culture. They were poison-wielding archers, wealthy art connoisseurs, and bewitching warriors whose lifestyle stoked both terror and fascination within the Greek population. Today, almost all that remains of this ancient civilization are the kurgans within modern-day Ukraine. Once again, war dictates the survival of the Scythians. This time, the Scythians don't have the shadows of mythology to hide in, unless the popular history of Wonder Women counts, so it is up to the world to take on the role of the Ancient Greeks: preserve, research, and record Scythian culture before it's lost for good. The Scythians didn't leave the deepest imprint on history, but they did forge a culture that was beautifully decadent and marvellously savage, just like the Amazonian wilds they came from.

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ONLINE EXCLUSIVE POETRY

The Dead Side

Lela Pennington

I live in a patch of nowhere
Nestled in the middle of something.
The hustle and bustle of daily life echoes beyond the trees
As I sit amongst the quiet folk
At one of the barriers of nowhere.

Our nowhere has two sides:
The living and the dead.
And now I sit with the latter,
The almost-autumn breeze caressing my face
Soothing the heat of the end-of-summer sun.

I've come here many times
In need of peaceful company.
In need of a place to breathe.
The air feels calmer here
In this yard where strangers sleep.

I close my eyes,
My hands on the marker
Of a couple's resting place.
With my fingertips on the sun-baked stone,
The couple's lingering joy soothes my soul.

This place feels as much like home
As the tiny house that contains the living side.
Among the carved stones and angels,
Listening to the birds singing and the last few June beetles buzzing,
The dead side feels warm.

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE MULTIMEDIA

Eastern Carpenter Bee

Brynn Munro



ONLINE EXCLUSIVE NONFICTION

“Dirt Cheap” by Artist Cody Johnson Shows the Value of Memories

Maggie Adams

Music has always been a common ground between people. It has been known to bring them together and provide a time of connection that everyone shares. As technology advanced, film production became popular, and music videos were born. Music videos allow listeners a view into the artist’s mind, and they highlight the motivation behind the song and what makes it so important to them. An example of a song with a music video depicting a story is country singer Cody Johnson’s “Dirt Cheap” from the album *Leather*, released in 2023 and directed by Dustin Haney. The narrative scenes, nostalgic lyrics, and concrete symbolism in Cody Johnson’s music video for “Dirt Cheap” demonstrate that memories can comprise more than mere thoughts, but individuals and places as well.

Cody Johnson’s music video for his popular song “Dirt Cheap” uses moving narrative scenes to show the viewer that there are possessions people have that are valuable beyond financial worth. In the video, he uses many different scenes to convey his idea and uses people’s emotions to get the idea across to the viewer. Johnson begins the story by showing a couple of suited-up developers who have been trying to buy land from nearby farmers to build a subdivision. The idea of developers trying to buy out farmland is something incredibly common that many country people would understand. While many people would think that this is just a piece of land with a regular house worth a lot of money, it is so much more than that. The memories that are tied to the house and land are worth far more than money could buy. Johnson shows this in the video when the farmer answers the door and begins to tell the developers the memories that are associated with the house and then says, “Boys, whatever you’re offerin’, it won’t be enough” (Line 9). Johnson then shows the farmer having flash-

backs to the memories he describes in the chorus, which gives the viewer a more personal look into the man's life and allows them to feel a deep connection to the memories. The flashback corresponds with the chorus of the song and provides specific and vivid details to give the viewer an emotional perspective of the memories. In the chorus, Johnson mentions the memories, including his daughter on a swing who has grown up now, the pink bow in her hair that he can still picture, a tree where his dog is buried, and where he proposed to his wife. Johnson uses the narrative scenes in the video to provide a deeper understanding of the song by adding the farmer's quote, "Everything that is important to me is here." This spoken line provides a personal touch to the video and shows the turning point where the developers realize that this land is worth more to this man than their money can buy. Johnson uses flashbacks from the past to go along with the present, where his daughter is wearing the pink bow in the past, then shows the present, where she is wearing the same bow alongside her daughter wearing the same bow.

Furthermore, the use of powerful lyrics reveals the emotion in "Dirt Cheap" which demonstrates that memories are worth more than money. Johnson uses many different tactics within the music video to go along with the story he paints for the viewers, and while the video does an amazing job at adding helpful imaging and details, the lyrics tell the whole story. Lyrics are such an important part of a song as they allow the listeners to feel a connection with the artist. People tend to gravitate towards songs that they can relate to or understand, which is why the lyrics of songs are so important. "Dirt Cheap" is a song that can be understood and related to by so many people due to the mentions of land trying to be bought, kids growing up, and places that bring back valued memories. Following the first chorus, the lyrics mention one of the developers asking the farmer, "Between the droughts and the floods, through all the years / what in the world got you through / How'd the hell you get here?" (Line 22-24). The goal of this line is to show the developers are starting to realize that this property is worth more than their money can buy and are beginning to respect the man with how long he has been there through everything that has happened. When Johnson says, "droughts and floods," he is not only talking about actual droughts and floods but the difficul-

ties of life; he wants the listeners to realize that with a firm foundation, anyone can make it through anything. Additionally, the title of the song “Dirt Cheap” is not just a random line from the song, it is the story. When Johnson mentions the title of the song, it is accompanied by the words, “You can’t buy that kind of dirt cheap.” When he says this, he is not talking about the land itself but discussing the memories that come with the land. He uses the developers to give the readers an idea of how it feels to try and put all the memories from that house and land into one price, which is impossible. Johnson tries to explain that the memories that were made on this land are priceless.

Moreover, Johnson uses many symbols in his video “Dirt Cheap” to further people’s idea of what a memory can be. Symbolism is something that is widely used in all sorts of media to try and represent an idea they have. In the song Cody Johnson uses a wide variety of symbols to show the value of the land and why it cannot be sold. Within the chorus, he uses multiple symbols that are repeated throughout the song showing how valuable they are to the farmer. The first symbol is his daughter; he remembers her when she was little, swinging with a pink bow in her brown hair, and how she is now all grown up and lives in the city. Through the mentions of her, he talks about how she still calls home, that he misses her smile, and that she is coming to visit soon. This symbolizes children growing up, which is a significant part of any parent’s life, watching their child go from a baby to an adult living on their own is such a difficult and rewarding part of parenthood. Many parents will associate specific memories they have of their kids with a certain place, and in this case, it was their home. Music critic Hank Rivers states, “The mention of a “little girl” and her “pink bow” is a symbolism for innocent joys and purity of childhood memories that money can’t buy” (Rivers). Another symbol that is repeated is the mention of his dog, who he says is buried under a cross beneath a wide oak tree. The relationship between someone and their dog is an unbreakable bond that lasts forever. While the farmer explains to the developers that they will not be able to put a price on the land, he says, “Keep your money ‘cause a man can’t leave his dog” (Line 17). He says that his dog was more than just a pet; he was his best friend who always stood by his side through it all, and his loyalty goes beyond death. As the

story continues, the farmer returns to the beginning, where he proposed to his wife on this land. Rivers claims, “This moment, marked by the act of getting down “on one knee,” symbolizes love, commitment, and the beginnings of a family, laying down roots deeper than a shovel can dig” (Rivers). Johnson uses the symbol of home being more than land but being where life’s most cherished memories are created. His use of symbolism throughout the song walks the viewer through each stage of life and how they have all been experienced in this one place.

The narrative scenes, nostalgic lyrics, and concrete symbolism in Cody Johnson’s music video for “Dirt Cheap” demonstrate that memories can be more than just thoughts but people and places as well. This song reminds others that sentimental memories are priceless. Everyone has memories, some are sad, and some are beautiful, but they are remembered for a reason. Memories are what help make people who they are and help them remember loved ones they have lost. Cody Johnson wants people to see that what may seem like a random spot on a map or house on a street holds memories that are worth more than anything in the world. Memories are unique to everyone, and while many are shared with those around them, they are personal to everyone and are valued by each person who holds them.

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ONLINE EXCLUSIVE POETRY

The Swift Dance

Rebel Roan

A zephyr swirled between the two,
In idyllic pastures beside a house of blue.
Debonair, both, in their skill of swords,
Both alone, without their hostile hoards.
Under the still of daybreak they stood,
If one did not begin, the other surely would.
A delicate dance of glimmering blades began,
Rhythmic feet together closing the span.
Polished blades crossed in harmonious sync,
There was no time to consider, no time to think.
Amongst the dulcet tones of steel against steel,
One moved with leisure, and one moved with zeal.
Until a singular misstep produced a vicious bite,

With a wound so profound, it concluded the fight.
The victor stood above their ephemeral foe,
Ineffable, experiencing sensational woe.
It was not a win, and they did not savor,
Their former friend's life began to waver.
They were destined to face eternal doom,
Their love to remain in eternal bloom.
The champion knelt with one final lament,
Knowing from this, they could never repent.

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE MULTIMEDIA

Flamingo Tongue Snail on Sea Fan

Brynn Munro



ONLINE EXCLUSIVE NONFICTION

Microtransactions Are Just Another Name for Gambling

Mitchel Stillford

When imagining how society interacts with gambling, the most common image that comes to mind is the Las Vegas Strip with its large casinos, bright lights, and colorful architecture. This image of gambling is often perceived as being far removed from our daily lives where it would be assumed to not have an impact and play a role. However, what if gambling was already present in a different form? When playing games online, many of them feature built-in shops where players can use real-world currencies to purchase microtransactions, which can include virtual items or in-game currencies. These items can sometimes be earned with randomized outcomes, so if the player does not get what they want, they may need to spend more money for another chance. Society already recognizes the dangers of traditional gambling with regulations in place to control it, but does society truly understand the potential dangers associated with microtransactions? Although gambling and microtransactions have served different markets and purposes, they share similarities when it comes to behaviors such as financial risk, psychological manipulation, and addictive behaviors.

Though serving different markets and purposes, gambling and microtransactions share a surprising similarity when examining financial risk. Gambling involves taking risks and betting money on uncertain outcomes for the potential of significant monetary gain. On the other hand, microtransactions primarily aim to benefit and enhance the game experience with virtual items such as cosmetics, character unlocks, progression, and power-ups. While these items usually do not hold tangible value outside of the game, there are cases where this does occur. In the game *Counter-Strike 2* (formerly known as *Counter-Strike Global Offensive*) players

spend money on items known as loot boxes. In CS2, these loot boxes are called cases, where they operate on the same principles as gambling with rewards being randomized and outcomes uncertain. When players receive something rare, it is akin to hitting the jackpot, as these rare items hold monetary value outside of the game and can be sold on a virtual market outside of the game for real-world money, sometimes fetching upwards thousands of dollars. Furthermore, both gambling and loot boxes involve an element of financial risk based on players' participation. In gambling, players have the chance to win money if they bet successfully but they also risk losing all the money they bet. Players who lose may believe that they can recover their losses by playing more and winning big. On the other hand, players opening loot boxes may only receive virtual items, but with no guarantee of obtaining their desired rewards, they may end up spending more than they originally intended. In essence, both activities carry financial risk as each side seeks to capitalize on their participants.

Additionally, the tendency to continue investing more due to previous investments is known as a sunk cost fallacy, which is a factor of psychological manipulation in both gambling and microtransactions. The intent of gambling is well known for its ability to employ psychological tactics to encourage continued spending and engagement. While the rewards of microtransactions remain within the bounds of the virtual world, they are also associated with predatory behaviors. Both gambling and microtransactions often employ persuasive tactics that look to attract players' money. In the realm of gambling, sports betting apps often entice players to gamble with promises of free money for downloading the app and the opportunity to safely gamble, with the hope that players will eventually use and put in their own money after winning or losing. Similarly, microtransactions employ tactics such as offering free to play games but then locking content behind a paywall where the only way to earn such is to open a form of a certain type of loot box to access it. In Japan, these kinds of games are very popular with the category being titled as so called gacha games. The name gacha refers to toy vending machines in Japan that dispense random prizes. What this means is that gacha games are called such for using the very same tactic found in gambling by having randomized prizes which will be bought in-game. Gacha games utilize the same

gambling tactic of random prizes as the randomness keeps players engaged as they anticipate a valuable reward, even if it is infrequent. The allure of variable rewards effectively maintains player behavior as individuals will strive and continue in the hopes of obtaining a desirable outcome. Social factors also play a role in encouraging behavior and reinforcing manipulation. Both gambling and microtransactions incorporate social factors whereby showcasing the successes of other players applies pressure on others and influences behavior. Witnessing others successfully win large sums of money in gambling can create the belief that players can achieve similar heights, motivating them to continue to play. In gaming, players can experience social pressure from friends making purchases and sharing achievements, leading players to spend more to keep up with others. The combination of social influence and the sunk cost fallacy perpetuated by businesses underscores the psychological manipulation in play in these mediums.

Going beyond mere psychological manipulation, interactions in both mediums may introduce addictive behaviors. While gambling and microtransactions both have the potential to lead to addictive behaviors, the extent of addiction can differ between the two activities. Gambling addiction often revolves around the pursuit of financial success and the thrill of risk-taking. Online microtransaction addiction on the other hand is more focused on the desire for virtual rewards, social status, or in-game progression. Despite the differences in desires between the two, the outcome of addiction remains the same. The thrill of winning, coupled with the desire to obtain rare or valuable virtual items, can lead individuals to spend significant amounts of time and money in pursuit of these rewards, to the point of financial trouble and psychological impact. On the psychological side, both gambling and loot boxes impact dopamine levels in the brain. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that produces feelings of happiness. By linking the rush of dopamine in the brain to gambling and loot boxes, individuals become conditioned to crave that happy feeling and excitement of acquiring money or virtual items. This can lead to an escalation of commitment where individuals continue to chase those feelings even as the costs rise. The reinforcement of these behaviors shows that both activities are connected to addictive behaviors and are not as dissimilar as they

may have seemed.

Despite presenting different mediums, society may not view gambling and microtransactions as one and the same, however, similarities in behaviors such as financial risk, psychological manipulation, and addictive behaviors tell a different story. The financial risks stem from potential losses associated with engaging in these behaviors. Psychological manipulation occurs when businesses employ tactics to keep players rolling the dice. Addictive behaviors come from factors in place to prey on and exploit the brain's ability to strengthen certain negative behaviors. Overall, calling it microtransactions is just another way to call it gambling.

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE POETRY

6:28 A.M. on December 19th

Quentin Hill

Frozen blades of grass gently covered in dusty snow
Morning dew dripping sharpened clouds down branches and leaves
Another winter's dawn breathes through thin walls
Painting hidden windows in delicate streams
Soothing burnt wood still simmering in the fireplace
Whispering platitudes to the slowly burning wax
"The orange shadows have melted into a clear blue sky.
"Flicker no longer, an early rest beckons your puddling scraps,"
The celestial ceiling stares through slivers of curtain
Peeking into the tightly bundled house
A cold whoosh flows through the air, sweeping out dying flames
All is quiet and silent and still as a mouse
Except for the creaking and groaning of a person just awoken
By the ferocious bellows of burrowing ice
The person wanders throughout the house, lighting charred wicks
"Too early," they cry, "It's too early to end the night."
Yet now their feet are chilled and their breath is puffing out
And their bed is leaking warmth and the wax has congealed
Another winter's dawn whisking a person from fluffy pillows

THE WAKE REVIEW

literary magazine and club

As Wake Tech's only student literary and artistic publication, our mission is to provide a creative outlet for the students, faculty, and staff of Wake Technical Community College. At the Wake Review, we believe Wake Tech should always have a place for its creative voices. We are pleased to share the 2025 edition of the Wake Review with the entire Wake Tech community. Thank you.

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