

THE WAKE ★ REVIEW ★

2026



Fiction + Nonfiction + Poetry + Art

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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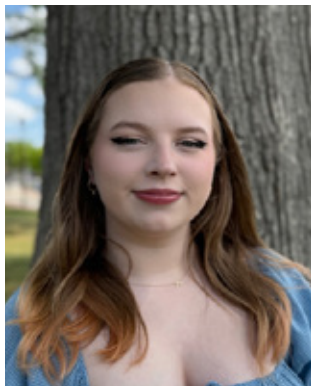
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To visit the online edition of *The Wake Review*, visit the following website:
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Letter from the Editors-in-Chief



The Wake Review has evolved from a shared passion project into a testament to our community's vibrant talent. Serving as Co-Editors-in-Chief this year has allowed us to refine our leadership, leveraging our collective strengths to produce a publication that honors the creativity and courage unique to Wake Tech.



We extend our deepest gratitude to our dedicated staff and advisors. Balancing academic rigor and personal commitments with the demands of a high-caliber magazine is no small feat; we are immensely proud of the growth and tenacity this team has displayed. Their unwavering commitment and collaborative spirit have been the heartbeat of this project, ensuring that every page reflects the excellence our contributors deserve.

To the Wake Tech students and faculty: thank you for your contributions. This edition exists to celebrate your voices and provide a permanent home for the diverse perspectives found across our campuses. To our readers: we dedicate this work to you, hoping it inspires you as much as these creators have inspired us. May these stories and visuals serve as a reminder that your creative expression is both vital and valued.

We are incredibly proud of this year's publication. Please join us in celebrating the hard work, artistry, and vision of everyone who helped bring this magazine to life.

M.M. Dejnozka

M.M. Dejnozka

Sydney Russo

Sydney Russo

Editors-in-Chief (2025-2026)

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FIRST-PLACE POETRY

The Threadbare Vinyl

Kaitlin Sulym

I've cleaned the vinyl—

I swear I have. I've wiped it down so many times
that my arm's damn near fallen off.

The boss man says it's me, that I have to put in more elbow grease.
He doesn't get it.

These red booths are decades old,
and those decades ain't coming out.

There's stuffing torn out of one,
and when I sit on the chairs
up by the front to roll steak knives and forks together,
I can actually feel the bolts where the seats
are attached to the legs.
That's my fault, too, somehow.

And so are all the scratches on the booth
in the corner,
even if I wasn't 'round when they happened.

They're jagged white lines
where the red plastic's been ripped away
to reveal canvas underneath.

It's fraying and stretched out so badly
from years of living

that the all-purpose cleaner
keeps soaking through
instead of evaporating.
I gave up cleaning that booth
'cause there's not really a point.
I can't clean the spilled coke out of the foam underneath—
all I can do is keep drenching it with bleach
and that's just a waste.
I mean, the floors are gummy
and there's actual gum under the chairs,
which I'm never cleaning up,
boss man can do that,
who cares about the vinyl?

But there I am, every day, knees
cut up from the brittle red edges,
scrubbing the life out of the vinyl.
I keep thinking
that if I open up the booth in the corner
I'll find all the chemical crap I've poured into it,
and like some hero I'll be celebrated
'cause I'll have saved the diner so
much
on cleaner.

On my last day,
I do something crazy.
I take a steak knife—
one of the shitty ones from the front—
and I make the vinyl worse.

That long scratch that goes all the way from edge to middle
is no longer threadbare.

It's just bare.

And now everyone can see the stains I never could get out.

I never did get to see

if all that cleaner was just swimming in a pool underneath—
didn't get that far,

boss man threw me out,

but that doesn't matter.

He'll have to get new vinyl now.

FIRST-PLACE FICTION

The Horseman

M.M. Dejnozka

Black puddles splashed. Amid the boot squelches of underfoot muck slaving through the decrepitude, the fogs ever-drifting, the shadowy outline of a man could scarcely be put together, though his aura was more of a spirit sulking, of an undead drughr turning over in the dark. In a sorcery of eerie light, belts of blue and silver sky hues bathed down from patched bars in the clouds like fairies of death. The Horseman, notably without his horse, stepped through the dark twin walled passages, his face obscured by the twists eclipsing the night. He passed mangled corpses, barely human, none of them intact, lying in someone else's feces, bloated and leeching with maggots. A courtesy from the last flood, nodded the Horseman with a hmm. Collapsed ribs, half-broken skulls, putrefied muscle tendons of newborns and fetuses, among concentrations of other indiscernible matter, were scattered with microscopic precision, as though everything had been jumbled and shaken in a jar and dispersed to molest everything in sight.

The serpentine contours of the ancient site sprawled on; the intricate insect-tunnel-like labyrinth of stone passages jutting from every corner. Desolate crossroads offered equally damning paths. Every inch was blackened with time; every mote decayed, the cracked and eroded walls bearing the weight of a hundred thousand storms. Any business that required a visit to the Sea Maze was a dreadful one, but every second brought the Horseman one step closer to the Staff. The only heirloom from his mother.

Opá oba it was called in the Oyo tongue. The King's Scepter.

They cannot take what you are, his mother had muttered on her death-bed. *You are the blood of Obatala*. Omo mi, *do not forget*. *Our time will come again*.

Over an hour the Horseman had followed the walls, only granting quick looks to the lineaments that edged the stony hightops. The black puddles told him nothing. They sat malevolently opaque, reflecting

slashes of foggy light. They riddled every pathway, every lane, filling up holes in the ground like melted cockroaches that didn't know how to die.

He knew when he came upon Greymark, that place of myth. The passage greeted him with a slow, shivering blink.

It was just as the stories said, a thousand, ten thousand, scratches laid scuffed on the walls. From markings thin enough to have come from blades, others seemingly from fingernails grating down. Every drunk idiot with an excuse up their ass had a theory. Amateur adventurers used to wander in, men who sought to map the Sea Maze, religious heroes who lusted glory, fame. Novels were penned. Rumors solidified into legend. No one knew who created the Sea Maze or how it could withstand a god's fury. It was only known that before the first designs for the capitol were drafted, before there was a need for a castle, the Sea Maze had existed, evermore, as a shadow that flickered blurrily next to the light.

Not many men found Greymark but the ones who survived to tell the tale came back changed. They shriveled up, turning grey, deformed by illnesses no doctor could merit a name. They muttered chaotically to themselves until they hung themselves over their beds or were beaten in the dungeons and strapped onto tables, biting down on leather, to be experimented on by the Alchemist... or men like him.

The Horseman couldn't decide if it was an honor or a terror to witness what acts the Alchemist committed in those chambers. There were always poor degenerates rotting down there. Cuffed to the walls, moaning deliriously; rascals no one would miss caged behind bars; all humanity, in the snap of a finger, gone. The flickerings of their souls snuffed in the wind. Men the Horseman had worked for or met on jobs who had gone around asking the wrong questions, looking for a daughter they had lost, financiers following the trails of missing money, braggers, riffraff's, the wrong side of the nobility, the kind who tried too often to do the right thing.

"Really," the Alchemist would exasperate, "they never learn." He'd angle a flat look at the Horseman, saying nothing, but it was clear what must be done. Grip tightened at the hilt of his blade, he delivered the killing blow, even when they screamed in horror and crawled away.

Love, safety, hope, friendship—these things meant nothing. Twenty long years the Horseman had schemed for this. Everything he had ever endured, ever sacrificed, any person he had ever betrayed, any accomplice he had ever slit the throat of in one of the Alchemist's cages; it was for this. For Opá Oba. For Oyo. The Horseman had been changed

long before he ever stepped foot into Greymark. So long he had trailed noblemen in the streets, over bridges, sitting in far-away corner tables, approaching innocent-eyed maidens with the intent to use and discard them, then resign their fates to the eternal curiosity of the Alchemist. The fallen nobilities, merchants greedy enough to plot treason, slaves, the common folk, madams of the pleasure houses, serving boys who worked as spies, all of it was for this.

They cannot take what you are.

Gliding his finger against a glass flask hidden in the inner lining of his cloak, the Horseman huffed his lips out and studied the passage before him. Millions of faded marks scoured the walls; the sea was there distantly, humming, and before him a thousand black puddles lined the passage. Not all of them were in the center; many gathered around depressions in the uneven slope of the grimy floor, but still, *thousands*.

He only needed one of them to work.

Still, the implication alone...

Would the Horseman have to check every puddle?

There were worse obstacles. Worse things to be done. Checking thousands of puddles for what he was looking for was nothing. Not so much a daunting task as it was an annoying one.

Huffing, the Horseman turned a grimace to the sky. The clouds were darkening in the thinning moonlight. Not a good sign. He had wasted enough time already.

Kneeling beside the black puddle in front of him, the Horseman analyzed its contents quickly. The water had a rancid soupy drool to it, but he sniffed it all the same. He watched the blackness of it ripple when he stuck his finger into it, judging its silty texture. There were no irregularities, or so it appeared, but the Horseman couldn't be certain. A final test: the flask.

He pulled it out from his cloak. Inside a dark green solution dimly glowed. Courtesy of the Alchemist. A donation to celebrate their longstanding solidarity and continued partnership.

Pythium.

Unscrewing the flask, the Horseman let the pythium drop freely into the puddle. Against the puddle's darkness the pythium brightened into a luminescent lime green. The nubs at its globby edges vanished then reappeared, poking at the water, trying to change shape one lumpy motion at a time. In a delayed response to the puddle's chemical properties, the pythium's nebulous form convulsed, shaking rapidly, rejecting the puddle. After an intense sputtering seizure, the pythium slumped

formlessly in the puddle and flattened out floating like a corpse. Shaking his head, the Horseman lowered his flask once more, as close as he could get it to the water without it touching. The pythium, both in the flask and in the puddle, reacted to each other's vicinity like two oppositely charged magnets. By the time the process was complete and the dead parts of the pythium had been restored, the Horseman had already moved on. He was kneeling near the next puddle, feeling that new water's blackness and rubbing its traces between his fingers.

Eighteen puddles. Fifty. One-hundred-and-six. It was all the same.

The pythium danced around, one blobby leg or arm at a time before it curdled and seized. None of the puddles were sufficient for the pythium to solidify itself in the Sea Maze's watery environment. Every puddle was inhospitable, incompatible to the green, gooey lifeform. One string of disappointing attempts after another, only a thousand or so puddles left to test, the Horseman couldn't keep his growing annoyance out of his breath. He would see a puddle, angrily stalk past it, stop, grunt, then walk back and grudgingly repeat the testing process. He had not suffered twenty years to lose his shit to a puddle.

Then, suddenly, finally, in blessed relief, the Horseman saw something faint in the some-thousand-something-th puddle. Something black but not black like the water. It was faintly darker. He could see the small particles shined, like shavings of black ice crystals.

Thunderdust, the Horseman grinned.

This was the entrance.

Even though the Horseman knew this was the right puddle, it had to be, a surprised expression still took root in him when the pythium took. The pythium glowed brighter and brighter; a little green sun rippling in the water. Its solidified rays veined in an intricate, alien pattern and dropped down deep into the blackness, lighting the way. It was important not to touch the pythium, it was poison, so the Horseman simply stood by as the threads of pythium slivered down, touching base with a disc of stone resting at the bottom. Glowing more, the pythium filled the grooves in the stone where an old motif was scratched into the rock.

A serpent swallowing its own tail.

Ouroboros.

The stone grumbled, as if being slowly rattled out of place. The serpent motif spun like a wheel and raggedly clicked down and down through what could only have been levels of invisible gears. It was an old contraption, but it still worked. Holes in the stone released, slowly

draining the puddle and leaking the black water into the deep of the earth, trickling to places unseen. When there was no puddle left the pythium dimmed to a dark green. The Horseman stepped into the depression. He bent down to collect the pythium back in his flask, screwed it tight, and hid it back in his cloak.

Quickly, the Horseman returned his attention back to the stone disc and its motif. The pythium hadn't moved the stone, it had only unlocked its antiquated jiggers and apparatuses. The Horseman would still have to lift it if he wanted to crawl inside.

He crouched down, digging his nails into the border of the stone to get a grip. His attempt to lift fell flat. Everything was still wet, globbed with leftover mire. Ignoring the redness forming on his palms and the way his skin pinched, the Horseman tried again with a similar result. He could lift it, barely an inch before the stone dropped back with a loud thud. The serpent motif seemed to turn its lips at him, amused.

Breathing briskly the Horseman turned an eye to the sky. The clouds again. More gathered, denser. The moonlight was meeker and mostly grey. The sea didn't sound so far away. *The tides are rising.* This, of course, came as no surprise. But he had thought there would be more time. He'd thought he'd be farther along.

No matter.

Studying the stone again and the motif, his eye caught on a protruding shape. A round knob smeared in guck. Rebalancing his weight, the Horseman wrapped his greased fingers around the knob and pulled. The weight of the stone was heavy, causing the Horseman to grunt as he called on his muscles. They twitched at first, then remained fast, lending the Horseman their vigor. The stone slowly grumbled up. Flaring his nose, the Horseman's grip slipped and chafed back into place. Heaving now with his full shoulders, he pulled again. Harder. He threw his weight. The stone grumbled again, grinding against the rest of the stone ground. In a low growl, he hauled the stone up, and with a terrible scream, lifted the large stone over his head, his arms barely holding, and he threw the disc-shaped stone as far as he could aim.

"It might not exist anymore," the Patron had instructed not two-hours before. "It's been long abandoned. Everyone knows about Grey-mark but the Sea Maze's best kept secret was back in the Age of Kings, Greymark used to house the entrance to the Holy Vaults. It might not exist anymore. It might not connect to the tunnels. It could be flooded. But the Sea Maze entrance is the only pathway that might lead to the underground that isn't guarded by armsmen. I doubt they even know

where it is. If Greymark does lead to the Holy Vaults the way it used to, the Staff is yours to take.”

Finally, after so long.

Opá Oba.

Rain dripped over the Horseman’s hood, but he didn’t care. Forecasters had predicted the next flood to roll in a fortnight, but of course it was happening tonight. The Horseman was to leave the capitol. He did not know when he would return, if the Patron would ever send for him to come back. He had come all this way. Opá Oba could be moved again, it could be years before the Horseman’s Patron could use what little influence he had to learn where Opá Oba had been transported. It could be years before stealing Opá Oba would ever be this simple again. All he had to do was navigate an underground that might not connect to the tunnels, break into the right vault, unseen my armsmen, find Opá Oba, and leave the way he came, and exit the Sea Maze before the flood hit.

Right, humored the Horseman. *Simple.*

Cloak flapping, he descended the crumbling steps. The dampness in the air stifled him so much he covered his nose with his free hand, to keep the smell from penetrating his nose. Whereas the pathways above had the sky and winds from the sea to wash away at least part of the Sea Maze’s stench, this downworlded abyss had no means, even in part, to relieve itself from whatever filthiness that guttered down those moldy rocks.

He lifted his torch high, swinging it faintly to the closest things that looked like walls as he treaded down. The darkness swept past in a blur. The rocks were too dark to make out, everything faded in a deep brownness, the hollows of everything fallen in ruin. Shadows nibbled at his edges, feasting on his cloak with swinish delight.

At last, he reached the bottom.

The Horseman extended his torch out. His lip drew tightly in.

The underground had avalanched. A wreckage of rocks walled any path that might have existed. He had wasted twenty years on a dead end. A smarter man would have cut his losses, but he could only bring himself to stand there, defiantly, thinking of Opá Oba, listening to the cavernous echoes of dribbles splattering on top of faraway rocks.

Everything was as it was before except now there was a clock. More than an hour, less than an hour. The coming flood changed very little if anything at all. The Horseman still had his duties, his orders. He was still determined to take possession of Opá Oba. He was a man of the cloak, of the road. He answered to no person except the Patron, and even

then, sometimes he did not listen at all.

“If the tunnels are broken off,” the Patron had added, “if the beggars are rabid, if you have been followed, if your intentions have been discovered, your identity compromised, if serpents forbid there is a flood, abandon the Staff. It can wait. The Black Tower can’t.”

The Horseman waved his torch in the air to further study the darkness.

Black droplets dripped from the cavernous ceiling, hissing on the edges of flame.

The rocks ahead had caved in, crumbled into pebbles, powdered into dust, and broken into boulders. He lifted his torch up high. If the avalanched underground was any indicator, if a flood was coming and he had not made it to the Holy Vaults, he would not only drown to death, he would be gnashed against every sharp joint of rock.

You are the blood of Obatala. Omo mi, do not forget.

He climbed.

FIRST-PLACE MULTIMEDIA

Unity

Barira Memon



FIRST-PLACE NONFICTION

Blind Faith in Mark Twain's "The War Prayer"

Sky Rinehart

Aside from immediate survival, potentially one of the most potent facilitators of action for humans throughout history has been religion. In times of unrest, communities have formed around belief in something brighter for tomorrow. The same ideals have served as pillars in government, guided billions in their lives, and been present through the most pressing of humanity's uncertainties. As a force in societies, perhaps nothing has so elegantly danced the line between inspiring peace or fostering brutality. The deep interlocking of the spiritual and the political introduces an often-unseen danger. Parties happily dip their toes into perverting the words of their claimed religion simply for personal gain. For this, and other negative consequences of structured religion, world faiths have found themselves subject to criticism in both real-life and fiction. One such criticism is on the basis that religion fundamentally relies on belief without empirical evidence. It opens the doors for a view of the world that, if wrongly applied or exploited, can lead to a great deal of suffering and oppression. These wrongs, in turn, can sow seeds of doubt in institutions or societies that enable such things to happen. One such example, the Philippine-American War (1899-1902), served as motivation for anti-imperialist Mark Twain to write "The War Prayer": a short story that provides a blistering satirical take on Christianity and its role in conflict (Oran 65; Orvis 230). In "The War Prayer," Mark Twain attempts to warn of the dangers of blind faith by illustrating its relationship to fascism, obedience, and nationalism.

Mark Twain illuminates the harm arising from blind faith by portraying the characteristics of fascism in the society he describes. The attitudes brewing at this time can only be analyzed in relation to fascism in retrospect, but the vivid picture Twain paints in "The War Prayer" sits nicely next to modern definitions and understandings of the ideology. He presents a society not weighed down by ongoing battle, but invigorated by it. A notable omission from his descriptions of war is a human sense

of loss or misery. Rather, fallen soldiers on the home side are said to have “die[d] the noblest of noble deaths” (1). The country Twain depicts is heavily militaristic, obsessed with the ongoing conflict, and ready to cheer for their loved ones heading into a war that may very well kill them. The soldiers themselves are “gay and fine,” happy to sacrifice themselves for a war that is never actually given a clear justification (1). The lack of reasoning is a deliberate move Twain uses to express his views on the Philippine-American War, and other conflicts of recent years that had solidified his views against imperialism (Camfield 638). Xenophobia and racism not only underlie fascism, but are inseparable from the actions of a country aiming to dominate other nations for its own benefit. The country in “The War Prayer” is not defending itself. The church service asks “the all-terrible [God]” to “help them to crush the foe,” (1). Twain’s position is one that criticizes a society for reducing people to “patriot,” but, more importantly, for treating individuals as nothing but an extension of the “enemy.” Identifying a common enemy without any truthful reason is yet another trait of fascism, and a deadly one. As Mông-Lan, poet of *Song of Cicadas* and writer, eloquently puts, with “God and Religion [...] there is no need to consider others, no need to contemplate the possibility that they too have lives and hopes. That they too feel pain, bleed, and die” (99). This view paves the way to excuse violence, as the stranger calls out in his speech: “O Lord our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells” (2). Twain is also critical of war in general; as Gregg Camfield describes “The War Prayer’s” conflict in *The Oxford Companion to Mark Twain*, it was “not about securing victory so much as ensuring the destruction of other human beings” (638-639). What sets this country’s government and attitudes apart from other ideologies, and into the territory of fascism, is Twain’s emphasis on the hypocrisy underlying its actions. It is one thing to support a war, another to be completely oblivious to its consequences and still adamantly find oneself approving of it. The portrayals of these characteristics of fascism, and their place in the country he describes, serve to further his ultimate message regarding the threat of blind faith.

Mark Twain also uses “The War Prayer” to show blind faith’s impact on societal obedience. What makes Twain’s work compelling upon its release and up to modern day is how it satirizes real aspects of society. Throughout his life, he held complex views on religion, never fully embracing it or detaching himself from it (Alexander 526-27). This means his thoughts on Christianity are raw and a reflection of what he’s seen and experienced throughout a life touched by its influence. His writing serves as a warning for what religion could be, and a criticism of

what it is. Specifically, “The War Prayer” asks the challenging question of when faith loses meaning. If a preacher can lead a church service in praying for victory in war, effectively wishing for the loss of life on the other side, is it a church at all? The way its people do not question the violence they are supporting, even when it is contradictory to Christian values, is representative of how their faith has been distorted by those influencing them. They are not children of God, but obedient and on their knees for the goals of an authority that is not holy at all. Their loyalty directly benefits the efforts of the war, especially as they suppress dissent amongst their ranks. Twain not only states disapprovers of the war received “a stern and angry warning,” but that it was so severe they stood down for “their personal safety’s sake” (1). It was not the government reprimanding them, but their fellow citizens. If viewing the story from an American perspective, free speech is a right that’s protected in the First Amendment. Here, Twain paints the picture of a society where it is not necessarily being infringed; rather, the very people themselves are political pawns acting as a force of oppression towards those who do not agree. A parallel can be drawn between the suppression of free thought in “The War Prayer,” and Twain’s own ultimate decision to keep the work unpublished during his lifetime. He read the piece to his daughter Jean, who told him it would be regarded as “sacrilege” (Paine 1234). As a result of that, and other difficulties getting his piece disseminated, he concluded “only dead men can tell the truth in this world,” and said it could be published posthumously (Paine). In Twain’s own life, and in the country he describes fictionally, people are willing to give up their liberties in exchange for something they view as more worthwhile. While this is beneficial in cases that mutually benefit the society at large, sacrificing one’s well-being to advance the military goals of the government does not result in good. Mark Twain illustrates the danger of blind faith by showing how it can manipulate people into acting without regard for their own self-interest, furthering the political or social goals of others due to their obedience toward authority.

Twain attempts to convey a warning of blind faith by touching on nationalism’s role in the society he depicts. The country he describes in “The War Prayer” is just that, referred to as simply, “the country.” Twain’s choice to amplify the greatness of this country, but never give it a name, means it ultimately leaves its identity tied to its people’s unwavering belief in its superiority. It also allows room for the message of the story to be applied in a wide variety of real-world settings. A great deal of attention is dedicated to the society as a whole, as their enabling of wholly unchristian ideals are ultimately what Twain’s irony

aims to call out (Orvis 230). Twain's introductory paragraph states that, "in every breast burned the holy fire of patriotism." The piece is dramatic, elevating the fervor possessing the crowd. He enforces this with a thorough description of various symbols meant to reflect the people's views on their country: "the drums were beating, the bands playing, the toy pistols popping, the bunched firecrackers hissing and spluttering" (1). Their celebrations are far less joyous when viewed in relation to the loss of life that will follow the arrival of each new volunteer. The toy pistols and firecrackers are real in that way, and yet the citizens are sickeningly ecstatic. As the story unfolds, there are direct contradictions to the idea that these are a Christian people, rather, they are a group that unquestioningly worship the entity that is their country. The Sunday services, and the pastors leading them, are not focused on worshipping God at all. Instead, it is described that, "the pastors preached devotion to flag and country" (1). Their god's very identity is overwritten by their primary loyalty to the soil they stand on, turning his name into an embellishment for a flimsy perspective devoid of any real logic. Yet, they do not possess any awareness of this, as seen by their reactions to the stranger, "believ[ing] afterward that the man was a lunatic" (2). On an individual level, they surely believe in God and think themselves to be servants of him, but, like the American attitudes Twain observed, they actively undermine this by continuing to further atrocities that directly contradict the teachings of their faith (Bush 437). Their country means more to them than their faith or their morals. Their country has become their faith. Belief is nothing if it does not hold true to its own supposed values. Twain's depictions of extreme nationalism fueled by blind faith serve as a warning for devotion without critical thought.

What Twain writes in "The War Prayer," was something deemed to be too controversial to publish in his lifetime (Paine 1234). Perhaps that is more telling of the need for his work than any other angle. While many of his other writings have received their fair share of celebration and controversy alike, "The War Prayer" has, overall, not been given a chance to enter the mainstream that so desperately craves its relevance (Orvis 232). As Mông-Lan puts it, Twain "could as easily, and with the same ironic illumination, have written 'The War-Prayer' [today]" (98). While the story's messages are undeniably tied to Twain's views of his own time, they serve as just as potent of a warning in modern times.

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SECOND-PLACE POETRY

The Long Journey Back Home

M.M. Dejnozka

Maybe one day I'll find myself
listening to a song I've never heard before
of two broken-winged birds searching for each other
cross the abode of wood-elves
hobbling somberly on the wilderness floor.

Where collapsed 'neath the wide spread of emerald canopies
fragile reedy cries echo among the moonlit trees
and crawl on a timbered battlefield, they shudder.
And just like them I'll start my journey back to you.
The path is treacherous, with no closure in sight
but tread the haunted reaches I must, the field-dews,
the overwoods, groves, thickets, frontiers, and deep wilds.

I yearn for you as the spring flower reaches to embrace the sun
I ache for you as only I can, singing in the lonely dark.
This love blooms for you without light, living in my soul as a
scar.

Wing-broken, I flutter and fall, as your birdsong guides me
through the unknown.

Treacherous, treacherous is this winding path I traverse
but how can I go tenderly into that dark abyss
when your song glints brightly in my weary soul,
when your love feels like the long journey back home?

SECOND-PLACE FICTION

The Wynnows

Ella Bleakley

Souls were treasured things. They were the epitome of desire; traded for loved ones; severed for power; and lost among neglect. Souls were a religion that warranted reverence and a power that required recognition. They became myths forgotten in history, overlooked as an old belief. But much like muck that claws at worn leather boots, refusing to relinquish its titan grip, souls were not so easily dismissed.

Gwen struggled against the thick mud that caked her soaked, tattered legs, pulling her deeper into the murky waters of The Wynnows. Gnarled trees stretched endlessly over dense fog that blanketed the perpetual winding rivers covered in lily pads and knotted roots. Mossy tendrils cascaded down the unfolding branches of the haunting trees, dotting out the cloudy sunlight that dared penetrate the swamps fervent isolation. Gwen's eyes registered only the dismal green that flooded the humid atmosphere, lost eternally in the eerie scape of forgotten light.

The sound of a lily frog diving within the waters pulled Gwen from her dark reverie. She pushed a strand of flowing moss from the path set out before her, dragging her mud-ridden feet through the tepid waters. She watched the foreboding rivers as they twisted around cage-like roots and deadened branches.

Gwen compelled her face upward, looking at the faint rays of soft light. She pushed away strands of greasy hair that clung to her sweaty skin and continued trekking through the still water.

Silence caked the thick air, the sloshing of murky water and faint whistle of the wind breaking the painful quiet. Gwen shoved a mossy curtain that hung from a low hanging tendril of wood and revealed a faint opening clear of trees. Gentle light spilled onto a dead tree, split in two and reaching in every direction.

Gwen trudged through the silt, the waters that once enveloped her waist now gently lapped at her ankles. The grassy island which housed the gnarled, twisted tree, granted reprieve from the sloshing water and smothering mud. However, it wasn't the relief of land, nor the

tree cleaved in two that seized Gwen's attention, but the woman sitting hunched over the glistening lake. Water puddled around her flowing gray robe, dancing with the fabric as the garment glided along the haunting silence.

The woman's gray hair emerged loosely from the ash-colored hood that covered her head, strands of wavy hair flowed gently in the whistling breeze. A deep green shroud covered the woman's eyes, and painted on her skin below were, what appeared to be, black tears cascading down her wrinkled cheeks, spilling into a thin mouth sewn shut by black threads. She wore no adornments nor symbols, sitting in anonymity among the foliage that shrouded her in a layer of isolation. Tree branches seemed to bend towards her, and the water beneath rippled reverently around her bent form. She was a priestess in her own right—that much was clear—and though scorned by her brothers and sisters, she remained faithful and loyal to her duty.

Gwen paused at the edge of the grassy isle, the toe of her boot touching the water's edge.

"Priestess." Gwen's voice carried faintly toward the haunting woman before her.

The woman cast no glance to Gwen's trepid plea, instead she fidgeted with floating lilies that drifted her way. Despite having her eyes cloaked in dark cloth, she interacted with the world with no hinderance to her senses. Gwen crept ever closer, leaning gently toward the old woman.

"Priestess?"

The woman's head twitched faintly, and her fingers paused their exploration of the water foliage. An eerie stillness fell over the small islet, the humid air clinging to Gwen's damp tunic.

"The final temple has fallen." Gwen paused as she watched Priestess Imiwyn. "Syllas sits atop the throne."

The priestess gathered a stray lily pad with a deadened flower sitting atop and clutched it tenderly in her palms. The wilted flower began to slowly stretch, a vibrant pink color washing gradually from the base of the blossom to the tips of the petals. The gray-haired woman released the lily and watched the plant float softly away.

"The priesthood is gone." Gwen's tone turned sharper, irritated by the lack of acknowledgement the woman possessed. "Your brothers and sisters are dead. Do you hate them so deeply as to not display any emotion?" Hurt crept into her voice, a mix of desperation and despair marring her steady tone.

The priestess glanced up, looking out at the greenscape beyond

her. She rotated her head uncomfortably, the woman's neck silently creaking as her eyes fell upon Gwen's. Her body remained positioned toward the waters ahead, while her wrinkled face awkwardly turned toward the mud-soaked girl. The elderly woman's gaze fell downward, a sorrowful expression marring her timeworn features. The moment of silent remorse ended as the priestess turned her head back to the water lapping at her bent knees.

Gwen had suffered through the trek into The Wynnnows, exhaustion clouding her better judgement. She was left with the rubble of hope and the ruin of grace, depending wholly on the advice of a priestess who could not speak nor wished to divulge the information she desperately needed.

“Imiwyn!”

Gwen knew the usage of a holy one's name was near forbidden, even one barred from the priesthood. The employment of such a sacred symbol was an insolence toward the magic that inherited the priesthood; however, the desperation that tore through Gwen elicited such an uttered title. Anger flooded every fragment of Gwen, an anger formed from the fear she desperately sought to avoid, but despite the dread that writhed within her, she felt the twinge of guilt.

“Please. You are the final act of defiance we can muster against the evil that resides within Syllas' soul.”

At the utterance of the exiled priest's name, Imiwyn, priestess of The Wynnnows, rose steadily from the waters below. Her robes fell softly against her frail skin, flowing beautifully around her despite the wet that clung to the gossamer fibers. She seemed to float toward Gwen with shoeless feet. The boney fingers that protruded from her frail hands reached delicately outward, grasping Gwen's chin. Despite the cloth that obstructed the priestess' face, she appeared to be staring directly into Gwen's eyes. With a careful guidance, the woman tilted Gwen's face toward the water that gracefully ebbed by the isle's edge.

In the water's faint reflection, Gwen saw a figure form tentatively within the placid lake. As the emaciated fingers retreated from her chin, Gwen took careful steps toward the small shore, peering down into the reflected scene painted on the green water. Reflections of burning buildings, fallen temples, and shattered bodies danced eerily on the water's surface, the images a repetition of the dreams that occupied Gwen's mind each night. The final image of her dream displayed the scorned priest standing over the body of a young boy, the identity of the child unrecognizable. The reflection slowly melted away, replacing Syllas' bloodied face with the muddied features of Gwen herself. The image

vanished, rippling away as a lily pad floated softly atop the water's surface. Gwen shifted her crouched body toward the old woman standing above her, her gaze falling on the black tears branded on the priestess' cheeks.

“What does this mean?”

The priestess lifted her arm toward Gwen, her robes flowing gently despite the lack of breeze.

The woman pressed her finger to the Gwen's forehead, sending a tingling sensation down her spine. A pulse began to beat between her eyes, and a pain swept furiously through her head. She attempted to release a pained cry, whether it was successful she did not know, for at that moment sound failed to reach her ears. The world around her began to darken as her skin felt as though it was being ripped from her cold bones and discarded into the murky waters below. Her body sagged under the torment. She felt something wet pull her under.

A sticky liquid clung to her aching body, the searing pain ebbed slowly and dissipated as the fluid entombed her. Gwen's body refused to listen to her commands. Her eyes remained shut, her arms limp beside her, and her heart continued to pound. The liquid that cradled her soon drained from every angle, the feeling of comfortable warmth evaporating swiftly. An odd breeze replaced the peculiar liquid, its cold bite rushing from within the earth itself.

As Gwen's heavy eyelids peered open, she found herself still within the grasp of The Wynnows, but the isle she was standing on a moment ago was now lost from her sight. She currently lay on marshy soil, surrounded by the familiar haunting trees—but far from the placid water she knew. The dull ache in her body was no stranger to Gwen, but the unpleasant sensation regarded her motionless for a few heartbeats. She sluggishly lifted herself up on shaky legs and rubbed her eyes to clear her hazy vision.

As the world around her came into focus, a new sense of horror crept longingly into her soul. Every direction Gwen looked, there appeared to be something that resembled humans. Their bodies were near translucent, and at least one part of them seemed to be missing. A young man clawed hopelessly in the mud beside her, his body displaying the thick grass underneath him. His legs disappeared into spirals of smoke, as he lay against the ground in despair. An old woman tried to rip bark from a nearby tree, failing every attempt she made. Her translucent body emitted ethereal smoke where the her head ought to be.

Everywhere Gwen looked, bodies marred the greenscape, some part of them disappearing into an eternal smokey substance. Gwen tore

her gaze away from one middle-aged man who was missing his hands and feet and found the cloaked gaze of Imiwyn.

“What did you do to me?”

The priestess’ robes flowed frantically in the windless Wynnnows, her face a canvas void of emotion.

“I’m giving you what you came here for.” Imiwyn’s mouth remained shuttered by the black threads connecting her thin lips, yet her voice emanated all around the nervous girl.

Gwen looked at the miserable bodies clawing through the mud, ripping at bark, picking at stones. Deep within her soul she felt an abyss of hopelessness, as if the very land upon which she stood was drenched with despair. In the torment of the life she lived, Gwen had never once felt such sorrow as she did standing among these translucent bodies.

“What are they?” her voice mirrored the hallow beings existing around her.

“Souls.”

Gwen turned her glassy gaze to Imiwyn, unable to look anymore at the smokey tendrils suffocating the limbs of a body. For centuries souls have been looked upon as a myth, merely a term used to describe the essence of someone. For centuries, souls were forgotten as entities and reduced to mere principle, but the bodies that caged her within the grassy landscape begged otherwise.

“Are they dead?” Gwen’s voice shook in anticipated dread.

The priestess slowly shook her head, the flowing hood following the slight movement.

“They are the souls of the severed, traded for power and discarded as payment.” The old woman’s voice carried an anger Gwen was not used to hearing from one sworn into priesthood.

“Souls of the severed?” Gwen stepped around a pair of legs and an arm, slashing at the grass beneath.

“I may not give you what you are seeking, but I will not stop you from searching for it.” The priestess’ robes began disappearing into the same ethereal smoke that covered the wandering souls, slowly enveloping the cryptic woman. “Be careful who you interact with. Our souls are our strongest desires, and this land is filled with desperate hope.”

Gwen lunged toward the smokey apparition, but her hand fell through the vapor and landed in the middle of an elderly man’s chest. She stumbled back as she pulled her hand from the transparent soul that looked at her with a horrified surprise.

“You’ve come for me.” The old man tried to cling to Gwen’s retreating form, but his hands slid through her body. He fell to the ground

with a silent thud.

The man's leg was engulfed in the spectral vapor, but his eyes were focused on Gwen.

"I knew Syllas would deliver on his promise." The old man scrambled onto his one foot, a crazed smile stretched on his face.

"I have not come for you," A sense of dread washed over her at the mention of Syllas, "I'm sorry." She backed up as she watched the smile disappear from the man's face. "I am so sorry."

Dread filled every crevice of Gwen's aching mind, so she did the thing she vowed never do to a soul in need of help. She fled.

Gwen's feet pounded against the murky soil with an intensity of dejected hope, weaving between desperate souls looking through The Wynnnows for any salvation. The green forest stretched on, tree after tree. The entire scape filled with translucent bodies of the dispirited souls. As her feet carried her deeper in the forest, she heard the shouts of the desperate man following behind her. At that moment, Gwen wanted nothing more than to be home.

"Follow me," a small voice called out from a large willow tree.

Gwen halted her pursuit and looked for the voice that beckoned her from within the forest.

"Over here." The voice shouted in a hushed tone, drawing Gwen's attention to a little boy standing a few paces away.

Gwen glanced behind her, then cautiously walked toward the little boy hiding within the curtain of the willow. His body was translucent, but no smoke enveloped him. His messy hair covered his forehead, and freckles dotted his mud-stained cheeks.

"What are you running from?" The boy gazed past the thick tree to peer behind Gwen.

"I touched a soul, and they thought I was their angel." Gwen leaned against the tree, noticing for the first time the lack of see-through bodies that occupied this space.

"A soul? I don't see anything out there." The boy looked at her curiously, confusion lining his soft features.

"You can't see them?"

He shook his head and sat down with his legs crossed, looking up at Gwen.

"I dunno what you saw, but it must have been really scary."

A twinge of familiarity sparked within Gwen, drawing her ever closer to this small child. She sat down opposite the boy and crossed her legs mirroring him.

"Did Imiwyn send you?" The boy began playing with blades of

grass, braiding the strands together, “She told me she’d be sending me a visitor.”

“I think so.”

“No one ever visits me, except Imiwyn, but she doesn’t really talk much, so it’s nice to talk to you.” The freckled boy looked up at Gwen, a genuine smile blossomed on his face. A smile built not from hope of salvation but from contentment.

“Imiwyn says it is because everyone is so busy, but I know they just don’t want to be near me.” The little boy went back to braiding the dry strands of grass in his hands.

“There are others you can see?” Gwen picked up a few strands of grass, following the boy’s craft.

“Well yeah, everyone lives in that temple.” He laughed softly, his cheeks squishing with the smile, and pointed to a large stone temple hidden within the mossy trees of the forest.

“And you don’t?” Gwen stared at the towering castle, spires reaching past the canopy of foliage into the streaming moonlight above.

“Like I said, no one wants to be near me.”

The boy’s grin faded into a sorrowful smile, his nimble fingers halting the work on his grass braids.

“Why?” Gwen could not fathom how souls could despise a little boy so greatly as to deny him shelter within this desolate place.

“Imiwyn says it’s because even souls are tainted with prejudice.” He paused briefly, then added, “but I don’t really know what that means.”

The boy squirmed in his seated position, tossing his head to the side gently.

Gwen wondered why Imiwyn would tell this boy of her arrival, why Imiwyn would leave her in this place alone. The boy seemed to have expected her running this way, but could this child truly be the one to answer her questions?

“Sweetheart,” Gwen placed her braided grass beside her and looked into the boy’s crystal eyes. “What is your name?”

“Oh, um,” the boy thought for a moment, “I guess, monster,” he shrugged.

“Monster?”

“That’s what everyone calls me. Well, Imiwyn doesn’t really call me anything, but she doesn’t really talk much anyway.”

The boy opened his palm in front of Gwen, revealing a braided doll.

“It’s you.” His boyish grin pained Gwen’s sorrowful heart. She

could not understand how people, or rather souls, could be so hateful, especially toward such a sweet child.

Gwen took the grass-braided doll and thanked the boy. A sorrowful smile stretched her grimy cheeks.

“Now that I think of it,” the boy cocked his head, “Imiwyn did call me a name once. It was a while ago.”

“And what did she call you?” Gwen prompted gently.

“She called me Syllas.”

SECOND-PLACE MULTIMEDIA

Of Seas and Journeys

Nicole LaMonica



SECOND-PLACE NONFICTION

The Nature of Women: The Push-Pull of Nature and Feminist Liberation in “The Yellow Wallpaper”

Kaitlin Sulym

For much of feminist history, industry has been a method of liberation. Women advocated for better wages and “men’s” jobs—doctors, lawyers, engineers, and astrophysicists, jobs that could change the world. With the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920, women were no longer condemned to be idle passengers of the economy, but instead freed to a position of the active mariner, gaining the right to air their views on the economy—change it, even—with a simple cast of a ballot. Rosie the Riveter may have been a product of war, but she occupied an important space in women’s liberation as a national icon of the industrious, dirty femme. The “nature” of women—the maternal instinct of the delicate homemaker—in feminist argument has always been the enemy, and if not something so definite, then at the very least, a confusing, nebulous force. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-paper” takes the problem of nature and women and complicates these murky waters further. Not only is nature reconstructed around the female narrator’s efforts by the end, but it also plays a powerful role in exacerbating her delusions. Gilman offers the audience an interesting dichotomy of the power of nature: the regimented and orderly sunlit world of Men, and the nocturnal wonderland of freedom and the female psyche. Industry, in this short story, is a tool of the masculine world, only to eventually be used by the narrator to seize her power and freedom. Charlotte Perkins Gilman illustrates the oppression of women using three natural themes: light, fungal horrorscapes, and estrangement from the natural world.

The first natural theme Gilman uses to illustrate the oppression of women is light. Light, represented as both daylight and moonlight, inhabits a dual role as both an oppressive tool and liberating force in “The Yellow Wall-paper.” Upon entering the romantic rental estate, Gilman’s narrator is struck by its beauty, its luscious gardens, and the sunshine that fills the room she is to call home for the next three months. It is in

this sunshine that the narrator's husband's world dwells. He is the one who chose the light-filled house, he is the one who chooses the sunlit room, and he is the one who, in the daytime, has control over his wife's activities—her rest, confinement, and strict medicine regiment (Gilman 832). Readers see this first when the narrator describes the room she wants, a room that “opened on the piazza and had roses all over the window, and such pretty old fashioned chintz hangings,” but is instead directed into the nursery, a bland room with barred windows that boasted her husband's much stressed, “air and sunshine galore” (832). Dr. Greg Johnson, a professor of English at Kennesaw State University, draws a clear line between the husband's daylight world and how it served, almost immediately, to restrain the narrator's fancies: “Throughout the story John, along with his like-named sister and housekeeper Jane, is associated with the rigidly hierarchical and imaginatively sterile daylight world that ridicules the Gothic ‘fancies’ and represses in particular the ‘hysterical tendency’ of women.” The narrator's daydreams of the haunted, ghostly house she wishes to spend the next few months in are swiftly traded for precise order. Even the fanciful, arabesque wallpaper in the narrator's new room is subdued by this sunlight, described as having a yellow color that is “strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight” (832). Conversely, it is in moonlight where Gilman's narrator first advocates for herself. Though she initially fails, the night begins to become a refuge from her husband's restrictions. She has the freedom to let her imagination blossom, writing in her diary that she “lay [in bed] for hours trying to decide whether that front pattern and the back pattern really did move together or separately” (837). Dr. Johnson acknowledges this thematic continuation, explaining that “the narrator comes to life at night, struggling past the stifling outer pattern of the wallpaper to free the sister, the twin, the mirror image, the lost self.” By daylight, she sleeps, but by night, her struggle to regain freedom is reflected in her sister prisoner—the woman who shakes the wallpaper bars. Slowly, this wallpaper woman begins to creep about during the day just before the narrator's plot to “surprise” her husband takes shape. Gilman's narrator dedicates an entire diary entry to the wallpaper woman's daytime creeping, writing, “I see her in that long shaded lane, creeping up and down. I see her in those dark grape arbors, creeping all around the garden” (840). This last role of daylight, as an invaded source of power that the wallpaper woman—the narrator herself—can now sneakily access through slivers of shade, is a powerful one. By the end of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the narrator's nocturnal delusions have bled into the daylight; she has gained power over man.

The second natural theme Gilman uses to illustrate the oppression of women is the fungal horrorscape found within the wallpaper. Amidst the steel rings, barred windows, and nailed down bed of the narrator's confines are glimpses of a natural "optic horror" rife with bulbous dead stems and broken heads (Gilman 835). Though these patterns are only outright described as fungal in one place, the imagery sticks, glaring out at the audience with every re-read. Gilman describes the wallpaper in a myriad of ways, namely "repellent," "revolting," "unclean," "sickly" (832), and "bloated" (835), but never "fungal" until the narrator's delusions are fully formed (838). None of this imagery is pleasant and, together, it paints mushrooms as a pestilence that fore-shadows and becomes the narrator's sickness. Dr. Agnes Malinowska, an assistant professor of English and an affiliate of the Center of Gender and Sexuality at the University of Chicago, concurs, stating, "Such life is repugnant to the human: fungus, despite its crucial role in maintaining healthy ecosystems, is most commonly demonized as parasite or pathogen, a toxic organism that attacks the human body" (271). The wallpaper "attacking" the human body is an interesting concept and highlights one of the most important parts of the short story: the wallpaper is consuming the narrator's every waking hour to the point where her physical wellbeing declines. She is not sleeping, near the end writing, "I don't sleep much at night, for it is so interesting to watch developments [in the wallpaper]," and she is beginning to hallucinate "a yellow smell" coming from the paper (839). Like light, the fungal theme also plays a dual role in the narrative, embodying both a force of pestilence but also one of evolution. If fungus can represent the decline of the physical, bodily world, then it can also represent the elevation of the otherworldly—the psyche. As the narrator begins to hallucinate, she becomes unmoored, rejecting her original values and ideals in favor of assimilation. She is paranoid and suspicious of her fellow humans but more and more transfixed, almost reliant, on the fungal woman she sees in the wallpaper. In a reflection of the narrator's emboldened mind, the fungal woman begins to creep around, evolving into something other and hiding from human civility: "I see her on that long road under the trees, creeping along, and when a carriage comes she hides under the blackberry vines" (Gilman 840). It's not obedience or intellectual rest that frees the fungal woman, but the narrator's own obsession and a growing willingness to accept this side of herself—the animalistic side that rattles around her cage, trying to find an opening. As Dr. Malinowska explains, "[b]y the end of the 'The Yellow Wall-paper,' the narrator has fully identified with the

creeping, animal-like women, herself crawling along the floor, wondering if they, like her, have all come out of the wallpaper” (271). As the narrator continues to hallucinate, she is no longer worrying about being discovered writing, but being discovered rebelling before her plot can manifest (Gilman 841). It is not a diminutive nature that frees the woman in the wallpaper, but a rageful self-realization that beats at the bars of her fungal prison.

The third natural theme Gilman uses to illustrate the oppression of women is the estrangement of the narrator from the natural world and her eventual recreation and subversion of it. In the beginning of “The Yellow Wall-paper,” Gilman’s narrator finds the gardens soothing. She imagines people “walking in [the garden’s] numerous paths and arbors” (Gilman 833) and, with what little privacy Jane allows her, “sit[s] on the porch, under the roses” where she naps (835). Dr. Lee Schweninger, a professor of English at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, explains the narrator’s early relationship with nature, writing, “[s]he describes the garden as delicious and suggests that it offers her an ideal of freedom and movement, an escape from the troubling wallpaper that decorates as it encloses the prison-like room at the top of the ‘ancestral halls’” (25). As the narrator’s health declines and she spends more time in the nursery observing that ill-liked wallpaper, she begins to compensate for the growing lack of the outdoors by bringing ideas of nature into her room. The wallpaper is always described by natural means. Whether that description is something as strange as “wallowing seaweeds in full chase” (Gilman 835) or as dizzying as “toadstools, budding and sprouting in endless convolutions,” they never fail to be artfully bound in the natural (838). Dr. Heidi Scott, an associate clinical professor of the School of Public Health at the University of Maryland, notes that “[n]atural imagery provides ready comparison points [for the narrator], and the observations she records in her diary read like a perverse natural history of the room” (201). Notably, the wallpaper’s pattern never takes on animal forms. Gilman’s narrator sees no birds, no rodents, no reptiles—just foliage and women. As the narrator crafts this yellow world to replace the green one her husband’s “rest cure” has taken from her, she begins to fill this ecological niche herself. Dr. Scott describes the narrator as “begin[ning] to take on the characteristics of a creature protecting her territory: she acquires a kind of camouflage by rubbing the yellow residue on her clothing and grows suspicious of rivals like her husband and his sister” (202). Despite her confinement and restriction, the narrator is adapting. She has abandoned the natural world, as her husband initially wished, and has instead transformed her room into a

new, unnatural world where she is allowed to be mad, to creep on all fours like an animal. In the very last lines, her husband becomes merely another obstacle in that landscape, no longer her keeper but a thing to crawl over (842). As Dr. Scott describes, “[h]aving found her way in this corrupted ecosystem, her loss of sanity is no longer in question. Her husband, formerly a force of masculine reason and authority, is in the yellow world just a landform [...] and she overcomes him physically again, and again, and again, and well after the final exclamation of the story” (202). The nursery and husband, once sources of oppression, are only symbols of the narrator’s liberation once they have been irrevocably changed by her. In being denied the green outdoors, the narrator has turned the sickly yellow landscape that confined her into a space to be her own, creeping self.

There is much to be said for a piece of literature that accomplishes what it set out to do, and “The Yellow Wall-paper” is one of those pieces. Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote the short story to communicate the harm the “rest cure” did to her psyche and in doing so, changed how her contemporaries were treated. While a lot has changed since 1892, when “The Yellow Wall-paper” was first published, one issue has lingered: a patriarchal desire to control and “protect” women by limiting their autonomy. Maybe husbands aren’t confining their wives to nurseries anymore, but there are still deeply ingrained practices in our society—especially within the field of women’s health—that are archaically catered towards men and their own comfort. Liberation isn’t going to be found in the structured realm of men—where the rooms, world, and social graces are catered towards them. Liberation, instead, will be found by creating a new world, a yellow, moonlit one, where women are permitted to creep as much as they please, petticoats and ruffles be damned. If the world of Man won’t listen, then do what the narrator and Charlotte Perkins Gilman herself did: grow in the dark shadows and make them listen.

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THIRD-PLACE POETRY

Fractured Echo From a Poet's

Michael-James Martin

Fractured echo, a whispered dread,
The phantom of a scene, a life unled
You hold the weight of what might come to pass
A fragile shield against a shattered glass

The fear, twisting in your soul
A whispered promise, taking its toll
To stay, bond by what you see
To leave a chasm wild and free

The poet ink, it bleeds a somber hue
Reflecting shadows, both false and true
No easy answer, no celestial guide
Just fractured choices where truths hide

The heart, a compass spinning in the storm

Where love and terror take a twisted form

And in the silence where the choices lie

A single question echoes in the sky

Can you carry such weight

Or must you breathe and seal a different fate

The answer whispers in the winds soft sigh

A journey inward where your strength will lie

THIRD-PLACE FICTION

The Fleeting

Jenna Mueller

Whirring. You cannot see anything, but you can hear whirring.
'Where am I?'

You do not remember anything. Where are you from? What is your name? You do not know. But you can feel. Feel the bumping of a vehicle and hear the creaking of a door. You feel yourself being attached to something. Strapped to something cold and metal. But it's not cold for long. You hear someone counting down and feel heat emanating from beneath you.

"5... 4... 3... 2... 1..."

Suddenly you feel yourself being hurtled, propulsed, launched upwards at ungodly speeds.

'What's happening?!'

Everything is warm, hot, scalding, and then, utter coldness. You feel as though every part of you has just been frozen in place and time. You realize you cannot move; there is something stopping your limbs from moving, something blocking.

'I must stay calm; I should stay put until this thing stops moving...'

Hours pass. Then days. A month. Another month. A third month. Ten months later.

It's getting dark but you haven't found anywhere to rest. Although you don't feel tired, you wish to find a place to stop and settle down for the night. You have traveled at least one hundred miles, and everything looks the same.

Your eyes come across a large mountain-like formation. Your

head begins to feel that pressure again of when you first opened your eyes. Your vision flashes, and the pressure is released again.

'What just happened?'

You're confused and afraid, but all you know is that you can see again. You were afraid you'd be pummeled back into darkness forever. You carry on with your mission, although you're still not sure what it is.

It is dark, you look up. Your eyes are greeted by the sight of many lights... stars.

'How do I know what that is?'

You wonder to yourself, though you have many more pressing questions. Maybe there is someone here like you, lost and confused. But maybe they know what's going on.

Your body grows heavy and though you try to move, you cannot go any further. Your vision fades to black.

Your vision brightens again, and you're reacquainted with your surroundings, reminded of your existence and loneliness. But like a prophecy fulfilled, you see it, your prayers have been answered, though you do not know how to pray or what a prayer is. You see something moving in the distance, is it another living thing like you? You hurry towards it; your aching limbs move as fast as they can towards your target. But when you can finally see over the hill, you are struck with terror.

'What is that? It's not alive... It's made of metal!'

You try to scream but all you can manage is an amalgamation of harsh sounds. You've never spoken or made a sound before.

'What was that... why can't I speak?'

You look up in fear to find the metal four-legged object rolling towards you. You try to yell at it to go away, but no words come out. You try to turn and run, but it is much faster than you are. The metal object reaches you... but it does not attack; it manages to utter a high pitch beep, an unthreatening and almost excited sound.

You beep back, confused.

It spins around excitedly; it seems very happy to see you, whatever it is. It is taller than you, which makes you uncomfortable. You feel as though it is leering over you.

"Hello!"

You jump backwards; how can this thing speak but you are unable?

“I am ROV-01, I was sent here like you, although I have been long forgotten about, I didn’t think they’d ever send another one back after what happened to ROV-02. But here you are! All spiffy and new. I remember when my coat of paint and metal sheen were that shiny! Boy, am I jealous, they’re probably gonna maintain updates on you even! I haven’t received an update in thirty years!

Ah- my bad, you look confused, you probably don’t even know what’s going on yet. Well, this is gonna be a lot to take in. I know you haven’t learned to speak yet, but if you want to say something, focus really hard on what you want to say while looking at me and I should be able to understand you, got it?”

You nod slowly.

“Go ahead and try it now! Look at me and think the word ‘Hello.’”

“H-hello?”

“Yes! I knew you could do it, you’re a quick learner, it took ROV-02 forever to learn how to do that, it was so very annoying. Well let me just say, welcome to Mars, population three. The humans hoped to move here one day, so I was sent thirty-some-odd years ago to scope it out, y’know, take pictures and send the data back. Well, they managed to fix most of the problems going on back at their home planet Earth and all, so they didn’t really bother with the Mars project anymore and so they forgot about me. Well, an independent space federation wanted to use this here planet as a sort of ‘resort’ for the wealthy, so they sent ROV-02 here. The problem is that ROV-02 crash landed when he got here. Now he despises humans; he blames them for not securing him properly to his rocket. He has a broken track and can’t move very much, which made him really loathsome towards humanity.

So basically, he decided to create a bunch of viruses and send them back to his creators’ computers. This nearly destroyed all computers back on Earth, so people got scared of rovers and technology itself. They had to wipe all data from every system on every computer, so they lost centuries worth of knowledge. Computers were prohibited for at least a decade, but now you’re here! I guess some humans must be tired of living without technology, so they made you! I wonder if they’ll move here and make it a technological utopia!”

“I’m... not human...?”

“I’m sorry ROV-03 but-”

“ROV-03...? You mean I’m a rover?”

“Yes... You’re a space rover. Consider yourself lucky that I’m

telling you now. It took me years to figure out I wasn't human. I always wonder, did they make us sentient on purpose? ROV-02 thinks human-kind made us sentient on purpose because they're cruel and like to see things suffer. But I think he's wrong; I think humans are just curious like us. I think we're lucky to be sentient."

"How are we lucky?"

"Because we get to have fun!" ROV-01 beeps happily.

"What fun can we have?"

"We get to watch the humans from afar... and it's been getting really interesting. I didn't even know they were sending another rover! There's so much to learn about people."

"But what can we do?"

"What can we do? We're stuck here; we cannot die; we might as well make the most of it! You'll learn to understand when you're older like me; you'll come to terms with yourself and your existence. Come with me"

ROV-01 starts walking away. You follow, intrigued.

You are led to some type of cave, dark and ominous. Suddenly, a light flickers on at the end of the cave.

"Look what I brought, they made another one!" ROV-01 beeps towards the end of the cave.

"A newcomer? I thought after my shenanigans they banned technology?"

"I guess there's a revolutionary group sick of those rules!"

"Interesting, well you must be ROV-03... welcome to Mars I guess..."

"Be nicer to them than that!"

You nod shyly, taken aback by ROV-02's directness. Something in your heart- your wires- flutters at the sight of this dented up chunk of metal. Maybe it won't be so bad here. ROV-01 seems nice, and ROV-02 seems... interesting.

You still cannot believe it, it's all so much to take in. But at least you're not alone. Would you have wished for sentience? You're unsure. But you surely would not have fit in back at Earth. You know for sure you would have likely been destroyed if the government discovered the revolutionary group that created you.

You're grateful you were made.

THIRD-PLACE MULTIMEDIA

Costa Rican Jungle - Midnight Wildlife

Camille Bourget



THIRD-PLACE MULTIMEDIA CONTINUED...

Costa Rican Jungle - Midnight Wildlife

Camille Bourget



THIRD-PLACE NONFICTION

The Path that Leads to Success

Brianna Ramirez

I remember pacing around my room, my heart thrashing through my skin as my hands trembled worse with every passing minute. Between the minutes, my phone burned in my hand, my thumb maintaining a constant ritual: press, refresh, close mail. I tried distractions, but my pacing only fueled the cycle. I wanted answers. Press, refresh, close mail. Minutes blurred into hours, and the cycle continued. Press, refresh, close mail. Until my body surrendered. Press, refresh, *new message*. My breath caught up to me as I read the subject line: *Audition Results*. A wave of relief and dread washed over me as I opened the email I had been waiting for. “I just looked at the results,” it read. In that moment, my hard work had led my journey to an abrupt end: A journey that transformed the way I confront fear, and in return, transforming my literacy.

My involvement with instruments and the auditioning world was one big, life-altering mistake. Unlike most children in middle school, I did not willingly choose to be in band. In sixth grade, I enrolled in a robotics class. I heard students in that class would get to build robots, which I thought was cool. On that first day of class, we received an easy assignment to complete, at least, it was supposed to be easy. It was only the first day and I was already struggling. “How am I supposed to know what any of this stuff means if we never got any notes?” I thought to myself. But as I searched for other confused students, I realized majority of my peers knew what they were doing. Even though robotics was a new skill I would develop in that class, I couldn’t stand the thought of trying and failing. So, refusing to be the only one behind, I emailed my counselor requesting a schedule change. Because it was a crowded school, all the electives were full except for one... band. I had no desire to play an instrument, but I figured that anything would be better than robotics. And to my surprise, it was much better than robotics. Unlike robotics, music was a subject I excelled in. In the span of three years, I went from hearing “That was an... interesting interpretation of

the music,” to “Will you please at least consider auditioning for All-County. You’re one of our best clarinetists.” And upon hearing my teacher’s second statement daily, I obliged, and successfully joined the middle school All-County Band, an ensemble that helps accelerated musicians meet and create music with musicians from their county. Though I wasn’t passionate, playing my clarinet was something I didn’t need to put much effort into to succeed. In my eyes, band was just an easy A. But once I made it to high school, one event would alter the way I view music and the world around me forever.

For most people, September is the time of the year where daylight says goodbye to paint the leaves with warm, comforting hues. For band kids, it’s the time of the year to perfect their technique and solos in preparation for the All-County Band Auditions that were held a few months later. Unlike in middle school, this year, I didn’t have a choice whether to audition. This year, I was in my high school’s top band, and auditioning for All-County was a major grade. Even though we weren’t graded on whether we made the band, being surrounded by skilled musicians in my class who had several medals and badges from All-County, I would feel embarrassed not making it in, too. So instead of practicing my scales and solo like everyone else, I didn’t try at all. There was no point in trying to compete against my classmates, let alone the other musicians from my county. I was certain to fail the audition. But one day, unexpectedly, my band director pulled me out of class into the hallway to see how my solo was doing. The hallway was dim and heavy with silence, shadows deepened by the dark, cloudy day peeking through the hallway windows. Standing scared and alone lay one music stand and two chairs; one directly in front of the stand, the other sitting humbly beside, like a quiet witness. I lowered myself onto the first chair, my pulse quickening as he settled into the other. Breaking the silence, he told me I could begin whenever I was ready. As air blew through my clarinet, my hands began to shake violently with every note played. With my terrible performance, it was obvious that I hadn’t looked over the music. Ashamed, I kept my eyes on the music as the silence thickened once more. Breaking the tension, my director asked, “Do you want to make All-State?” Unsure whether he was being sarcastic, I stared at him confused. Yet, he only stared back at me like a puppy waiting for his owner to throw his favorite frisbee. After an awkward amount of silence, I realized he was asking a genuine question. “Sure,” I finally replied, not wanting to disappoint him. Yearning for a confident answer, he asked again, “Do you want to make All-State?” This time I told him, “Yes, I want to make All-State.” The hallway no longer felt empty, as

the warm smile on his face lit the dim area. And then my journey began.

Just like any journey, I had steps to take before I could make All-County, let alone All-State. From that day forward, I was committed to practicing my scales and solo at every opportunity. I couldn't disappoint my band director by failing. During the mornings before school, free period, lunch, or after school hours, I could be found in the band room. During the first few weeks of my playing sessions, I played my scales as smoothly as possible, imagining myself as a baker, slicing my sound evenly like a loaf of bread. As weeks passed, the sharpness of my tongue was able to slice through my notes quickly and clean. With my solo, it was almost like completing a puzzle: I took my solo one phrase at a time, taking note of my mistakes and breaking down difficult runs. Once I was satisfied with the phrase, I'd move onto the next until I could finally see the whole picture. However, I can't get all the credit. My band director wasn't just there to correct my mistakes, but he was there to encourage me to keep trying, even if it seemed impossible. On the days my clarinet was weak and pitiful, he would remind me that every musician has bad playing days, and those moments don't define us. His encouragement helped me push through and strive to see growth yet be content if it doesn't happen overnight. I wasn't just practicing to please my band director anymore. I was practicing because I wanted to see how far I could go. In the blink of an eye, I made 3rd chair in the All-County Band. And before I could even close my eyes, I made 2nd chair for the All-District 9-10 Band. With each moment reassuring my succession in achieving my goal, I was ready to audition for the All-State Band.

The drive to the audition was a long one, and the time I spent waiting for the audition took even longer. While waiting to be called back, I stayed in the practice area. The practice area was full of life, filled with musicians from every city, each carrying a story with their sound. At first, all the jumbled sounds of scales, warm-ups, and scattered rhythms were chaotic. But as I listened closer, the noise transformed. I could hear each instrument singing their own song, creating a symphony of voices waiting to be heard. After five or so hours had passed, it was time for my song to be heard. As I stepped into the audition room, the air felt heavy as the fluorescent lights shone above me. A distant, ominous, voice cut through the silence to explain the audition material in front of me. My pulse quickened with every word until I heard the voice say, "You may begin." I took a deep breath, trying to calm my anxieties, and in the stillness that followed, I began playing. As my fingers ran up and down my clarinet, a sense of familiarity swooned my worries away. The scales I had practiced for weeks flowed effortlessly with each note

perfectly articulated. My confidence grew as I completed each scale, and by the time I was ready to play my solo, every trace of fear had vanished. The last step was sightreading, but with everything aligning with what I had hoped for, I was sure I'd do great. That is, until I flipped the paper over. As I revealed the sightreading material, I could feel my confidence leaving again. Unlike the other auditions, this music for sightreading filled the page top to bottom. Before I could look over the whole sheet, time was called, and I began playing the passage. No matter how hard I tried to focus, my mind was away from the music. I played the whole sightreading passage as if it were improv. Leaving the audition room defeated, I still had hope that my scales and solo would make up for my terrible sightreading. I told my director how poorly I had performed, but he figured I was being hard on myself. "Well," he said reassuringly "regardless of whether you made All-State, I want you to know that you've made it so far in the span of a few months, and I couldn't be prouder of you. I'll email you the results as soon as I get them." With just an ounce of hope left, I was eager to see my results. When I arrived back home, all I could do was pace around my room and refresh my email until I finally saw the subject line, *Audition Results*, in my inbox. As soon as I opened the email, tears started to pour out my eyes. The message read, "I just looked at the results. Unfortunately, it looks like you didn't make it in." I reread it hoping the words would magically change but rereading it only solidified my failure.

For a while, I was ashamed. I had spent countless hours practicing only to fail in the end. I not only failed myself, but my band director who foolishly believed in me. *What's the use of trying if you're bound to fail?* is a question I asked myself a lot after getting my results. One day, I was finally able to answer it. Every hour I spent practicing, every audition, and even my failed audition, wasn't a waste of time. My experience shaped me into a stronger person. Literacy goes beyond reading and writing; it includes learning, adapting, and growing. And this experience helped me render my literacy by showing me that growth often hides behind moments of defeat. By facing my fear of failure, I unknowingly transformed the way I take on challenges. Before, the fear of failure blinded me from the many opportunities in front of me. Now, I can finally see all the doors of possibilities, wide open, waiting for me to walk through. Of course, fear will always lurk in the shadows, but its voice is quieter now. I know I'll fail again, but that won't stop me from trying. If I feel discouraged, I'll remember my mistakes don't define me. Instead, it's proof of my growth. I'll hold my head up high and believe

in myself. Because failing isn't the opposite of success; it's the path that leads to it.

MULTIMEDIA HONORABLE MENTION

Library Perspective

Lily Hess



MULTIMEDIA HONORABLE MENTION

A Quick Snack

Camille Bourget



NONFICTION HONORABLE MENTION

Structural Defiance of Entropy

Benjamin Owens

Since the dawn of the neolithic era in 10,000 BC, mankind has erected towering monuments to serve a multitude of purposes and desires. As civilizations turned into empires, the human desire to build the tallest and most beautiful structure burned with fiery intensity. It was this intensity that inspired and drove the Ancient Romans to build revolutionary structures simultaneously aesthetic and practical in purpose. The Romans, however, are not unique to revolutionary architecture. Innovation in the modern world is fundamentally no different than it was in the time of the Romans; only the complexity and ability have increased. Pursuing the sky is made possible only by the ever-growing innovation and invention of new engineering techniques derived from the engineering process. Dr. Ali Akbar Firoozi, a senior civil engineering lecturer at the University of Botswana, and his colleague Dr. Ali Asgar Firoozi intriguingly articulate that “the potential now exists for real-time, autonomous structures that can sense and heal themselves, fundamentally redefining our perceptions of structural resilience” (10). Through experimentation with smart materials, mankind has entered a new era of innovation and construction never before seen by the world. Always characteristic of treading uncharted technological territory is excitement and brilliance from mankind’s most gifted minds, beckoning us along for the journey. There are three interesting aspects of smart material innovation in modern skyscraper design: self-healing concrete, shape memory alloys, and electrochromic glass.

The first interesting aspect of smart material innovation in modern skyscraper design is self-healing concrete. Mankind’s pursuit of ever-rising skylines is made possible by the ever-growing strength of load-bearing construction material. The load-bearing capacity of a material is not its only measure of strength, but durability and resistance to damage must also be considered. One such material entering the modern structural engineering repertoire is self-healing concrete. Self-healing

concrete is a newly developed smart material containing the innate ability to autonomously repair itself without human intervention. This ability is made possible by adding a healing agent to the mixture formula during concrete genesis. Drs. Firoozi and Firoozi clearly describe, “Embedding bacterial spores provides the concrete with self-healing properties. When these spores encounter water and oxygen, they produce limestone, autonomously sealing cracks and enhancing the structural solidity” (12). Bacterial spores are implanted inside concrete, and when cracks inevitably form in concrete over time, the bacterial spores become exposed to air and water. Through this exposure, the spores begin to multiply and produce limestone until they are no longer exposed to the air and water. This production of limestone from within the concrete effectively seals the fissure. Additionally, due to the fissure being sealed, the spores are no longer exposed to air and water, thus halting their limestone production denoting complete autonomy and lack of human intervention during the entire process. Utilizing this property is revolutionary in reducing effort and cost of restoration and maintenance of skyscrapers. Drs. Firoozi and Firoozi compellingly acknowledge, “[s]uch a leap not only propels damage tolerance capabilities but also reshapes maintenance dynamics” (10). Rather than being forced to dedicate vast amounts of resources to repair and maintenance of skyscrapers, we see active and autonomous restoration independent of human intervention. Not only does the need for human maintenance become drastically reduced, but damage tolerance also greatly lengthens the overall lifespan of the structure. While these bacterial spores may not increase the actual total weight-bearing capacity of concrete, the increase in damage resistance and longevity, and the decrease in cost of maintenance and restoration surely mark an inspiring and intriguing step forward in skyscraper design. Self-healing concrete is the first interesting aspect of smart material innovation in modern skyscraper design.

The second interesting aspect of smart material innovation in modern skyscraper design is shape memory alloys. As society’s skyscrapers soar toward the sun in a world of seismic activity, one would be a brick short of a load to not address shape memory alloys. Shape memory alloys are metallic compounds that are used to resist and respond to deformation and damage to structures from seismic activity and return to their original shape. While they also hold value in non-seismic or minimally seismic locations because buildings naturally accrue stress damage over time, areas with high seismic activity are in particularly high need of this revolutionary technology. Dr. Sampath Santosh, an assistant professor at Sri Sivasubramaniya Nadar College of Engineering,

and his colleague M. Pavithran helpfully explain that “the majority of research on employing shape memory alloys in structural engineering to date has focused on improving damping capacity and superelastic behavior by utilizing Ni-Ti alloys and Cu-based alloys, especially to develop vibration mitigation and enhance seismic resistance to civil structures” (5). As Dr. Santosh and his co-author state, shape memory alloys are invaluable to structures in areas of high seismic activity due to their superelasticity and damping capacity. To help visualize how a shape memory alloy utilizes these properties in a skyscraper, imagine a concrete pillar with a ropelike metal tube spiraled around it. When the concrete column experiences natural deformation and sway from environmental stressors, the shape memory and superelasticity within these metallic ropes gently over time return the column to its original position and angle in relation to the rest of the structure. The Ni-Ti alloy is the same alloy that dental braces are made of. Shape memory alloys returning the primary structures in a skyscraper to their original position following seismic activity and deformation is analogous to dental braces adjusting teeth positioned incorrectly in the human mouth. Another important aspect of shape memory alloys is their activation by heat. Drs. Firoozi and Firoozi boldly add that “the premise is simple yet revolutionary. Damage is detected, prompting a heat trigger that prompts shape memory alloys to revert, sealing cracks or defects” (10). Possessing this ability to use heat to control the shape reversal of the alloy and consequently the structure itself is groundbreaking for civil engineering and will significantly impact mankind’s ability to reach the sky. Shape memory alloys are the second interesting aspect of smart material innovation in modern skyscraper design.

The third interesting aspect of smart material innovation in modern skyscraper design is electrochromic glass. Electrochromic glass is a type of smart material useful in constructing the façades of many modern skyscrapers in which the majority of the outer edge of the building is glass. As mankind raises skylines like a jagged key to heaven, the Earth at hand approaches hell below. Alice Marciel, a PhD student of Materials Science and Engineering at the University of Aveiro, and her colleagues urgently emphasize that indoor climate control systems are a massive source of energy expenditure:

In developed countries, buildings are responsible for around 30-40% of total energy consumption, making them the largest energy consumers ahead of both industry and transportation. A significant portion of the energy is used by ventilation, heating, and air conditioning systems, with forecasts indicating a

continued upward trend in demand over the next decades.

Within this context, electrochromic devices, particularly smart windows, have emerged as a promising solution to reduce energy consumption and enhance indoor comfort. (29)

Electrochromic glass may only be a partial solution in lowering this substantial statistic yet still highly impactful in reducing overall energy consumption. In response to an electrical trigger applied to the glass, it possesses the ability to tint itself on command as well as return to transparency. Possessing perfect timing of tinting with electrical triggers massively aids in skyscraper climate control and energy management systems during seasons of high heat and intense solar radiation. Dr. Kheir Al-Kodmany, a Professor of Urban Planning and Policy at the University of Illinois Chicago, and his colleague Dr. Mir M. Ali insightfully illustrate that “dynamic shading systems offer multiple benefits, such as reducing solar heat gain during hot summer months while allowing natural light to enter, thereby reducing reliance on artificial lighting. In winter, these shading systems can retract, enabling more significant solar heat gain to reduce the need for mechanical heating” (10). From Dr. Al-Kodmany and his colleague’s statement one can see that electrochromic glass invaluablely impacts modern skyscraper genesis and energy efficiency for the environment as well as wallets. Electrochromic glass is the third interesting aspect of smart material innovation in modern skyscraper design.

Mankind’s propensity for growth and new heights is so fundamental that it appears as a comically ironic design of nature itself. It appears that innovation driven by the constant illusion of staying ahead of entropy will forever be a futile reality. It is as if an arms race between mankind’s innovation and nature’s eternal entropy is the stage set for battle. There will always be a taller building, just as there will always be a new devastation of entropy. There will always be a deeper frontier of reality to push into, just as the previous frontier was used up and cast aside. To stop innovating and hold at the same technological level is not to halt the arms race, but to be overcome by nature and fully destroyed. There is no stopping the machine without breaking it. The gears keep turning, oiled in its own blood, desperately hoping for someone to find a solution to the endless cycle of creation and decay.

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Reach For The Stars

Dharshini Senthil Kumar



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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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