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AMY WATKINS

grew up in the Central Florida scrub, surrounded by armadillos, palmetto brush and a big, loud, religious family. She is the author of "Milk & Water" and the art editor of "Animal: A Beast of a Literary Magazine." She lives in Orlando with her husband and daughter.

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Editor's Note.

READERS,

The history of humanity is the history of conflict. Conflict animates our earliest artifacts of literature and art. It shaped the nations we inhabit today. And it makes up the pages of countless newspapers around the world on a daily basis.

In many ways, conflict is the lens through which we view the world. We've invented divisions amongst ourselves – races, classes, religions, nations and so on – and it is these divisions which define us and provide the necessary elements for conflict: multiple forces.

When the bombs went off in Istanbul, Brussels and Lahore last month, the world witnessed, yet again, what happens when any two of those forces collide. All told, dozens died, hundreds more were injured and millions have been left questioning. With each new attack, I felt hopelessness and cynicism grow inside of myself.

But that's the easy response to the attacks. The much more difficult task is to respond to violence, chaos and death with love. In the weeks to come, there will most likely be much talk of national security, but we need to ensure that "national security" is not a trojan horse through which fear and divisiveness are introduced into our communities. Cooperation, not separation, is the only true option, because in unity, we find our humanity.

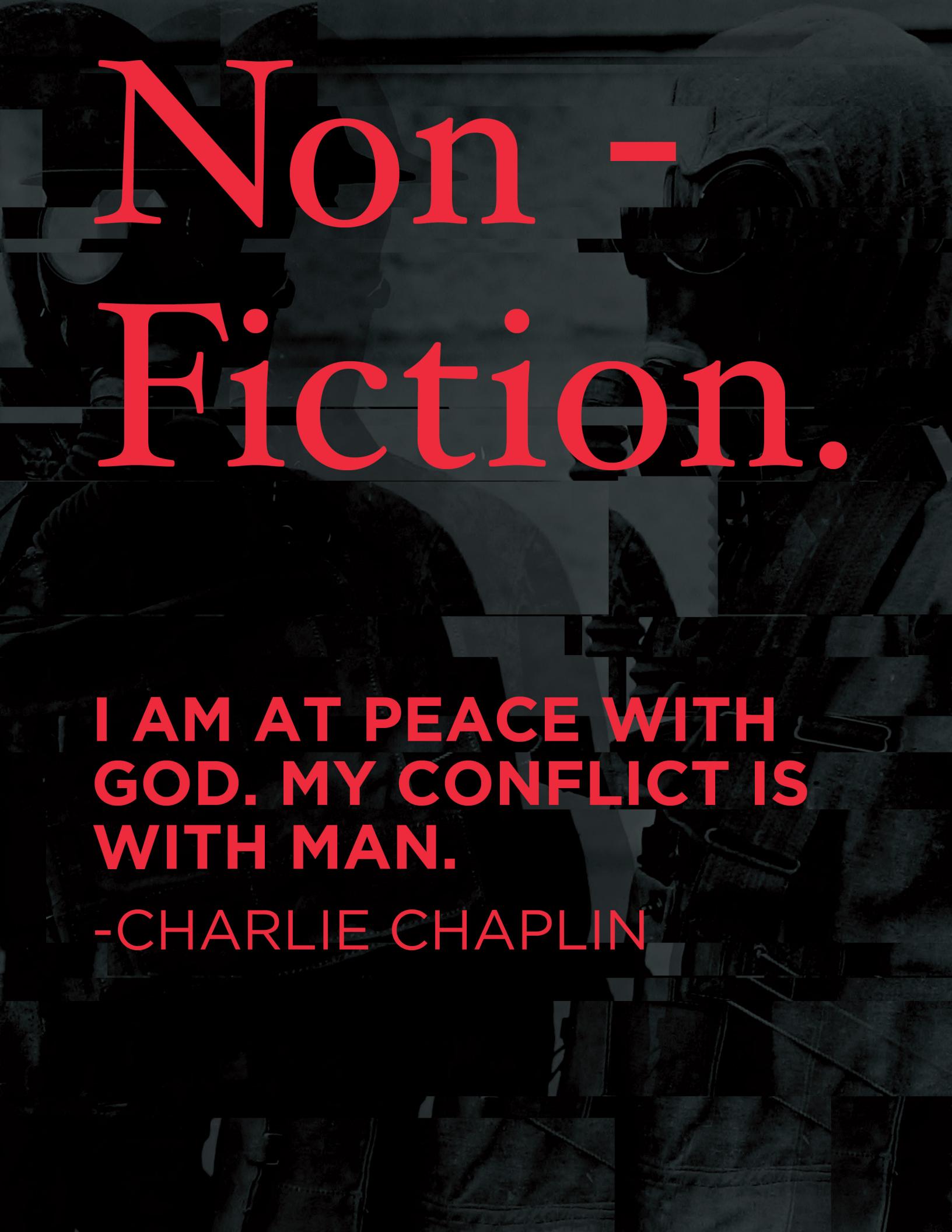
This month, SunStruck Magazine discusses conflict. The writers in this issue attempt to confront the categories and hierarchies that make up our society in an effort to demonstrate their absurdity. Ironically, rather than focus on conflict itself, the majority of this issue is about what we can learn from our conflict and how we can avoid it in the future.

And it is not just societal conflict that our contributors deconstruct. Inner conflict and the way it shapes our experience of the world is discussed as well, presenting us with new ideas and interpretations of identity, relationships and art.

This is the penultimate issue of SunStruck Magazine. More details will come next month, but for right now I'd like to thank you for being part of our mission to confront the reality in which we live. I hope you'll join us next month for our final issue, "Home," and a proper goodbye from the rest of the editors at SunStruck.

CALEB DOWNS
EDITOR IN CHIEF

Non- Fiction.



I AM AT PEACE WITH
GOD. MY CONFLICT IS
WITH MAN.

-CHARLIE CHAPLIN



Lullabies

A NIGHT IN THE UKRAINIAN REVOLUTION WITH LEMON BUCKET ORKESTRA, CANADA'S BALKAN-KLEZMER-GYPSY-PARTY-PUNK-SUPER-BAND.

WRITTEN BY MARK MARCZYK

FEBRUARY 2ND, 2014 – KYIV

In central Kyiv, to the west of the Dnieper River, lies the headquarters of the revolution: the Maidan.

The Maidan can hardly be described as a riot or a protest or even a demonstration. It's an unprecedented ad hoc village that stretches across the whole Maidan Nezalezhnosti Square and down Khreshchatyk Street between Khmelnytskoho and Hrushevskogo. It is made of canvas tents, tires, broken-apart crates, cut-open barrels and flags, and its facilities include field kitchens, libraries, hospitals, toilets, warming stations and stage.

The Maidan is protected from vehicular traffic and the Berkut, Ukraine's special police force, by massive barricades made of bags of ice and snow, which are reinforced with other repurposed material. There are volunteers guarding every entrance, doling out hot food, sorting warm clothes and blankets, and carrying supplies from one part of the Maidan to another.

The October Palace is a massive museum and cultural center in the southeast section of the Maidan. A patchwork of cardboard-box flanks, political banners and billboard segments are tied and duct taped together to guard the entrance to

the Palace. On January 21st, following one of the first violent flare-ups of the revolution on Hrushevskogo, riot police were stationed in the October Palace, ready and prepared to attack protesters on Horodetskoho Street from behind.

The building was surrounded by more than 2000 protesters armed with busted-up cobblestones, fireworks and make-shift weapons. After a particularly costly battle, the protesters occupied the building. Within two days the windows were patched up, the mess was cleaned and the Palace was transformed into the administrative headquarters and cultural center of the revolution. More than 4000 protestors live here now.

It's 2 a.m. when we approach the front doors of the Palace. We're asked for our passports, but when we show our instrument cases and say we're here to play, they let us pass without checking.

The balalaika player, P, tells me that in the center of the lobby, there used to be a huge statue of Lenin spanning the three floors that held the offices of the Communist Party. Later, it became an art gallery and convention center for Ukrainian art, culture, and commerce. Now, it serves as home



Religious leaders attempt to intervene between protestors and the special police on Hrushevsky Street (Photo by Christiaan Triebert)

to a free public library, a kitchen, a lecture hall, an artist exchange, an SOS hotline and sleeping quarters. The lobby is effectively a cafe where hundreds of people drink tea and watch the news on a single television.

Under the stalled escalators, there's a cluster of people on their knees coaching an epileptic through a string of seizures that won't let him go. He caws furiously, gasping for something at least as important as air. Sleepy-eyed people crawl out of their beds and waddle over to the edge of the balcony on the second floor, peering over and whispering words like "exorcism" and "overdose."

Behind the traffic jam of onlookers, the revolution's library is being stuffed once again into bookcases. I'm told it has been moved several times.

"Ah! This is my favorite book of all time! I just love it!" P hugs the book before showing the rest of the group. It's "A Hero of Our Time" by Mikhail Lermontov, in which he writes, "I would make any sacrifice but this; twenty times I can stake my life, even my honour, but my freedom I shall never sell. Why do I prize it so much? ... What am I aiming at? Nothing, absolutely nothing."

We head back to the lobby. "Surely we can play now," P says. "I think everyone's up anyways." He

starts picking impatiently at the strings of his instrument through the thin canvas bag.

"CORRIDOR!"

The cafe splits in two. Six men carry a seventh man in a flower-print curtain. They're led by a priest with a cross pressed to his chest. After they exit, another man gets up on his chair and yells,

**SLEEPY-EYED PEOPLE
CRAWL OUT OF THEIR
BEDS AND WADDLE
OVER TO THE EDGE
OF THE BALCONY ON
THE SECOND FLOOR,
PEERING OVER AND
WHISPERING WORDS
LIKE "EXORCISM" AND
"OVERDOSE."**

"Attention, dear friends. There are traitors among us! Please look out for one another. They are in this building right now. They're here to provoke and to steal, so please: Look out for your things and your brothers and sisters! Understood?"

"Yes," half the room replies, uncertain, uneasy, or else too far away to hear him.

"An unusual beginning must have an unusual end," P says with a sardonic finger hanging in the air. Then he turns to me and changes topics. "There are two types of Russian folklore: balalaika and Kalashnikov. Known the world over..." He points the veiled instrument and pretends to shoot me.

"Brothers and sisters, follow me," says a man whose balaclava looks like a hockey sock with holes cut out for the eyes and mouth. Loose threads dangle from the edges of the eye holes like thin black tears. The mouth hole is a bit too big. I can see that he cut himself shaving - twice - just under the lower lip.

We follow him to the freshly mopped basement, to a section of the hall where the showers have just been

opened.

"Do you want to take a shower?" he asks, half-joking. "Men over there, women over there."

It isn't long before there's a crowd, before other musicians join in, before there are requests. Ukrainian folk songs, Russian prison songs, Romanian lautari songs, French chanson, delta blues—whatever someone requests, we play.

"THERE ARE TWO TYPES OF RUSSIAN FOLKLORE: BALALAIKA AND KALASHNIKOV. KNOWN THE WORLD OVER..." HE POINTS THE VEILED INSTRUMENT AND PRETENDS TO SHOOT ME.



Lemon Bucket Orkestra - Mark Marczyk, lead-singer, lying in the front right.

There is a cacophony of side jams too. In one corner of the room a Canadian composer is teaching a Ukrainian folk singer how to play the euphonium; in another, a Ukrainian student asks a Moldovan gigger, “Can I play your cello?” and launches into the most famous of Bach’s cello suites. The session ends with a particularly incomprehensible version of “Smells Like Teen Spirit.”

At a nearby table, twenty-somethings are drinking tea and eating cookies. They’re wearing bullet-proof vests, and their faces are completely black from soot. These are the boys that keep the tire fire raging on the front lines. Three or four to a shift, they localize the bonfire and make sure it doesn’t spread to the pre-prepared wall of vulcanized rubber that will protect the Maidan from advancing troops - if it ever comes to that.

Below: Protestors gather at the Maidan. (Photo by Ivan Bandura. Taken on December 1, 2013.)

At around 4 a.m., it finally becomes
“too late to play music/are you crazy/there are
people sleeping/go to Profspilok.”

By the time we get to the Trade Unions Building, our posse has diminished to six. Still, our entrance is similar to what it was at the October Palace. We’re asked for our passports at the door, but when we show our instrument cases and say we’re here to play, they let us pass without checking.

We drop our cases in the foyer on the second floor and sprawl out in a corner on the floor beside the elevator. Everything’s slower and heavier at this time of night. 30 guards sit cross-legged in front of us, backs hunched, cheeks on knuckles. Through the window, you can see the whole Maidan, its empty black streets like bags under the green eyes of army tents, chimneys smoking from between canvas lips.

“Maybe you know this song,” says an old poet





who, depending on what is needed, dresses wounds and sandwiches on the main floor of the building.

Suddenly, two boys come rushing in with a heavy backpack they can barely carry together, telling people to move. Our audience inches over on their bums, barely enough to let them through.

The old poet begins reciting a lullaby she wrote for this building. The guards' whispers wane and ebb with her line breaks. Between stanzas you can make out a few words: "...grenades... brought from... found in... a bag of grenades... delivered by..."

As we are packing up, a lanky man who once served in Afghanistan takes out a jaw harp and asks

me if I want to play it.

"Is it any good?" he asks. "A friend sent it to me from far away and I didn't know if it was any good."

"It's very good," I say. "Play it in good health." He smiles and walks away.

Two grannies sing tragic ballads under a coat rack in the window. They're passing a box of cherry juice back and forth like it's the last inch of a bottle of vodka. The sun is coming up behind them and the distant twang of a jaw harp echoes in the stairwell down the hall. ■



MOJGAN'S RAZOR

THE UNINTENTIONAL
CONSEQUENCES OF
SELF-MEDICATION

BEN
ABERCROMBIE

Chicago poet Marc Smith started the Poetry Slam in 1984. During those slams, poets performed their work without props or musical instruments for most likely intoxicated crowds. Audience members were chosen randomly and told to rate each piece based solely on whether or not they liked the poem. In an act of noble rebellion, those first slams stripped a preserved and academic medium down to something naked and vital. Those poets made words matter intensely, and I'm able to tell you from experience that poetry blooms the moment a poet and an audience connect. That connection engenders pure, genuine feeling: the kind of feeling you can't find anywhere else.

When I was a kid, I stuttered badly. Not being able to speak reliably created this manic headspace inside of me that frantically searched for a way out. Somewhat masochistically, I found that through poetry slams I was able to scab self-love over self-harm. Forcing speech and sound through my tortured throat slowly made me feel as if I had something worth saying. I became entranced by the humble pulsing inside my chest as crowds fell silent and I began to speak. There is nothing more invigorating than landing an opening stanza to emphasized, welcoming support.

But that warmth came after the need to punish myself for my shortcomings. At first, slamming was just me repenting for the tedium in my head that I didn't like to talk about. It was a brutal, teenaged apology for being inadequate, and my biggest apology happened on a night when the slam at a Greenville dive bar sold out. I'd caught a rep for moments of fluid truth telling, and I felt okay about going up on stage when fellow poet, Rage Almighty, called my name. Mid-poem, I leaned on a tumbling, shouted rhythm to bounce out of a stutter, and the crowd latched on to it. I felt momentum and energy in my chest that forced me into an impassable wall of muscular malfunction inside my larynx, tongue and mouth.

It took eight *hard* minutes to perform a two and a half minute piece. Today, when I close my eyes, I can still hear excruciating, shuffling chair legs, uncomfortable coughs and my wooden speech machine brutally blocking every other word. Eyes rolling, puffing air, disabling sighs, sputtering and



*Anis Mojgani. The 21st-century Whitman.
(Photo by Natalie Seebot)*

stuttering and sputtering. On that night, I battled my own throat and lost. I walked off stage with a twitching chin and a humiliating failure that peeled back my young writer's arrogance.

Poetry did that. Poetry was *capable* of that.

Traumatic though it may have been, it hollowed out a hunger inside of me. It forced me to study, read and privately imitate poets who were better than me. It forced me to find Anis Mojgani's work. Poems like "The Fisherman" bottomed out my stomach and made me feel as if there were a new realm of truth to be uncovered.

*The fisherman throws his nets [...]
Most mornings he wakes before the sun
For the fish, they don't sleep long*

*On some nights, when he's been drinking heavily
He goes down to the rocks and he reads to the fish
He reads to them poems, poems from books
Poems about the human condition, about the muscles
inside of him
That question and quiver and shiver in sleep
Bottle in one hand, book in the other
Books clutching poems like they were their mother
Too afraid to let their children out into the soft fear of
the electric night
And he was the wild one to show them this world*

His words seemed laser focused and descended from free verse pioneers like Walt Whitman. He struck me more than any other poet because of his pure intentions made obvious by the wondrous, delicate lyricism of his work. Here was a poet who wanted everyone to see the profound beauty he'd been taught to see.

There was an immense expansion that happened when I lived alongside an artist's work I found truly inspiring. I marveled at the lightness and effortless tapestry of Anis' deliberately spare lines. The way he instinctually manipulated negative space mesmerized me. "Bottle in one hand, book in the other." "The Fisherman" spoke so simply. I didn't know words could be used so precisely or so lovingly.

By showing us the ways in which love springs from our bodies, Mojgani makes us feel like we're actually in tune with someone speaking into a cosmically amplified microphone.

That poem helped me begin to grasp the gutting power poetry could wield, and I became more aware of the colors surrounding me. I started to listen for the layered humanity in a person's voice as they said mundane things like, "I, I don't know." Truly, it was not unlike that moment in "The Matrix," when Neo could finally sense dimensions composed entirely of code.

Forgive me if that's too abstract. Gesticulating the right description for Mojgani's work is remarkably difficult. Renowned Slam Champion Patricia Smith called him "a gale force talent, a twirling dervish of lyric and the body's music, a poet who gleefully spurns the boundaries of poet." There is no bit of prose more suited to Anis because his work makes the reader feel like it's cool to be genuine. Look no further than, "Shake the Dust."

Make sure that by the time the fisherman returns you are gone. Because just like the days, I burn at both ends and every time I write, every time I open my eyes I am cutting out parts of myself just to give to them to you. So shake the dust. And take me with you when you do. For none of this has ever been for me. All that pushes and pulls, it pushes for you.

*So, grab this world by its clothespins and shake it out again and again
and jump on top and take it for a spin and when you hop off shake it again.
For this is yours, make my words worth it. Make this not just some poem that I write,*

Not just some poem like just another night that sits heavy above us all. Walk into it, breathe it in, let it crawl through the halls of your arms, like the millions of years of millions poets coursing like blood, pumping and pushing, making you live, shaking the dust. So when the world knocks at your front door, clutch the knob tightly and open on up.

Hopefully you'll agree that his voice feels kind, and lovingly prodding. If you don't know what I mean, that's okay. I've got to wave my rhetorical arms like an orchestra composer to properly describe just what Anis doesn't do. Again, it's that negative space in between his words, lines and stanzas that allow me to fall in with his dictation while it pulses with my heart beat; while his rhythms ebb and flow like the tides and glow like the moon.

As I read Mojgani's poetry, a respectful depiction of the whole human soul begins to take shape. Just like you move from Whitman singing the body electric to his ponderous extrapolation of harbor glimmering in early morning sun, so too do you follow Mojgani from Louisiana summer nights to pissing in the shadow of the Louvre. By showing us the ways in which love springs from our bodies,



Mojgani is a two time National Poetry Slam Champion and winner of the International World Cup Poetry Slam.
(Photo by Carra Sykes)

Mojgani makes us feel like we're actually in tune with someone speaking into a cosmically amplified microphone.

Studying a poet I love helped me see just how shallow my poetic approach had been. I realized I'd been skimming the very surface of expression, and that's when I began to focus on what actually matters to me. I wrote about love in the face of loss and growing through harsh reality. I wrote about psychotropic dream spaces and the alleyway behind my house that broke my arm and held my childhood route to the bus stop. It isn't that Mojgani is better than every other poet. It's that he helped me crack the surface and swim around. He showed me that poetry was really about opening up somebody's soul and letting the light in.

And I ferociously wish that more of us recognized the transcendence of poetry, that more of us saw and felt its telescopic power. The written word turned a kid afraid to say his own name into a fiery, agnostic revivalist that shouted himself ragged to the cheers and snaps of a loving audience. Poetry tore me down to my most fundamental, and then it built me back up. It continues to teach me how to listen to entirely new kinds of rhythm, and it helps me notice the width and breadth of consciousness, as echoed by Mojgani in "Equal Parts Science and Magic":

There is something in music which forgets us. When we listen we are remembered. The science of this is something magical: when you stand on a rooftop, in the dark, and the sky and the stars sit above you like a collection of mirrors that lie too far away to see what they are reflecting. And their bodies can be described as being both loud and silent in the same moment. And there is a stillness that surrounds you. A stillness that covers your knees, comes up to your waist, submerges your whole body, your tiny existence until you no longer know what part of you is and is not part of the universe. There's a conversation that happens, a conversation between yourself and the world around you. That conversation is us talking to ourselves... Call me naïve...but I believe that there is nobility programmed into our hearts.

After exposure to pure intention like "Equal Parts," it shouldn't feel too surprising to hear that these last few years relieved me of my tunnel vision and (some) of my self-consumption. In fact, I went back to the slam recently to test drive my newly-found humility, and the work that's come from it. Nothing massively redemptive happened. I didn't win the slam, but I did turn in a performance that embraced my imperfection. And afterwards, somebody told me I'd made them feel warm and open, and I have never felt so full of purpose. ■

An Affirmation of Collectivity

“THE SYMPATHIZER” AUTHOR VIET THANH NGUYEN ON REPRESENTATION, CLASS AND SUBJECTIVITY.

INTERVIEW BY CALEB DOWNS

Viet Thanh Nguyen’s “The Sympathizer” is about reconciling discordant identities.

The story begins in the final days of a Vietnam warring for its own identity, and it’s told by a narrator who is both communist spy and member of South Vietnam’s National Police; bastard and beloved son; French and Vietnamese; murderer and hero.

From a literary perspective, the book itself represents a struggle with multiple identities. Rather than attempt to write a novel that fell into the category of either genre fiction or literary fiction, Nguyen decided to blend the two categories, which he believes to be “artificial and debilitating,” and create a novel that used the tropes of a standard spy novel while presenting the critical ruminations many associate with literary fiction.

Despite the numerous literary and narrative characteristics of “The Sympathizer” that seem to be at variance with one another, Nguyen conducts them into a rebelliously harmonious work. “The Sympathizer” is a thrilling, dramatic and heart-breaking novel that simultaneously offers an intellectually satisfying and critical take on one of America’s most troubling chapters.

Nguyen presents American readers with a voice from the “other” side of the Vietnam War, which he says has been vastly underrepresented in American culture. And it’s this very underrepresentation

that seems to be the driving force behind the novel’s narrative. Vietnam was the “first war where the losers would write history instead of the victors, courtesy of the most efficient propaganda machine ever created”: Hollywood.

The narrator of “The Sympathizer” understands that the representation of his country in popular culture will determine their role within the global community and how he’s viewed by society. His mission, aside from spying on the South Vietnamese, is to represent his culture and his people truthfully through his story.

Yet, Nguyen’s narrator does not ascribe the conflict-ridden spectrum that runs from capitalism to communism on one axis and individuality to collectivity on the other. He criticizes and satirizes any compartmentalization, choosing instead to pay the consequences for his unwillingness to compromise his own identity. And because of his honesty, readers are presented with necessary questions and ideas about a war that has hitherto been analyzed from a “deeply ethno-centric” and limiting point of view.

I spoke with Nguyen over the phone about the arbitrary distinction between literary and genre fiction, the importance of representation and the “possibilities of collectivity, solidarity and revolution.”

Q: You're an associate professor of English and American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California. What are some of the ideas you focus on in your classes and what do you hope to impart to your students?

A: Right now, I'm teaching a class on the Vietnam War and memory. It's a class that is a part of my scholarship, and it's a class that I used to help me come up with the narrative for the book that I have coming out in April, which is "Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War." When I teach I hope that what I'm able to do is take all of this scholarship that I've been doing - the archives, field work, theory and criticism - and find a way to make it relevant to students' lives and students' concerns.

The book is very much about memory and history, and how we choose to remember or forget difficult pasts and conflicts. I teach that history in the class itself, but I also constantly try to draw students' attention to how, in terms of the Vietnam war, the concerns that come out of that are still relevant today.

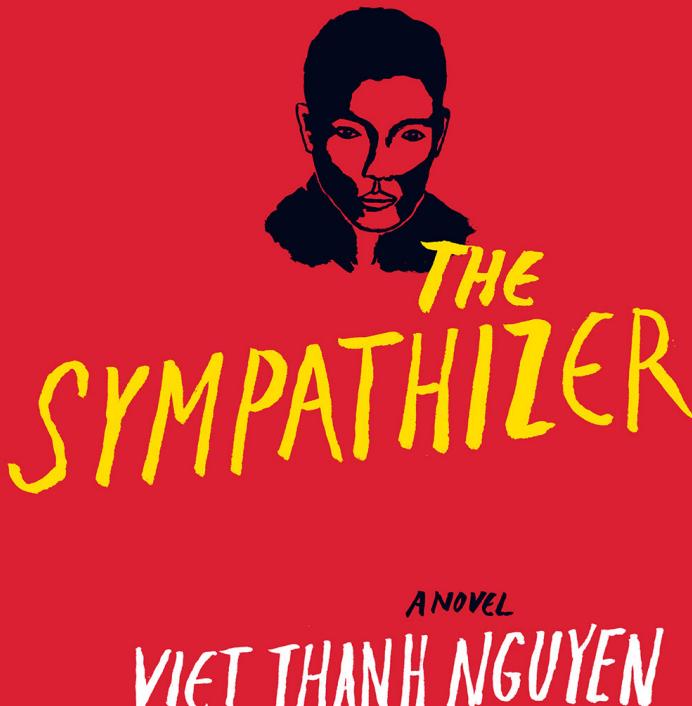
How we choose to remember and how we choose to forget are still in operation in terms of how Americans recall the Vietnam War, and how they use those lessons for contemporary wars and conflicts. For example, I'm constantly making connections between how Americans conducted the war in Vietnam and how those lessons and strategies have been applied to Afghanistan and Iraq and Syria.

Today, we talked about the slogan, "Always remember and never forget," which happens every time we discuss some sort of atrocious past. What I was trying to get across to the students was that it doesn't matter where you hear a slogan like that, whether it's the Vietnam War or the Holocaust, what's always contained within that claim of always remembering and never forgetting is the implicit urge to forget something else.



Viet Thanh Nguyen is the author of "*The Sympathizer*," which made it to over 30 book-of-the-year lists in 2015. At the time of this writing, it's a finalist for both the 2016 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, which recognizes the best work of fiction, and the 2016 PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize, which recognizes the best work of debut fiction. (Photo by Bebe Jacobs)

"A MAGNIFICENT FEAT OF STORYTELLING. THE SYMPATHIZER IS A NOVEL OF LITERARY, HISTORICAL, AND POLITICAL IMPORTANCE."
—MAXINE HONG KINGSTON, AUTHOR OF *THE FIFTH BOOK OF PEACE*



"The Sympathizer" won the First Novel Prize from the Center for Fiction and the Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction from the American Library Association.

We should always be skeptical whenever we hear platitudes like "Always remember and never forget," which are just so easy for us to utter. Hopefully they take that away from my class.

Q: What are some of the consequences of remembering the Vietnam War through American minds? You've said that just by calling it the Vietnam War, we're distancing ourselves from it in some ways.

A: I think that just by calling it the Vietnam War is troublesome for a lot of Vietnamese people because it turns the name of a country into the name of a war. Much less, the Vietnamese effort at remembering the past as the claim, "Vietnam's a country, not a war," which is exactly the opposite of how Americans have chosen to remember it.

Part of the troublesome aspect of this war for Americans is that they can't make up their minds on whether it was a good war or a bad war. Over the past few decades since the end of the Vietnam War, it's been remembered generally as a bad war for Americans. But now, everyone from President Jimmy Carter to President Obama have given speeches in which the ultimate point is to argue that, actually, this was a noble endeavor on the part of Americans. It may not have worked, but it was a noble endeavor on the part of the American soldiers and the American country, and that's how we should choose to remember it.

The terrain of memory when it comes to American perceptions of the war is still a very fraught one. When we remember the past is going to determine how we conduct ourselves in the present, it becomes important for Americans to turn the memory of a bad war into the memory of a good war so that they can continue to conduct contemporary wars and interventions today.

The other danger is that simply reversing it by calling it the American War, which is how the Vietnamese choose to remember it is also very dangerous, because what both of these gestures allow Americans and Vietnamese to do is to embark on a story of reconciliation with their former enemies.

Now, of course, America reconciling with Vietnam and building trade and political relationships between themselves is very important. But what both countries really wish to forget is the fact that the Vietnam War or the American War involved other countries besides these two and has had enormously damaging consequences in Laos and Cambodia.

If we start talking about those countries, all of the assumptions Americans and Vietnamese have made about this war really fall apart. What happened in Laos and Cambodia simply cannot be tolerated in these two national narratives.

Q: You've referred to "Nothing Ever Dies" as the non-fiction bookend of a creative project for which "The Sympathizer" served as a fictional bookend. Could you tell me a little bit more about that project?

A: I've spent 13 years working on "Nothing Ever Dies," and I've spent most of my lifetime since I was a teenager thinking about the Vietnam War in

various kinds of ways. This lifelong project, and the focus it has achieved in the last 13 years, really helped me to think historically and critically about how all sides have remembered this war and also about the processes of remembering and forgetting.

I just couldn't take all of that thinking and knowledge and drop it into a novel and at the same time write a fictional story that I was really interested in. I thought of it as a challenge to think about how I could address dominant ways of thinking about this war, on both the scholarly and the fictional end.

I knew that if I could accomplish something on the scholarly end, that would be important, at least to me, because so much of the scholarship on the Vietnam War, at least from the American perspective, is deeply ethno-centric and limited. The book is trying to make an intervention in that area. But, at the same time, it was clear that the limitations of American scholarship about the Vietnam War were part and parcel of a limited American way of thinking about the war all around, including in fiction.

If I really wanted to contest how Americans thought about this war, I felt I needed to do it both through fiction and through scholarship. Through the scholarship, I could say very explicit things. But through the fiction it would be harder to do that. I'm so constrained by the boundaries of what fiction is supposed to do.

The challenge with writing "The Sympathizer" was to take all of this knowledge I had and turn it into something entertaining, and in that way provoke people who would've never picked up a book of scholarship through a work of fiction. I wanted to see if I could turn a work of fiction into a work of criticism, which I hope is what "The Sympathizer" is able to do. You read it like a novel. It does various things that a novel is supposed to do, but it also is very explicit about delivering satirical and critical points or punches in ways that are hopefully acceptable within the framework of fiction.

Q: In "The Sympathizer," the narrator turns typical, cliché American ideals on their head. For example, he says the pursuit of happiness is like buying a lotto ticket: "Someone will surely

win millions, but millions would surely pay for it." Did writing the novel allow you to see these ideals in a new light or was this an objective of writing the novel?

A: I think it was both. Certainly, when embarking upon this novel I had a fairly critical perspective on American culture, ways of thinking, customs and things like that. I also had very critical takes on Vietnamese communism and nationalism too. All of these are up for critique and satire in the novel.

I didn't know that I would write these things. I didn't pen that sentence that you quoted in advance. That wasn't something that I had been holding in my pocket for decades waiting to say. In writing the novel and creating a character who could possibly say these kinds of things, I inhabited his voice when his voice came along. So, I'm writing the novel, I'm having a good time, and all of a sudden a sentence like that will come to me because it makes sense in terms of what my narrator would be thinking.

The fact that it realizes something that I think I also personally believe is part of the process. I deliberately created a character who would allow me to say things that I personally believe but would also be fictionally believable coming from the mouth of this person.

Q: Tell me about how the idea of the novel came about and how the formation of this character developed.

A: I had written a short story collection and my agent said that in order to publish books in New York City with mainstream publishing houses, you have to write a novel. And I said, "Okay, I've always wanted to write a novel. I'm going to do it." The first thing that came to mind was that I wanted to write a spy novel, which would also implicitly be a historical novel. The reason why that was the case was because that's a genre I enjoy - the spy, detective, thriller genre - and I wanted to write an entertaining novel.

The other reason for choosing a spy novel was because there really were these communist spies in South Vietnam. These were people who had gone to the United States and studied here and then

gone back to Vietnam and climbed very high in the South Vietnamese and American hierarchy.

I thought that was a great hook for a story.

My feeling had always been that I wanted to write fiction that either could be classified as literary fiction or genre fiction, because I think the distinction between the two is artificial and debilitating to both sides. I wanted to write a book that could be considered serious literature, but that would also be seriously entertaining at the same time. I thought this conjunction of the spy novel and a historical novel written in the so-called literary way would allow me to do both things, which is to deliver the literary ruminations through a narrative that would be compelling for non-specialists.

Q: In the opening lines of “The Sympathizer,” the narrator describes himself as a man with two minds. This inner-duality seems to be heightened when he travels to America, and by the end of the book he’s referring to himself as “We.” Can you talk about this duality within the narrator and how it might comment on the modern day refugee experience or the refugee experience of the Vietnam War era?

A: I chose for him to be a man of two faces and two minds partly because that fits the generic narrative of the spy who has to live a double life. As a narrative framework, it also allowed me to deal with all kinds of binaries and oppositions. The most classic one, in this regard, being Rudyard Kipling’s idea that “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.”

That idea becomes really dominant with our 21st-century narratives about people who are caught between East and West, either because they’re mixed race people, like my own narrator who is half-French and half-Vietnamese, or because they are migrants or refugees or transnationals of some kind who find themselves caught between worlds. Of course, the stereotype is that this is a tragic circumstance. You’ll never be able to reconcile this vast difference between East and West, Orient and Occident. In some ways, that’s what happens to my narrator. He’s a tragic figure because he can’t reconcile these oppositions – political, spiritual, racial, cultural and so on.

That is the case for a lot of refugees, and partially that’s the case because they are treated as a

collective. Refugees who come to the U.S. or who ask to come to the U.S. or Europe, they come for the lure of individualism and all that it promises: capitalism, benefits, freedoms and all that kind of stuff. But they’re treated as a collective.

They’re these huddled masses that threaten to unsettle or destroy the fabric of Europe and America. That’s always the plight of minorities in a majority society. They’re treated as a kind of group. By the end of the book, the fact that the narrator turns from an individual, first-person “I” to a collective, first-person “We” is meant to do two things. It’s meant to gesture at the fact that minorities and refugees are treated as a collective, despite their own diversity, but it’s also meant to affirm what the possibilities of collectivity are.

This is something I’m doing that I think is not that common in American literature. The novel that I had in mind was Ralph Ellison’s “Invisible Man,” which is a really powerful book. I love that book. But it is, by the end of it, an affirmation of individualism. The narrator of “Invisible Man” flirts with communism, brotherhood, solidarity, and he’s disillusioned. At the end, he turns back to himself and the promise of American individualism. I did not want to do that at the end of my novel, because I know that’s the narrative conclusion that the majority of Americans would want you to reach.

At the end of the book, which is partially about the horrors of communism, Americans want that character to say, “Now I’m an individual, now I’m free.” And that’s exactly what the book doesn’t do. The book instead says the Revolution has screwed up. Communism has screwed up. But that doesn’t mean we have to give up the possibilities of collectivity, solidarity and revolution.

I think that may be one reason why the book is difficult for some American readers, because the American publishing industry is totally geared towards producing narratives of individualism, especially for people who come as refugees, immigrants or migrants from places that are supposedly more oppressive than the U.S.

Q: Throughout the book, some of the characters are referred to by their given name and others are referred to by titles. For example, the “General,” the “Commandant” and so on. Was there a method to choosing which characters



Nguyen is a professor of English and American Studies and Ethnicity at USC. (Photo by Anna Min)

were referred to by a name and which ones were referred to by titles?

A: I chose that strategy partly because I wanted the novel to have a certain veneer of accessibility, and I wanted the novel to be read as a universal narrative beyond the Vietnamese War. It was very important not to have a lot of culturally specific names that I knew would snag readers.

From my personal experience, my own name does that. I have a very common Vietnamese name. For Vietnamese people it is nothing unique. From an American context, it is unique, and it always causes people to ask me how to spell my name, how to pronounce my name and all of that. I wanted to avoid that problem in this book by treating most of the characters through titles that would allow them to be read universally.

I didn't really have a rule of thumb for giving people names. It was more intuitive. I think the closer they got to the narrator, the more likely they were to have names. His best friends, his blood

brothers, Man and Bon, have names. Lana has a name. Sofia Mori has a name. These are the people that are intimate with him. They're more individual to him than as types. He also knows he's telling a confession that is built around people serving intended functions as types.

Finally, the last reason for using these kinds of titles for the characters is that in American movies, people who are foreign, or only serve as extras, are oftentimes referred to as types. "Crazy Guy in Whorehouse" is a type that appears in the credits of Vietnam War movies. That's the kind of title that they get in the book as well. Generally, more generous titles than "Crazy Guy in Whorehouse," but that's the other reason to have those kinds of types appear.

Q: Were there any rules you set out for yourself when you began writing the novel?

A: I don't think I had rules in mind. I think I had certain rules or assumptions that I was against.

I think there are certain kinds of rules and assumptions that so-called literary fiction is beholden to. Maybe No.1 is “Show don’t tell.” But there’s so much in this novel that’s actually about telling. The narrator feels free to tell the people he’s talking to exactly what he thinks. In many contexts, that would not be an acceptable literary device, because you’re supposed to stage things dramatically.

I think the novel does stage things dramatically, but it does so in a way that allows our narrator to be didactic. This is breaking a rule that I think is potentially limiting in American fiction. I think one of the reasons why a lot of contemporary American fiction might not be interesting to me is because it is apolitical, and it’s apolitical because it’s afraid of telling people things. It just wants to show things.

But sometimes to get the political point across you have to be very explicit. I had to figure out a dramatic way in which I could have someone who would say very explicit things or tell people very explicit things, yet have that work as a novel that wouldn’t be read simply as a set of diatribes or lectures.

The other assumption I don’t necessarily believe in is to have a likable character. My agent told me, in reading an early draft, “You know, your narrator isn’t very likable. He’s doing terrible things.” I thought, “Why is that even important to have a likable character?” And, also, to me he actually was a likable character. I sympathized with my character.

That shows a really important distinction around this whole debate of likability: its highly subjective. I wanted to disregard any idea that likability would be crucial in it and that you could define likability in a certain way.

Q: You bring up two interesting points here. Tradition says the protagonist has to be likable, but in a truer sense it’s all subjective. You were also talking about genre fiction and literary fiction and how the distinction between the two is also subjective. How did you come to hold these views? Do you believe there’s any objectivity in literature?

A: I think that much of the so-called objectivity in how literary fiction is discussed or taught is actually deeply subjective. Again, the premises of “Show don’t tell” which are treated as physical in the world of fiction writing, or teaching fiction writing, is again actually a very subjective notion.

It hasn’t always been the case that literature is only supposed to show us and not tell us. Arguably, for the majority of human history literature and storytelling were more didactic than otherwise. So, why is it the case nowadays that, at least in the United States, in teaching fiction writing we have this dictum of “Show don’t tell?” Arguably, it’s a depoliticizing strategy. That prevents American writers from telling it the way it is when they look at the world around them. Instead, they show some small part of what they see.

I think it’s really crucial to point out the subjectivity in certain kinds of seemingly objective notions, because for so many writers of minority backgrounds - however you choose to define a minority, race, sex, gender or whatever - they confront a set of subjective notions that are masked as objective when they go into the writing workshop or out into the publishing world.

So, the notion of likability, right? That’s seemingly objective. But a certain character who is unlikable to the majority may be completely understandable to the minority. The minority writers who encounter gatekeepers in the form of writing workshops, the publishing world, agents, editors and so on, don’t have the space to articulate between the subjective and the objective. They’re simply told to conform to the demands of either the workshop or the marketplace.

Why is it the case nowadays that, at least in the United States, in teaching fiction writing we have this dictum of “Show don’t tell?” Arguably, it’s a depoliticizing strategy.

The other question of literary and genre fiction is also related to this issue about how literature is taught in a writing context. I think generally speaking it's quite safe to say that writing workshops don't teach genre writing. They teach literary writing. A lot of literary journals will say, "We don't accept genre writing, we only accept literary writing." To me, that is actually really problematic because it doesn't recognize how a lot of so-called literary fiction is its own kind of genre.

What gets taught in dominant literary workshops at Iowa, or whatever other workshop, teaches people a certain set of conventions about how a short story is supposed to operate or how a novel is supposed to operate. That is a kind of genre. If you do it right, you may get recognized by *The New Yorker* or publishing houses or by talent scouts and so on.

Yet, a significant amount of that fiction – and this is a completely subjective perspective on my part – is boring. It's not very good at telling stories. It's not even my complaint, it's a common complaint that so-called writing workshop fiction is not very interesting at the level of narrative, even if it's very serious and tackles significant moral or ethical questions and so on.

When I was writing the novel, I thought, "I do enjoy reading *The New Yorker* fiction sometimes. I do enjoy having to grapple with significant questions and all that." But I also realized that a lot of that is not very compelling at the level of a story, and at the same time a lot of the genre fiction that I read – spy stories, detective stories, crime stories – actually do grapple with significant moral questions, and also sometimes very significant political questions. Ironically, sometimes genre fiction is much more forthright about talking about certain kinds of political events. They do it in a way that literary critics or literary readers might consider rather bald-faced, but they do it.

I wanted to bring these two artificially separated worlds together through this novel that tackles serious questions but does so through generic conventions.

Q: A good portion of the book is dedicated to a critique of Hollywood and how it has misrepresented Asians. The narrator goes to the Philippines to serve as an assistant on the *Auteur's* movie, which you make clear is supposed

to represent Francis Ford Coppola's "Apocalypse Now." Could you talk about the books relationship with "Apocalypse Now" and about how one's representation in popular culture affects one's ability to function in society?

A: Both of those are related issues because "Apocalypse Now" was one of the earliest movies that I remember seeing as a child. I saw it on the VCR when the VCR was still really new technology. I was probably ten or something like that. It was a deeply scarring experience. It was a very confusing movie for someone who is ten. There were scenes in that movie that shook me then and shook me still a decade later when I would think about it. Literally shaking. I was trembling with anger and emotion.

Well before I became a scholar, it was very clear to me that popular culture could have that kind of an impact on people. It can deeply shape people's beliefs about the world, about history and even about themselves. The scene that I'm thinking about in "Apocalypse Now" is when the American sailors come across a Vietnamese boat with innocent civilians and then massacre them. That's disturbing for anyone who watches it. I think many Americans are disturbed when they watch it.

But if you're Vietnamese and you're watching that scene, there's this extra layer of difficulty, which is that you're also a viewer. You're also a spectator, and along the way, watching this movie from the American point of view, you encounter these Vietnamese people who are murdered. At that point, who are you supposed to identify with? Are you supposed to identify with the American sailors, or are you supposed to identify with the Vietnamese people? That's a moment of split identification.

This one scene symbolizes the very difficult situation that people who are not represented happen to find themselves in when they encounter representations of themselves in which they are cast as the Other from the point of view of those who are telling these stories. While we can dismiss one movie as simply a movie, if every movie you see about Vietnam does that, or every movie you see about whatever subject does that, then you realize the power of representation as a whole.

That's what America has done to Vietnam and the Vietnamese people. It's made numerous movies

about the Vietnam War that are not as artistic as “Apocalypse Now” but basically tell the same narrative of identifying with the Americans at the expense of the Vietnamese. It is also the narrative that makes up the bulk of American scholarship about the Vietnam War, the majority of American speeches from politicians about the Vietnam War and so on.

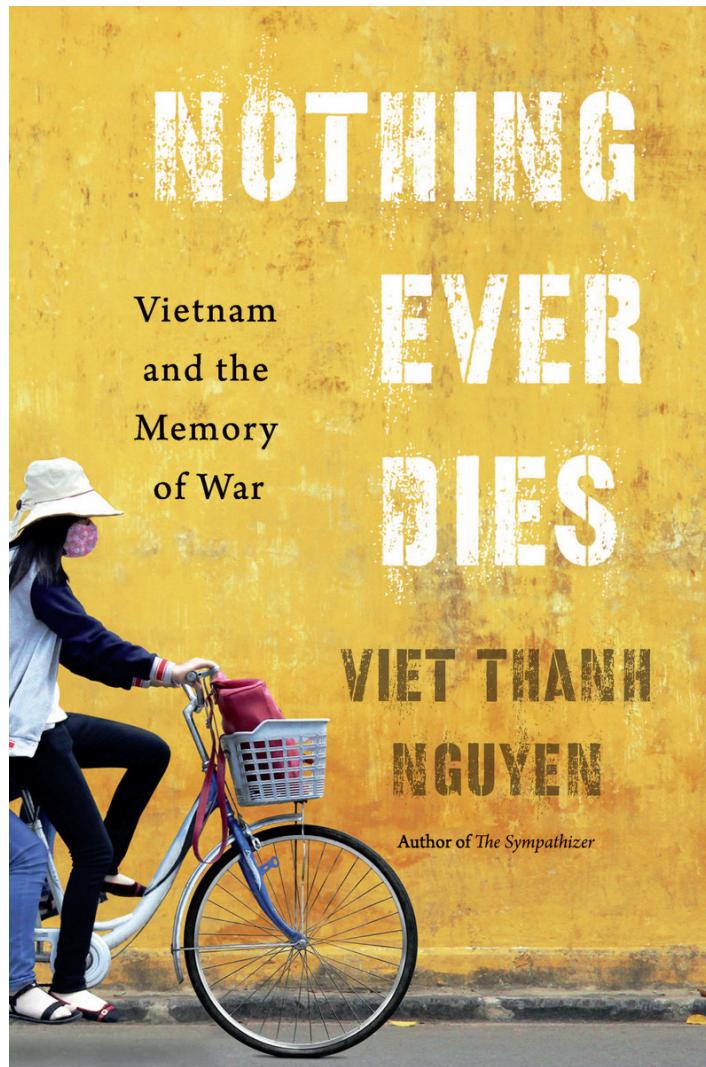
Representation is not just a problem in literature or film. Literature and film participate in a wider system of representation. In the case of the Vietnam War, all these different modes of representation – cinema, literature, political discourse – have reinforced these sorts of narratives that eliminate Vietnamese people.

The novel was designed to make that unavoidably real to anybody who reads this book. That's why I wanted to spend so much time on this movie that looks very much like “Apocalypse Now,” but is really a compilation of all kinds of American movies about the war. I wanted to take on Hollywood as what I call in my critical book “the cinema industrial complex,” which is basically the propaganda arm of the Pentagon and is the thought-power version of American hard-power.

The novel is designed to make this system of representation evident, to criticize it and to also offer something outside of that system of representation in its own form as a novel told from a very consistent Vietnamese point of view.

Q: In an article titled “Representing Reconciliation,” you wrote: “From the self-immolation

of Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc to the My Lai Massacre to the ‘boat people,’ Vietnamese bodies have been the silent spectacle on which American historical writing has been staged.” Do you feel any responsibility to transform that spectacle into an authentic representation with your work?



Nguyen has called his new book, “Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War,” the non-fiction bookend of a creative project for which “The Sympathizer” served as a fictional bookend.

some don't. I happen to be one who both does and doesn't.

I don't because I recognize that this book represents only my vision of this history, but it will be interpreted as being representative of the entire Vietnamese experience. When the novel came out, it was reviewed in The New York Times, and the reviewer said, “Here we have a voice for the Vietnamese people.” I thought, “Oh, no.” That is exactly

A: I feel a responsibility in the sense that I know my work will be read as authentic representation. Again, the mechanism of American publishing, actually the mechanism of national publishing wherever you find it, when it comes to underrepresenting people, is geared to produce representatives for those people.

I think a lot of Americans actually do recognize or complicity understand that they don't know enough about Vietnam. They don't know about a lot of places, but Vietnam plays a special role in their history. So, when a Vietnamese author comes along, that author is almost automatically elevated to the status of a representative of Vietnamese people, whether or not that author wants to be that representative. Some do,

It's a very tricky situation that I find myself in where I want to exploit the trap that I know has been laid out for me.

what I don't want to be, even though I know that's how I'm going to be read. I'm not the representative of the Vietnamese people, or even Vietnamese Americans.

Nevertheless, at the same time, because I know I'm going to be read that way, I tried to write a novel that would address those issues. Questions of representation are very explicit in the book, but also, I try to take on the entire history of the Vietnam War and its aftermath, particularly because I feel that not enough has been said about that from the Vietnamese-American or Vietnamese point of view in a way that American audiences have listened to. It's a very tricky situation that I find myself in, where I want to exploit the trap that I know has been laid out for me.

Q: You've previously said that it was only once you pursued a degree in ethnic studies that you began to make connections between aesthetics and politics and that you realized the potential to tell stories that "America would rather ignore." I think it's safe to say that most Americans would rather ignore "The Sympathizer." How do you overcome that challenge? How do you make people listen?

A: Well... good one. I don't really know the answer to that except to have written the best novel that I could have possibly written at that time. I had two years to write the novel. I had two years off from teaching, so that was the deadline. I wrote everyday, and as I was writing, I mostly had a great time, except when I had to talk to my agent. I have a great agent, but when I spoke to him I had to worry about whether I was going to sell this novel, whether anyone would pay attention to this book besides me. That was really the only dispiriting aspect of the process. He brought it back to Earth.

When I wasn't thinking about that, when I was thinking just about writing the novel, I thought that I was writing this novel for me. That is not a

really good answer. That's not a position that most agents or editors want to hear. They want to hear that you're writing this book for millions of people. In my mind, I thought, "Well, if millions of people read it, that would be awesome, but if I don't satisfy my own aesthetic and political position first, that would be not very meaningful for me."

First and foremost, it was an individual work. Second, I thought that if I were true to whatever it is that I believe in, I also have to hope that I will reach a certain group of people for whom this will be true as well. I have the optimistic belief that I'm not the only person who sees the limitations in how American literature has dealt with the Vietnam War or how American scholarship dealt with it or how American fiction has operated in certain ways.

And that seems to have been the case. The book has been relatively successful. It's done better than a lot of other first novels. It hasn't done as well as other novels out there. I don't have any complaints about that. Whether that's a limitation of the book, whether that's a limitation on the part of American readers who want to ignore "The Sympathizer" and the subject matter it brings up, I don't really know. But I think that the book has had enough of an impact because I did not, in my own mind, compromise what I wanted to do. ■

This interview was edited and condensed for clarity.



HELLO
my name is

OMAR
ALI

What's In A Name?

A YOUNG IRAQI'S FATE IS DETERMINED BY HIS ETHNICITY AND RELIGION.

WRITTEN BY ALEX POPPE

The passport depends on the checkpoint. At Kurdish checkpoints, he uses the passport with the first name "Omar." If it's an Iraqi checkpoint, he uses the one calling him "Ali." It's practically a death wish to have a Sunni name like "Omar" or "Othman" or "Bakar" in his home town of Basra, Iraq, a Shia dominated city where Sunnis are targets of sectarian violence.

I met 21-year-old Omar Alkhaldy at the American University of Iraq in Sulaimani where he studies English as a second language. He was my student for one term. I'm in the midst of my second stint teaching English in northern Iraq and my fifth in the Middle East. The Kurdish and Iraqi students draw me back. No matter what horrors they have experienced, their humor, compassion and generosity triumph. Alkhaldy is no exception.

Alkhaldy has fled for his life three times.



Before the war, Basra was a diverse and culturally vibrant city. No one talked about sectarian divides. Women went to school, and they

weren't forced to wear hijabs or burqas in public. "You could do anything," Alkhaldy said.

But Basra was the first city to fall to the coalition forces in the Iraq War. In the 2003 invasion, British and U.S. forces entered Iraq from Kuwait, caravanning to Basra on the "Highway of Death." The U.S. predicted that the Shiite population of Basra would welcome the coalition forces and rise up against Saddam, but they were met with unexpected resistance. After a few days of conflict, U.S. forces moved north to continue the invasion. They left the British to siege Basra, which was in the midst of intense sectarian violence enflamed by the invasion.

Alkhaldy's family was not exempt from the violence. As eight-year-old, he watched his father and uncles fire their shotguns out of windows at Shia militia members during a skirmish. Hearing gunfire, British soldiers on a tank patrol approached Alkhaldy's street. The soldiers told everyone to drop their weapons, or they would shoot. They seized the weapons and put them in a car, which they then ran over with the tank. They took the Shia militia into custody, but Alkhaldy's father and uncles were spared from arrest when his father explained that he was a doctor in the Iraqi Army and showed his badge.

At that time, the U.S. Army was creating the new Iraqi army under Paul Bremer (who foolishly disbanded the original Iraqi army) in Baghdad, so the British army arranged for Alkhaldy's father, who is fluent in English and Arabic, to join the new force. Alkhaldy was 10-years-old when his parents, cousin, brother and he moved to Baghdad, where they resided in the multi-religious neighborhood of Al-Jihad in the west of the city. Unfortunately, trouble followed them.



Following the collapse of the Iraqi government in 2003, a number of Shiite Islamist groups, specifically the Sadr Movement led by Muqtada al-Sadr, expanded their influence in southern Iraq. Muqtada, who's known to have close ties to Iran, created the Mahdi Army, which served as the military branch of the Sadr Movement and spearheaded the first major Shia confrontation against U.S.-led forces in Iraq.

The Sadr Movement was part of the shaky United Iraqi Alliance coalition in the 2005 elections in Iraq. The coalition was mainly comprised of Shia Islamist groups, including former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki's Islamic Dawa Party, and had a platform based primarily on national security and reconstruction. In December, the coalition earned a total of 128 seats, with the Sadr Movement and the Islamic Virtue Party, a branch of the Sadr Movement, gaining a total of 44 seats, solidifying their presence in Iraqi politics. At the height of its power in 2005, the Sadr Movement was strong enough to influence local government through its link with the National Independent Cadres and Elites party, and it was especially popular among police forces.

In February 2006, sectarian violence flared in Iraq after Al-Qaeda, a Sunni Islamist group, bombed the al-Askari Mosque, one of the holiest Shiite mosques. This act set off a wave of violence that displaced some 370,000 Iraqis and led many scholars to label it as a civil war. The Mahdi Army was a primary belligerent in the conflict and was accused of operating death squads that targeted Sunnis in Baghdad and southern Iraq. Masked gunmen - allegedly from the Mahdi Army - set up

MASKED GUNMEN - ALLEGEDLY FROM THE MAHDI ARMY - SET UP A ROADBLOCK IN ALKHALIDY'S NEIGHBORHOOD OF AL-JIHAD, CHECKING IDENTIFICATION CARDS AND MURDERING ANYONE WITH A SUNNI NAME.

a roadblock in Alkhaldy's neighborhood of Al-Jihad, checking identification cards and murdering anyone with a Sunni name.

Once again, it was bad to be an "Omar," and the streets were filled with gunshots.



In the summer of 2006, Alkhaldy was 12-years-old. One day, Alkhaldy's Sunni neighbor jumped over the wall between their houses to warn his family that the Mahdi Army was coming. Alkhaldy's family grabbed gold, money, passports and clothes and got into a car headed for Syria. Alkhaldy's father was still enlisted in the military, so he promised to join them later. Alkhaldy's last image of Baghdad is of a rocket exploding in one of his neighbor's houses.

The family settled in Bloudan, Syria. Bloudan, boasting cool summer temperatures, parks, and springs, was once a major tourist destination for Arabs. Alkhaldy spent five years in Syria and described his time there as harmonious and calm. "The people are beautiful," he said. "There were no problems with Shia and Sunni and Iraqi."

Alkhaldy's father was still a doctor with the



British forces lay seige to Basra, Iraq in 2003. (Photo by Rhonda Roth-Cameron)

Iraqi army while the family lived in Bloudan, a position which provided the family with enough money for a good life. When Alkhaldy reflects on life in Syria, he shakes his head. "Now Syria has nothing," he said.

In 2011, Alkhaldy's brother was stopped by the Syrian army for driving a car with Damascus plates. "You're Iraqi," they told him. "How do you have this car?" Alkhaldy said his brother rented the car, which had a loud-speaker system and siren, something his brother failed to notice or consider. The police believed the car to be linked to incidents that had instigated civil unrest. They beat him with the butt of a rifle, severely injuring his face. Fearing for the safety of his family, Alkhaldy's father organized two cars so they could flee Syria. Again, Alkhaldy's family packed up their life in minutes. Again, they ran.



The family settled in Sulaimani in Iraqi Kurdistan, an autonomous region in northern Iraq, where they remain today. In Sulaimani, Alkhaldy doesn't have to worry about being Sunni, he has to worry about being an Iraqi. From his experience, Kurds hate Iraqis. He is quick to point out not all Kurds, but in all of his five years there, none of his neighbors have even said "Hello" to him.

The Kurd-Iraqi conflict has its roots in British occupation in the early 1900s, but it is Saddam Hussein's al-Anfal Campaign that most Kurds remember. Led by Ali Hassan al-Majid, who at the time was the secretary general of the Northern Bureau of the Ba'ath Party, the al-Anfal Campaign was a genocidal effort from 1986 to 1989 to rid Iraq of ethnic Kurds. Mass deportations, firing squads and chemical warfare were just some of the tactics used by the regime to exterminate Kurds. The campaign is said to have killed as many as 180,000 people and displaced around 1 million.

Kurdish animosity towards Iraqis was recently

rekindled when Kurdistan experienced an economic crisis in 2015, the contributing factors of which included the expansion of ISIS, an influx of 1.8 million refugees from Syria and northern Iraq, declining oil prices and an ongoing feud between the central government in Baghdad and the regional government in Erbil. The continuous arrival of refugees in Sulaimani has driven up the price of housing, increased traffic and pollution, and squeezed the already limited number of vacant spots in public high schools and universities.

When Alkhaldy arrived in Sulaimani, there were still places in public high schools for Iraqi kids. He told me he had good grades in high school, but as an Iraqi, he was given an unwarranted low score on a compulsory, standardized test given to all graduating high school seniors. When Alkhaldy went to the Ministry of Education to dispute his scores, he was told he had waited too long. Alkhaldy challenged the government official.

"I told him that even if I had come right away, he wouldn't have helped me," Alkhaldy said. "The official told me, 'No, I wouldn't.'"

Receiving the low score bars Alkhaldy from attending public university. He said the same is true for most of his other Arab friends. However, a few of Alkhaldy's friends were able to attend public university because they had connections. For example, one has a Kurdish father who serves in the Peshmerga.

Alkhaldy said the Ministry of Education intentionally gives poor grades to Iraqis to force them to leave Kurdistan. Some private universities, such

"I TOLD HIM THAT EVEN IF I HAD COME RIGHT AWAY, HE WOULDN'T HAVE HELPED ME," ALKHALIDY SAID. "THE OFFICIAL TOLD ME, 'NO, I WOULDN'T.'"

as the American University of Iraq in Sulaimani, admit Iraqi students to undergraduate programs, but they are very expensive whereas public university tuition is nominal. Thus, Alkhaldy became my student by circumstance, not choice. His only hope for a public university education is to study abroad. He hopes to score well on the TOEFL test and study in Turkey.

Alkhaldy said his friends who stayed in Syria are doctors and engineers now, which makes him feel ashamed about his situation. "Look at me," he said. "I am nothing."



Alkhaldy is one of many in his generation without hope. He told me he heard a U.S. Army officer once say that the coalition forces "gave Iraq on a plate of gold to Iran." Alkhaldy doesn't know if this is true or not. He also doesn't know if the 2003 invasion was good or bad, because he doesn't know what Saddam Hussein would have done as president. All he knows is that if he can go abroad, he is going abroad.

"After what happened in Basra and Baghdad," he said, "I don't care anymore. Everyone tries to kill me if I leave Kurdistan for Iraq. In Kurdistan, I am Arab. In Iraq, I am Sunni. Ramadi, Fallujah and Mosul used to be safe for Sunnis, but that changed with ISIS. Now Iraqi people are hated by the whole world."

Were I in his shoes, I'd probably feel the same way. Alkhaldy can't stay where he is, but he has nowhere to go. The Mahdi Army was disbanded in 2008, but in 2014, the senior Shia cleric of Iraq, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, issued an edict calling for Shiite men to fight against ISIS. Sheikh Abbas al-Mahmudawi, the leader of Iraq's Hezbollah, stated that some 800,000 people responded to the edict, creating a military force significantly larger than the Iraqi Security Forces.

After Ayatollah Sistani's edict, the Mahdi Army then remobilized as the "Peace Companies" and vowed to defend Baghdad against ISIS. And they weren't the only Shia militia to do so. Foreign Policy's Ali Khedery reported in February 2015 that "within months, hundreds of thousands of young Shiites responded to the call — and today, virtually

all of them have been absorbed into Iranian-dominated militias, whose fundamental identity is built around a sectarian narrative rather than loyalty to the state.”

ISIS controls a vast swath of northern Iraq, while the Shia militias control the south. Shia militias, like al-Hashd al-Shaabi, guard Baghdad. Militia members sometimes extort money or sexual favors from women and take cars from the Sunni refugees fleeing ISIS. Other times, they deny them entrance into Baghdad, and the refugees disappear.

As fences go up in Europe, as Syria descends further and further into chaos, as the terror attacks in Turkey proliferate, as the Greek economy collapses, and as certain American Republican presidential candidates spout their xenophobia, I wonder: where can someone like Alkhaldy can go? ■



The American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (Photo by Wikizandi)



Trump'd

WHAT THE DONALD HAS TAUGHT US ABOUT AMERICAN CULTURE, ECONOMICS AND POLITICS.

WRITTEN BY ROBIN HELLER

All of a sudden he was upon us, descending from his throne on an escalator to the world of mortals, two thumbs hoisted up in total confidence, surrounded by a group of paid actors cheering him on. He took the stage and initiated what would become a hailstorm of news reports, a complete and total media frenzy from which we're still reeling.

With that, the 2016 presidential race had begun. We've been trying to understand what the hell is going on in our country ever since.

2016 will be remembered as the year of Donald Trump. His image has effectively consumed the election. He's earning better ratings than any season of "The Apprentice" ever did. He has radically shaken up an election that was at one time expected to be a battle between two families of American royalty. American politics have been forever changed because of what Trump has done over the past nine months. The idea that government and dignity must necessarily go hand in hand has been thoroughly debunked, and the notion that one's political platform must be bound within the realms of reality in order to gain support is now laughable. Pragmatism is old news. Populism is the future.

Trump's policy proposals have been evaluated and dismissed by essentially every major news publication in the U.S. and abroad. His tax plan would

wipe away almost 10 trillion dollars to the national budget in its first decade. He wants to deport all 11 million illegal immigrants living in this country and prevent them from coming back by forcing the Mexican government to build a wall along the border. He's threatened China with 45 percent tariffs on exports to the U.S., which economists predict would increase the U.S. trade deficit by some \$70 billion.

Additionally, he's sown seeds of violence throughout the U.S. His rallies are regularly attended by large groups of protesters who usually end up in a confrontation with Trump's supporters for one reason or another. He's stoked the flames of xenophobia and sexism, provoking waves of backlash that seem to do nothing more than endear him to his supporters even more. In his own words, he could "shoot somebody and not lose any voters."

Whether Trump would act on any of his promises (not to mention whether they would even pass Congress) is practically irrelevant at this point. He's earning just under 40 percent of the popular vote in the Republican primaries, signifying that his political platform is popular with a significant swath of the American public. His message is resonating, and that is the truly worrisome aspect of Trump's campaign.



Donald Trump most likely saying horrible things a campaign rally at the South Point Arena in Las Vegas, Nevada. (Photo by Gage Skidmore/Flickr)

Trump's popularity amongst American voters, tells us certain things about our country. It's not exactly new information, but it is information that might've otherwise been less noticeable. For better or worse, Trump is an incredibly catalytic candidate that has revealed crucial aspects of modern American culture and politics.



Most notably, Trump has proven that America has yet to become a post-racial society. After the election of President Obama, many Americans liked to believe that we had entered into a color-blind era in which a person's skin color did not affect the way they were treated in society. But for anyone paying attention to Trump's campaign (not to mention the tumultuous year of Black Lives Matter protests and the disgusting acts of police brutality in recent years), that notion must now be regarded as little more than fantasy.

Watch footage from any Trump rally and it becomes immediately clear that the vast majority of the audience is white. The staged diversity found at other Republican and Democratic candidates' rallies is non-existent at Trump's. He doesn't even try to hide it. For a man like Trump who understands that image is everything, it's revealing that he

hasn't just paid some minorities to fill the screen. It's a deliberate action on his part to have a white crowd because they are the congregation to whom he's preaching, and the message of his sermons is that wolves are attacking his precious flock.

For centuries, white Americans have been practically guaranteed social advancement due to their whiteness. Whites were favored for job openings. They had the ability to purchase land. And most had the benefit of education - not to mention the fact

that they didn't have to experience the rough side of racist social policy.

Over the course of the past few decades though, certain groups of white Americans have seen their social status slowly deteriorate to a point where that of their parents and grandparents seems like a lost dream. Wages are stagnant. Jobs are harder and harder to come by.

To be clear, this trend does not apply to all whites. The 1 percenters and the rest of the upper class is still overwhelmingly white, and the majority of American institutions have pink-faced chairmen. But for those occupying lower-working class strata, and for those whom have fallen through the cracks of the American education system, Trump appears to be something of a white knight.

This group's fears have been stoked for years by incendiary radio hosts and internet bloggers who see advances in minority status as antagonistic to that of white status. The daily propaganda issued from sources like Fox News, Breitbart and the National Review, not to mention the propaganda spewed at political debates and town halls over the past nine months, have engrained in middle-aged white conservatives the notion that minorities are essentially human vacuums, non-working citizens who reap the welfare benefits they provide them. Trump is appealing to that resentment in a way

that no other candidate has, and he's doing it with alarming bluntness.

In an ironic way, Trump has perhaps been the most powerful force in demonstrating the racist undercurrents that flow throughout American neighborhoods, perhaps even more so than the Black Lives Matter movement. For while Black Lives Matter has focused on structural racism and discriminatory police practices, Trump has made the images of a racially divided America publicly available to anyone with access to a news channel.

Of course, this facet of American society has been made public for all the wrong reasons, but it is now evident that America has a long way to go before it achieves the status of a so-called post-racial society.



Trump has made it clear that many Americans have embraced a willful ignorance of history. His shameless scapegoating of the Other for America's problems places him firmly within the category of other nativist, fascist leaders.

Here I must be cautious. Too often Trump is compared to Hitler, Mussolini and other authoritarian figures with little logic behind the claims. The public hears the absurd and politically incorrect things he says, and suddenly, he is treated as a dictator. This is wrong and harmful, for if that is the criteria for a fascist, free speech has been dealt a devastating blow.

Yet, claims of Trump's fascist tendencies may contain some truth. In order to understand why this is the case, we must first place ourselves in the shoes of the modern day white worker.

Last year, Princeton's husband-and-wife economist couple, Anne Case and Angus Deaton, published what was perhaps the most surprising and discussed study of the year. In their study, "Rising morbidity and mortality in midlife among white non-Hispanic Americans in the 21st century," they found that the mortality rate for middle-age whites is increasing, while the mortality rates for every other racial and ethnic group are declining.

Suicide and poisonings by alcohol and drugs are cited as the primary causes of this phenomenon. Though Case and Deaton aren't able to pin down the exact causes for this due to the numerous factors that could possibly be involved, they say ties to economic insecurity are a definite possibility.

After the industrial productivity slowdown in the early 1970s, and with the advent of widening income inequality, many members of the baby-boomer generation are members of the first generation to find that they will not be better off than their parents were. Growth in real median earnings has been slow for this group, especially those with only a high school education.

The current state of working class whites is one of deep confusion. With the collapse of the industrial economy and the utter thrashing of unions, they've been left to fend for themselves. They've been told their whole lives that if they work hard,

they'll be able to have a good life and they're now realizing that is not the case for them. They've seen the economic rise of China. They've lived through 9/11. They struggled through the economic crisis of 2008. They've



Princeton economist Angus Deaton and his wife, Anne Case, discovered that the mortality rate for middle-age whites is increasing, while the mortality rates for every other racial and ethnic group are declining.



Coming November 2016: Donald Trump. Collect them all!
(Photo by Millis Baker)

watched the American military get bogged down in Iraq and Syria. They've witnessed the unwinding of American excellence.

Slate's Jamelle Bouie recently pointed out that Trump's popularity came from a desire for a return to the "old racial hierarchy." He's right, but his focus is too narrow. When one hears the slogan "Make America Great Again," what one should understand is that this slogan is pining for a past era in which there was not only strict racial hierarchy, but strict economic, religious, gendered and political hierarchy from which whites benefitted.

The call to "Make America Great Again" is an appeal to a time in American history when a white and patriarchal community thrived. The desire to "Make America Great Again" is recognizing that America is beset with severe problems, yet calling for regression rather than progression. It is a call for conservative revolution, which is the definition of fascism.

What working class whites would like is a return to the America pre-Vietnam, pre-Watergate, pre-Monica Lewinsky, pre-Afghanistan and Iraq, and definitely pre-Obama. A time when their labor in the market economy held more value and when they were situated in a dominant position in the social hierarchy. They're tired of hearing about economic and racial inequality, and they would like to return to a society devoid of racial and class-based strife (at least against themselves) in which the "pursuit of happiness" was open to everyone willing to work for it.

This is where the support for Trump comes from. This is also where the support for Hitler came from. Post-WWI Germany was full of people in a similar, but far more exaggerated, situation. Hitler focused their economic fear and social anxiety on the Jews, creating a narrative that blamed them for Germany's woes rather than the fallout of WWI.

Trump has created a similar narrative in which the causes of the financial crisis (which, ironically enough was caused by the real estate industry) and the reality of global capitalism are wholly ignored, instead blaming foreigners, women and liberals for the problems facing America.



In addition to the societal and economic revolutions courtesy of Trump's campaign, we've also witnessed an important political revelation. Trump's popularity with voters has demonstrated just how much power the establishment has in deciding how our country is managed and who gets to manage it. The Republican party has made absolutely no effort to hide the fact that it is considering any and all means to block Trump from receiving the Republican nomination.

On the one hand, it's a noble effort. They understand the danger that Trump represents, and they're trying to prevent him from gaining a platform. However, in reality, they're also trying to save face and prevent the American public from seeing what the true nature of the GOP is. After decades of hysterical rhetoric from the likes of Newt Gingrich, Trump should come as no surprise. He is the logical conclusion of the ideology pushed forward by American conservatives.

Trump's issue, or rather the issue that the Republicans have with Trump, is that he is simply too blatant about his political beliefs. Republicans are quick to lambaste the rise of political correctness, but they have their own form of it. Rather than demeaning the poor, minorities, women and others who fall outside the typical group of conservative voters, Republican politicians have found ways to blame them without calling them out by name.

But Trump doesn't play by those rules. He openly blames Muslims for the dashed ideal of Ameri-



People like Andrew Breitbart (above), Rush Limbaugh and other propagandists have had a definite role in the rise of Trump. (Photo by Gage Skidmore/Flickr)

can security. He openly belittles women. He makes no effort to hide his desired policy on immigration. That's why the people like him and the politicians hate him.

The ideal Republican candidate holds similar views to Trump, but keeps them concealed, maintaining the veneer of dignity necessary for the functioning of a political party. But Trump, backed with his real-estate empire valued in the neighborhood of \$3 billion, is not beholden to anyone's demands. He can say and do what he wants. He has wrested control from the establishment, and he's beating them at their own game.

Their efforts to stop him include vetting possible third-party candidates for the general election, spending millions and millions of dollars in attack ads and conducting a huge media campaign to strike him down. This January, the National Review published a total of 22 essays by conservative writers on the theme "Against Trump." Republican officials have urged state governors to draft an open letter expressing their disdain for Trump. According to The New York Times, "at least two campaigns have drafted plans to overtake Mr. Trump in a brokered convention, and the Senate majority leader, Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, has laid out a plan that would have lawmakers break with Mr. Trump explicitly in a general election." Even the Koch brothers don't like him.

Yet, what must be remembered is that Trump has earned the majority of the popular vote in the Republican primaries. We live in a democratic society, or at least one that appears to be democratic, and unfortunately, people like Trump's message. They're voting for him. As the saying goes, in a democracy, you get the government you deserve.

The problems with the tactics that the Republican establishment are using and are threatening to use against Trump is that they are severely anti-democratic and they make the entire primary election process look more like a pretense than citizens actually voicing their opinions.

At the time of this writing, Trump has reneged on his promise to support the Republican nominee if it is not him, and I have to support that decision. Establishment politicians are manipulating the election to fit their own desires rather than those of the people.

Should Trump not get the nomination due to a contested convention or some other scheme

devised by the Republicans, the truly democratic thing to do on Trump's end is to run as a third party candidate. It may be a self-serving position to take, but it is undeniable that many Americans want him to lead this country, and as disgusting and embarrassing as that is, their voices should not be stifled.

The principles which undergird the founding of the U.S. demand that we respect that. Trump's popularity is something that no politician can take away from him, and as hard as it is for me to say this, it must be respected if the U.S. would like to continue to consider itself a democracy and not just an oligarchy.



Trump as the Republican nominee would be, in his own words, a disaster. It would be an embarrassment to our country, and it would instigate even more violence and chaos throughout our society. However, more important than Trump winning the nomination are the problems that he's revealed about our society. No matter what the outcome of this election, the problems will still be deeply embedded in America, and with congress acting essentially as a non-entity, it will be difficult for us to overcome them.

Whether or not Trump wins the Republican nomination or the presidency is essentially irrelevant. What should be taken away from the 2016 presidential race is that America is a deeply divided country ruled by a government that has proven itself incapable of cooperation.

The people that should truly be held accountable for our current dilemma are the politicians that have sewn the seeds of division amongst Americans for the past three decades: the tea partiers, the lobbyists, the power-hungry and manipulative democrats, the politicized Supreme Court, far-right "journalists," the billionaire puppeteers and every other political entity that tries to silence American citizens or manipulate the economy to their own benefit at the expense of others.

The problem is not Trump. The problem is the environment that provided Trump with water, sunlight and fertile soil so that he could grow. ■

Poetry.

MAN MUST EVOLVE FOR
ALL HUMAN CONFLICT A
METHOD WHICH
REJECTS REVENGE,
AGGRESSION AND
RETALIATION. THE
FOUNDATION OF SUCH
A METHOD IS LOVE.

-MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

Domestic Situation

AMY WATKINS

*Sometimes a man stands up during supper
and walks outdoors, and keeps on walking...—Rilke*

Sometimes a woman stares at his empty chair
then begins to clear the dishes from the table.
Sometimes he returns, bringing flowers, and she
runs water in a cut glass vase. Sometimes
she drops her favorite tulips on the front step.
Sometimes he stays out all night, and she leaves
the porch light on and sleeps on the sofa. Sometimes
she thinks, “Let him find his own way home, or not at all.”
Sometimes a man leaves suddenly, and a woman
runs after him, but sometimes she stays because someone
has to stay. Sometimes a man keeps walking.

Black Boy Down

KAI COGGIN

(for Michael Brown 1996 - 2014)

I already wrote this poem,
Black boy down,
Officer heavy trigger finger,
I don't want to see the sun shine
through the holes you left in his body,
Black boy down,
I don't have the right to write this poem.
I got pulled over last week for a taillight out and expired tags,
never did I think I would get shot,
never did I think my life would be over,
never did I think I was public enemy number one,
never did the fear of being my own shade of light brown come into play,
I did not get frisked or patted down,
I didn't even get a ticket.
What is the difference in my life over someone else's?

I am numb from this,
Can't read anymore details,
Can't find any peace in the aftermath,
Can't find a glimmer of hope this time,
Black boy down.

Not really understanding the depths of my privilege but learning,
wanting to learn the meaning of passing through life
without carrying the fear of seeing a cop on the street who might kill me.
It's unfathomable to me, but why isn't it unfathomable for everyone?

Black boy down.

10 shots through his young black boy skin,
He was going to start college last Monday.
Literally.

His first day of school became the day the riots swelled on
the streets of Ferguson, Missouri,
smoke rising from fires and looting,
the rage of a people wavering on the precipice of peaceful protest
and LET'S BURN THIS MOTHER FUCKING CITY DOWN!

BLACK BOYDOWN!

Black boy down

Michael Brown,

Young Mike Brown,

Brown boy,

Black boy,

Never going to be a black man,

Black son,

Black life taken before it really begun.

I already wrote this poem,

His name was Trayvon,

But I don't really own the words,

Black boy down,

This fear is not mine, but I feel it,

This rage is not mine, but it seethes in my gut,

This roaring noise rising from candlelight vigils,

Waking me from the blindness of privilege

to see a mother's blank, broken eyes

crying for her baby,

crying for her baby boy down.

Baby boy down.

Medusa

ASHKAR NAQVI

I tell this story for the first time
because the thin, meandering scars
sunken lines like desiccated clay
on his forearms spelled
trustworthy.

i alone called her by name
the other schoolmates content
with the marker
'nepali girl'
as if a distinct curve in the eyelids
told them all there was to know
while all her processions
of ebony curled lashes cascading
to a point, gesturing to the world
around us, languorously
left me searching for a mental map

at our age it was cute
--not yet a sick male fantasy
to have ponytails
but i always wore my hair
in a single braid
down to my waist
avoiding innocence and its loss
and before she could read my name
in the lilts and swings of nastaliq
she called me bad girl

in between equations solved
and paragraphs memorized
on weekend afternoons behind the

closed door of my room
(mine alone now with sister
having married herself away)
i would let her slip off the rubber tie
holding my feminine medusa snares in
check
and run her fingers through it
so soft
from temple to tip
and if we wanted
further
to slip off other encasements
and i tried to ignore the snakes hissing in
one ear
for the warm breaths drifting into the other

my cousin often thought we were too quiet
from his room next door
to be studying.

as quiet as I usually was
whenever he would slip in at night
but I would never let him touch my hair.
we existed in the world
as a singular language
the language of adjective girls
but there are some words
that should have remained
locked away in dictionaries
in the bits of scripture and poetry
that our parents had carefully
drowned in a thick black line of ink
but like favorite swears

you learn them on the street
and in the spirit possessed
line drawings of your tongue
or in the hard grip of a boy's
fingers around your throat
when you are the only adjective
in the house alone
with a proper noun.

by the end of the next monsoon
I had been firmly dis-abused
of any delusions of an alternative linguistics
left to assemble reconstructions
of the countenance I had committed
to the safest vaults of memory
from the spared couplets
of my fellow bereft romantics
no longer a door hinged to the wall
but only a paper thin curtain
as silken as her hands.

I want to rejuvenate this hollowness--
the barren desert brown
of my confidant's cheeks
kissed much too violently by the sun
but he tells me this deprivation is his own
sorrow to bear
if the oil of his love's disappeared lips
cannot hydrate this arid shell
then nothing will
so I must forget my distractions
and bare my own as well.

Legacy Holder

ELEANOR KEDNEY

Scraping hot Sonoran sand, I trespass
under barbed wire onto private land
where Victorio, the Chiricahua Apache
leader, hid from U.S. soldiers in 1878.
My immediate family no longer alive,
a friend called me the “legacy holder.”
I hunker in the cave’s black light,
my unrest, gritty and unspoken.
Outside, the cicadas’ death-slow pulse
in dry heat. I step out of the cool grave—
the Dragoon Mountains break endless blue
with peaks dark as flint. Driving home,
wind shirrs through Texas Canyon—
looming boulders, echoes
haunting the spaces between them.



Café Scene

GEZA TATRALLYAY

I

(Paris, 1973)

I have put my guts
on the shelf,
and I dance
alone
all the tangos of Paris.

In the cafés
I talk to myself,
discussing inflation
and Picasso's death.

Facing the mirror,
I see them laugh
and gesticulate,
nod and jabber
on and on
about this and that.

And nauseated by the smoke,
the noisy mob,
I read my Dostoevsky,
snubbing at life.

II

(Paris, 2015)

I take my guts down
from the shelf
and I tread
alone
all the streets of Paris.

In the cafés
I talk to myself,
discussing the horror
at the Bataclan.

Facing the mirror,
I see them come
brandishing their
Kalashnikovs
randomly
firing at the crowd.

And nauseated by the blast,
the bloody scene,
I read my Charlie Hebdo,
snubbing at death.

another beer, guys?

RAPHAEL D'ABDON

lead rains have fallen from skies of odium
and starred aircrafts are flying back to the h.q.

amos, shlomo and bram set up their camping chairs
and tables
on the hilltop in front
of the gaza border

they check the iphone batteries: they're full
and so is the portable fridge
the coal in the barbecue is red hot
the golani brigade's banner waves smugly
in the sundown breeze
the stereo blasts
metallica's "kill'em all"

the buddies uncap three beers
and have a toast

one talmud song and
one selfie
as they wait for the next raid

thuds of shellfire
flashes of explosions
and palls of smoke
from the agonizing strip

"yeah!" shouts amos
"fuck yeah!" sobs shlomo
"woooooo-ohhhh" grunts bram

a round of hi-tens
and they down the beers

harar and jijiga
warsaw
rotterdam
london
dresden

hamburg
chongqing
guernica
hiroshima
nagasaki
philadelphia
hanoi
beirut
belgrade
mururoa
grozny
kabul
baghdad
gaza
gaza
gaza...

fascists in different eras and
under different flags
have always had a flair for
crashing down cities
bodies
and spirits

their progenies chill on viewpoints with
a hot dog in one hand
and a binocular in the other

and enjoy the show

“there is no rationality in the nazi hatred”
primo levi wrote
“consciences can be seduced and obscured again”
and again
and again...

the aircrafts are coming back
the iphones are ready

“another beer, guys?”

(written after reading harriet sherwood’s article “israelis gather on hillsides to watch and cheer as military drops bombs on gaza”, the guardian, 20 july 2014)

Fiction.

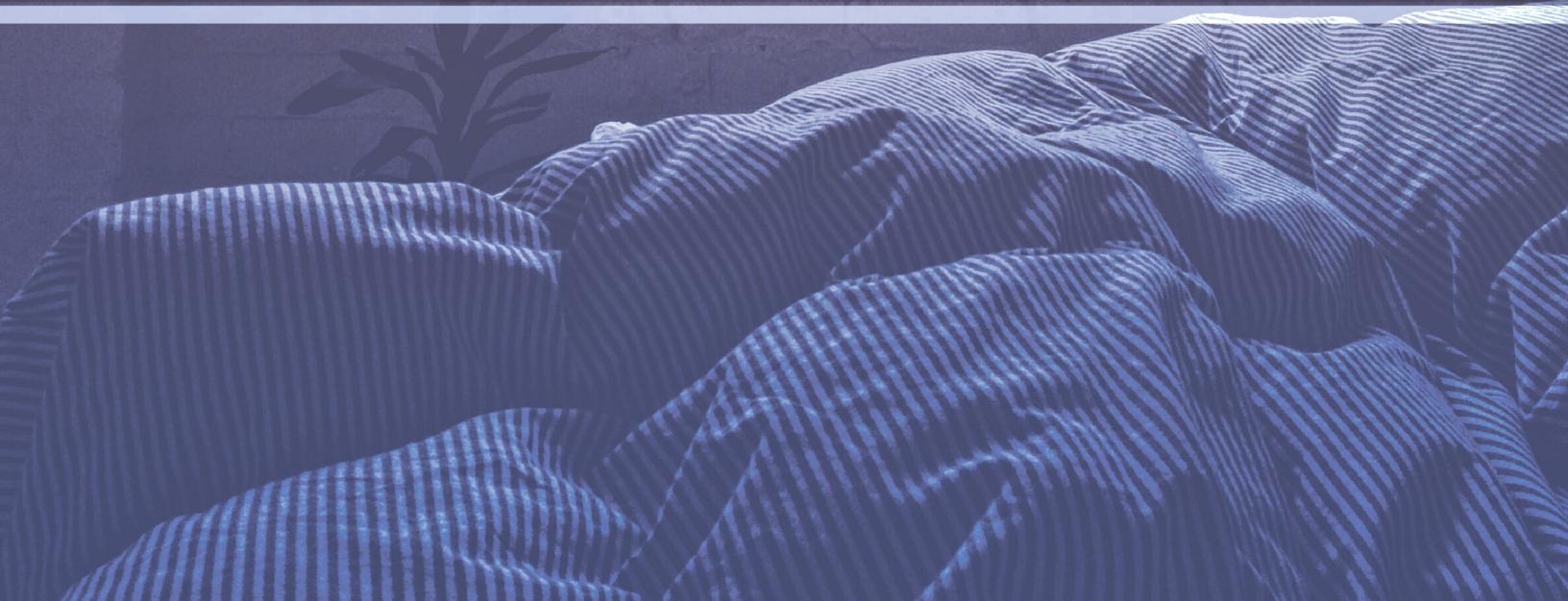
I EXHORT YOU ALSO TO TAKE PART IN THE GREAT COMBAT, WHICH IS THE COMBAT OF LIFE, AND GREATER THAN EVERY OTHER EARTHLY CONFLICT.

-PLATO



Hastings Sunrise

Emily MacDonald



She found a way to make it work. Slicing buttery avocado in morning light, watching boys skateboard in the streets below, scattering orange caps and their needles — a headache subsides into clarity. Ctrl + Alt + S ly adverbs and adjectives. This breakfast is sugar free.

Try to find the right ly adverb for striking through ly adverbs and adjectives. When she kisses the one she loves, they taste coffee instead of the stale paste of alcohol and cigarettes laminated onto the surface of a hot tongue.

Last week she thought in speculative words. Ones that taunt and depress. This week she thinks in images. Ones that inspire and delight. Genuine pleasure alive and useful without diamond remnants on a powered LP, cat-calling and condescending minutes later, distracting expensive dissatisfaction. She is no longer paranoid of others laughing behind blinds. She is itchy, nervous, wildly overconfident. She starts writing for the first time in weeks.

* * *

Eyes flutter open under navy blue textile, light moving like waves across porous fabric, she wakes up swimming. Nothing but water and the feeling of distant shapes waving – teasing at the idea of home - while she floats somewhere between a sky and sea indeterminate from each other. She tries to remember whose idea it was to go back to his apartment and why him and not the others this time. Her legs feel sweaty wrapped up in sheets, knotted together between pale limbs. She always pays attention to their bedding, studying the ways the fabrics interact with each other. She knows from art school that many types of textiles use knots to repair their damage. Beneath hot sheets, a fleshly metronome ticking tries to catch up with blood pounding in a dehydrated head, legs sticky with a hot paste smeared on the inside of her thighs in lamp light that she mourns on hangover Mondays, abrasive and dry.

Her limbs draped over the bed, face resting on his mattress, neck cranked upwards in his unsightly direction. There is nowhere else to look except at him, standing in front of the window, at the back his sweaty, skinny, hairy legs, too confident in their prepubescent boxer shorts.

“See that blonde over there? I imagine she used to hate herself less,” he says, gesturing outside the window.

She gets up and walks towards the window not looking for the blonde he mentions. If she were to ask the blonde what she liked most, she would probably say: Art (the important kind museums deem brilliant), cold-pressed coffee, Instagram and thinking about her life.

Garbage trucks spilling dirty bits of foil, the light they reflect off creating contrast to illuminate anything in opposition. The sound of trucks stopping and starting drowns out broken lyrics shouted from the mouths of buskers across the street, and she wants to shut them out. Turning over secondhand blue jeans with her tiny bare feet, finds his last beer. Breaking aluminum with brittle nails, warm lager hisses, spits at her.

The depression is sudden. That punctual melancholy, a subtle invitation to dwell, to reconsider her undergraduate as a mere exercise in time management. How opportune. She

pulls the broken storm window closed. Muting life outside makes the sound of her heartbeat in her throat louder. And she chokes.

“What about you?” she asks.

“Well if it were up to me, I wouldn’t mind so much,” he says. “I really have no control over that. Plus, it’s Sunday. God and I don’t fight on Sundays, we’re just always drunk together.”

“It’s, ‘God and I don’t fight on Sundays. We just get drunk together.’ I bought you that book after the writing seminar”

“I’m surprised you read that one. I thought you were just trying to impress me.”

* * *

She pulls on her dirty socks, leaves the navy blue sheets behind in a pile. Wild-eyed and skinny, talking to herself the whole way to a friend Nick’s house to use his shower, share a stale bagel. They start talking about art school and how they’re going to make money. They try to decide what they want more: to live in the emptiness of Alaskan ice with a rifle and a tent; or go to Berlin and romanticize living in an SRO on top of a used book store and write poetry about the man who works downstairs. Conversation couldn’t solidify their plans. She tells him she hates painting self portraits because it becomes clear that she never looks the way she feels. Instead, she writes stories focused on plot and structure. She wouldn’t have to know if her characters looked the way they felt or the way she felt on the page for someone else’s eyes.

* * *

The first time her first-year English professor sees her smoking outside he says, “See, that could be it! Motivation: can’t have a cigarette until you’ve finished the sixth paragraph.” He’s smiling, awkwardly seductive, cunning - like she imagined a first-year English professor to be. She explains confidently to him that it’s an integrated process. “Every morning still slightly dreaming, light a cigarette and push smoke out of tight lungs into a digital screen lit lightly, glowing with the dawn outside.” She had no idea what she was talking about. Her fourth-year professor now in her ears: Never give yourself the best lines. Ctrl + Alt + S.

* * *

She presses the digits into the calculator without looking up to make sure she entered them right. She gets upset when the math is wrong, and she doesn’t know what number 1 through 100 she could have entered wrong. She smashes the calculator and wonders what the fucking point was in using one at all. She wonders if she’s the only one who does this. Aware of the mistake and the solution. Calculating apathy and ambiguity seemed like a useless task to begin with. Instead, still wild-eyed and skinny, the other studio tenants listening to her clicking and pedantic murmurings on the other side of the building’s thin walls. Ctrl + Alt + S ly adverbs. Calculating. Repeatedly.

* * *

The first boy she fell in love with. They walked fast and paced their sentences with the sound of strangers passing by. They were talking about nothing. They walked in and out of alleys in a neighborhood they'd never been to in a city that felt strangely like home. When wrapped up in his descriptions, the residue of a dream smeared all over his face. On the long walk back, he lied through yellowed teeth and tried to make it real for her.

But it was that cloud of school children that made them silent, and they let it swallow them and their trains of thought. It marched towards them in unison, beaming with hungry eyes, fruit rollups, Slurpees, little bruised knees and a contagious need to touch everything — to feel everything. They're ripping branches off the canopy trees, punching each other's shoulders, pulling on tiny pig tails, leaving spit on the sidewalks, dragging sticks and banging them on electrical boxes. Electrical boxes with their irrelevant warnings and unwarranted salutary invitations.

They turned another corner they didn't recognize and kept shopping for words like domesticated women filling their cold metal frames without lists. Electrical boxes labeled with irrelevant warnings, he would tell her. And she kept shopping for words. Now she wonders what his new girlfriend's lipstick looks like on the coffee mugs she left behind at his apartment.

* * *

"There is a space for more meditative prose, for verisimilitude, in your work that I think you're afraid of," the professor says. She thinks she sees him scratch his balls.

She doesn't look at him, instead focusing out the window. She notices the way people move single file through a narrow passage of sidewalk below, barely acknowledging each other. Eyes colliding with coldness, ceramic cued crashing and rolling, wandering between the liminal space of being here and being somewhere else. She notices the way the sidewalk separates the bus stop and the bar behind it stacked with SROs, the building block leftovers of the city planners. That bar is always playing TLC or Led Zeppelin. You can hear it from the bus stop below. She thinks about what their conversation must sound like over \$3 pints of yellow lager, and if they would sound like the conversations she's had on those same stale, mint green tables. Color is something she avoids in her writing. It is too tangible, an intimacy maybe better avoided. She thinks about how their breath smells, stories spilling out of out of toothless smiles, lying to themselves in an exchange under flickering lights. And the crash of ceramic pool balls carries a weight out into the street. Sonic patterns finding their way up to his window on the fifth floor, ceramic cued crashing and rolling.

If she does it enough she knows what to expect: filling her lungs, coating the inside of her nose and down her throat. It is predictable and something she can control. She can't control the way he looks at her or the way you are looking at her now - a trace of defect in affect, subtle imperfections displaced onto a character and mistaken for literary effect.

“There is a difference between a character who is stagnant,” he starts, “the character who actively engages with their setting, and the character who is affected, who fails, and who overcomes by way of risk, by way of the choices they make. Without internal depth, you are telling me that you don’t know your character. She acts as a sign post to move plot along. Your focus on structure, on plot — it’s overbearing and I don’t know who this character is.” He never looks at her, eyes always on her manuscript. She notes the antonyms to stagnant. Flowing. Alive. Something about water and how her father never taught her how to swim.

* * *

Inside her backpack this week is a literary magazine she borrowed from her professor. She read it out loud to people and found ways to integrate parts of it into conversation like a kid in class sharing irrelevant personal anecdotes that everyone hates them for. She is sceptical of power relations that come with disseminating education and wonders if she was ever really perceived as imposing at all. The one she usually reads is Lauren B. Davis’s, “Lies, Lies and More ... Fiction,” where she wrote: “There was just drinking and the lying I was telling about drinking, about writing, about caring about anything except drinking.” She thinks about Lauren B. Davis. She thinks about a recurring paradox in her life — to feel nothing or to feel things in extremes, tricking the mind into thinking the highs outweigh the lows and that the lows are worth the highs and how people are good at this. It’s not specific to writers, artists or musicians, but the culture really likes to perpetuate the stereotype. For a creative person it’s dangerous — a strange cultural addiction to melancholy and nihilism sedative in its nature. We had the experience but missed the meaning — an important point T. S. Elliot once wrote. And she left the blanks for the reader to fill in. An unrealized breakthrough that would start when she stopped drinking and started writing.

* * *

She knows she needs to catch the bus soon. The one where orange caps and their needles, scattered by the steps of strangers to permanence, rest on hot pavement. They collect in the entrance of the doorway — a strange cave, sheltered, permits sleep. 7 something something E Hastings. A golden number 7 always swings loose when someone screams to another person upstairs and slams the door behind them. They’re always screaming and slamming that door. On her way home for the first time in days she waits for the 135 on the other side of the street and watches the swinging number 7. When the sun goes down she watches the moths hover outside the small window on the door and try to eat the light inside. ■



ABOUT THE COVER ARTIST



Above - Tiago Salgado

Tiago Salgado is a street artist from Lisbon, Portugal, who goes by the pseudonym “Regg.” He was initially attracted to street art through the work of Banksy, whom he found both artistically and intellectually stimulating.

Many of his works are massive in scale, making them more akin to murals than standard paintings. He often incorporates animals or other natural phenomena and anthropomorphizes them, a combination that often results in a humorous but poignant final product.

He’s artistically diverse, often working within the realms of digital art and traditional painting. His latest artistic endeavor is a combination of a painted canvas inside of a wooden frame that has painted thread sewn from top to bottom, which he says is his own attempt to “push the boundaries of what painting is.”

Q: What got you into street art?

A: Painting in the street is exciting. My college was in Santarem, Portugal, a kind of a strange and lonely place, and there was no street art (or any kind of art). It’s such an incredible feeling painting outside and seeing people react to it the next morning.

Q: What inspired you to experiment with mixed media?

A: I don’t have a preferred material for my art. I’m used to creating with the stuff I have at hand. Sometimes this doesn’t do justice to the work but I think I have to be practical or else I end up not doing anything. I also don’t like to restrict myself to any kind of medium just because it’s “supposed” to be like that.



It just so happens that applying paint with a brush is the way I prefer. Digital comes close, though.

Q: Do you prefer to work on the side of buildings or on canvas?

A: Neither of them. Outside I get a lot of sun, communicate with people and paint giant murals. Sometimes the lookout for police can be annoying, but I've never had serious trouble with them. Inside the studio, everything becomes more personal. It's my little world, where I have control over the way I apply the paints, draw and rotate the canvas.

Q: What do you consider to be the primary message of your work?

A: There's no direct message to my work. Most of the times I try to paint my feelings and thoughts which don't necessarily translate well to painting. When I paint my most inner thoughts, that's when they resonate with people, and inevitably they start to get meanings out of them. At the end of the day, visual impact trumps complicated explanations any day. ■

**ALRIGHT,
THAT'S IT.**



**YOU CAN GO
HOME NOW.**