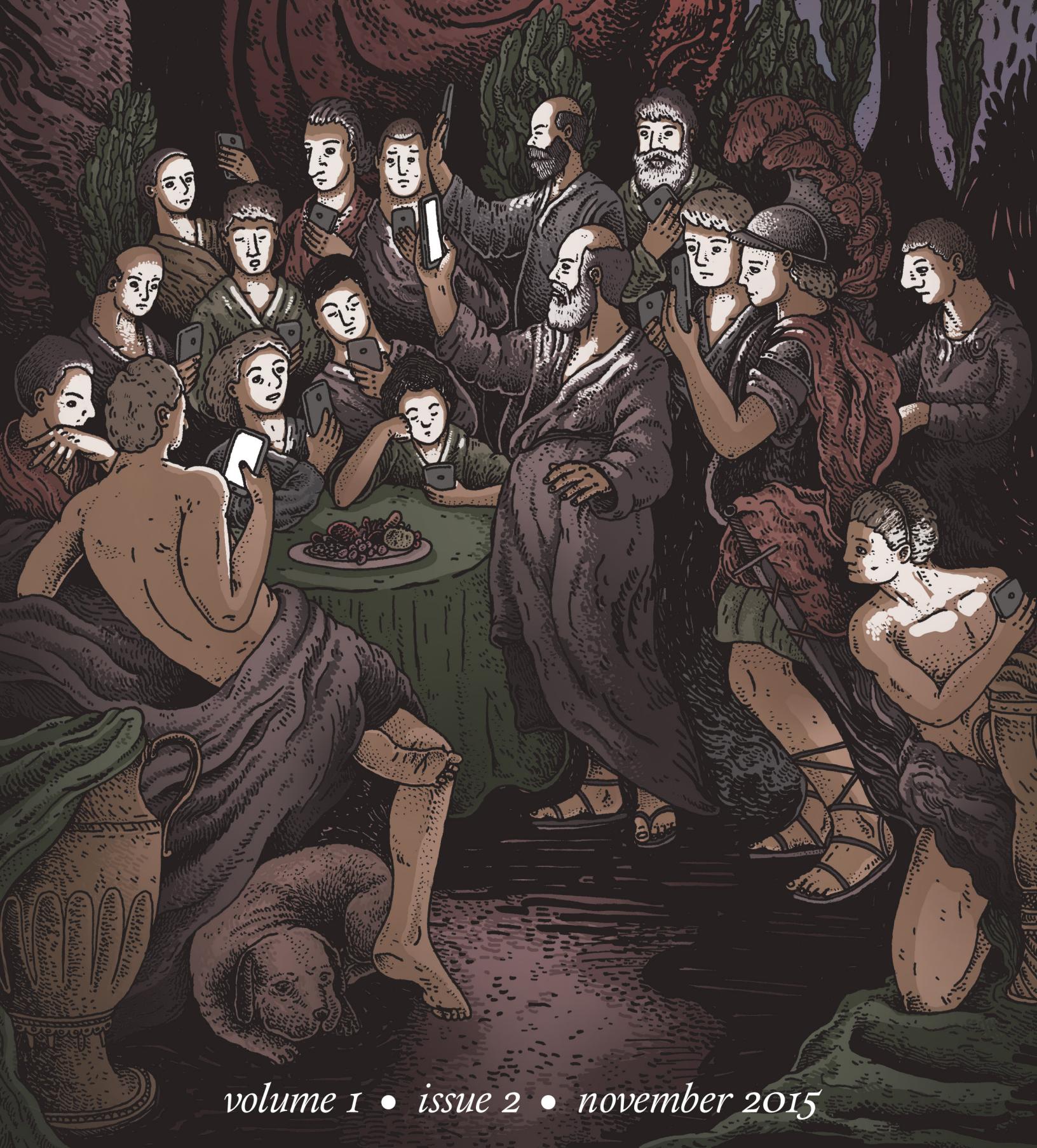


# SUNSTRUCK



volume 1 • issue 2 • november 2015

# Dear Readers,

Humans have created wonderful and terrible things over the course of their existence. From shining cities to majestic art to incredible technological advances, we have made our mark on the face of this world. Our creative capabilities seem endless when viewed from a historical perspective. Every new age builds upon the industry of former generations, expanding and enhancing the face of civilization.

Rene Descartes believed that it was man's duty to utilize technological and scientific advances to render ourselves as the "masters and owners" of nature. Francis Bacon echoed similar sentiments, albeit with more religious overtones, declaring, "Only let mankind regain their rights over nature, assigned to them by the gift of God, and obtain that power, whose exercise will be governed by right reason and true religion." Those statements were made centuries ago, and man has abided by them dutifully.

However, in our current situation, it's clear that the attitude towards our environment advocated by Descartes and Bacon has come at a cost. Our advancement has not been without consequences. The environment is beginning to show signs of exhaustion, and the resources we use to manufacture our lifestyle has created regions of never-ending violence. The bureaucratic institutions that govern our lives, while revolutionarily efficient, are faceless and place value on the bottom line over the experience of those that fall under their domain.

It is crucial that we fully examine the phenomena that we produce, and that we maintain a healthy dose of skepticism about our ability to manipulate our surroundings. More often than not, one man's luxury comes at the expense of another man's, or another environment, harm.

This is not to say that all innovation is malevolent. Recent advances in the field of computer science have essentially democratized information, and breakthroughs in physics have demystified many aspects of the world around us. But we must ensure that our advancement and the way in which we safeguard civilization places life at the forefront of our priorities.

This month, *SunStruck Magazine* examines the creations of humans: their wonder, their terror and the lessons they can teach us about the world we live in. The work contained in this issue takes an unflinching look at the world we've built for ourselves and the way it affects our everyday lives.

Sincerely,

- Co-Founder, Art Director  
*Adam Emerson*

- Co-Founder, Editor in Chief  
*Caleb Downs*

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# NON-FICTION

ETHICAL  
THEORY IS  
BROKEN

Alex LeNail  
pg. 01

THE  
ALL SEEING  
EYE

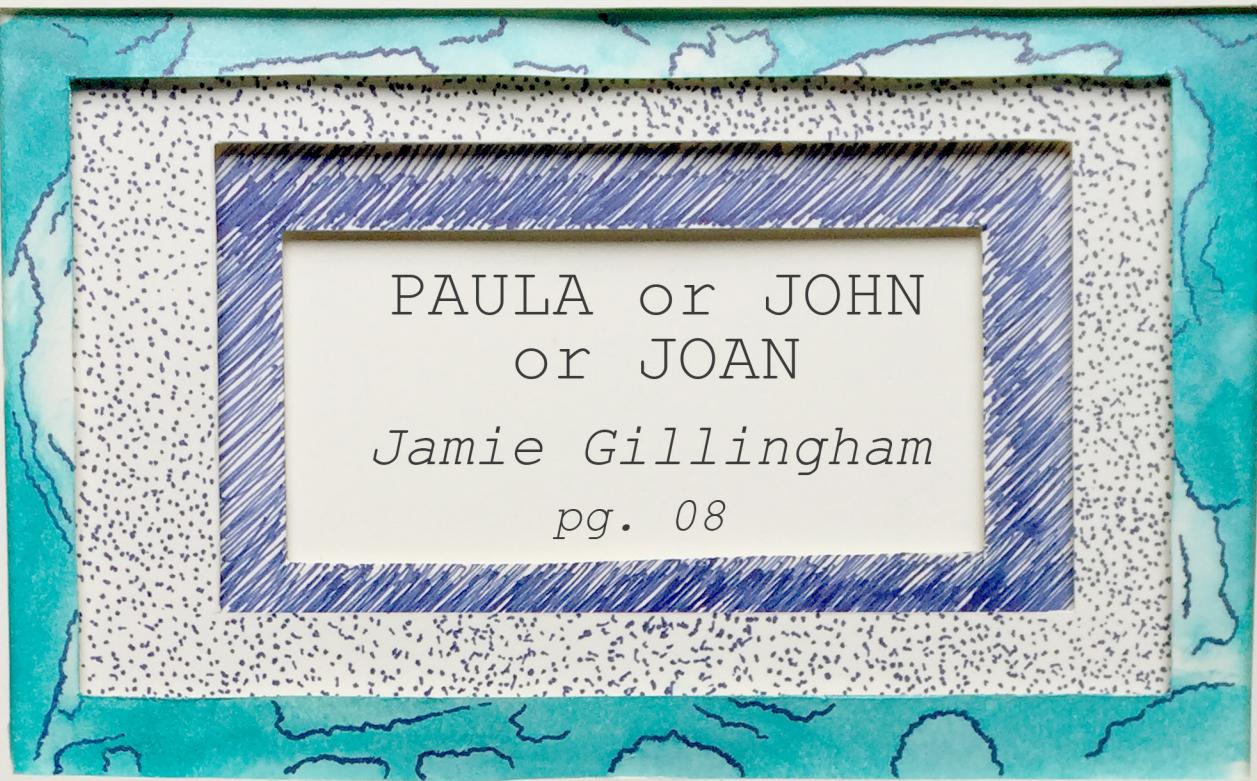
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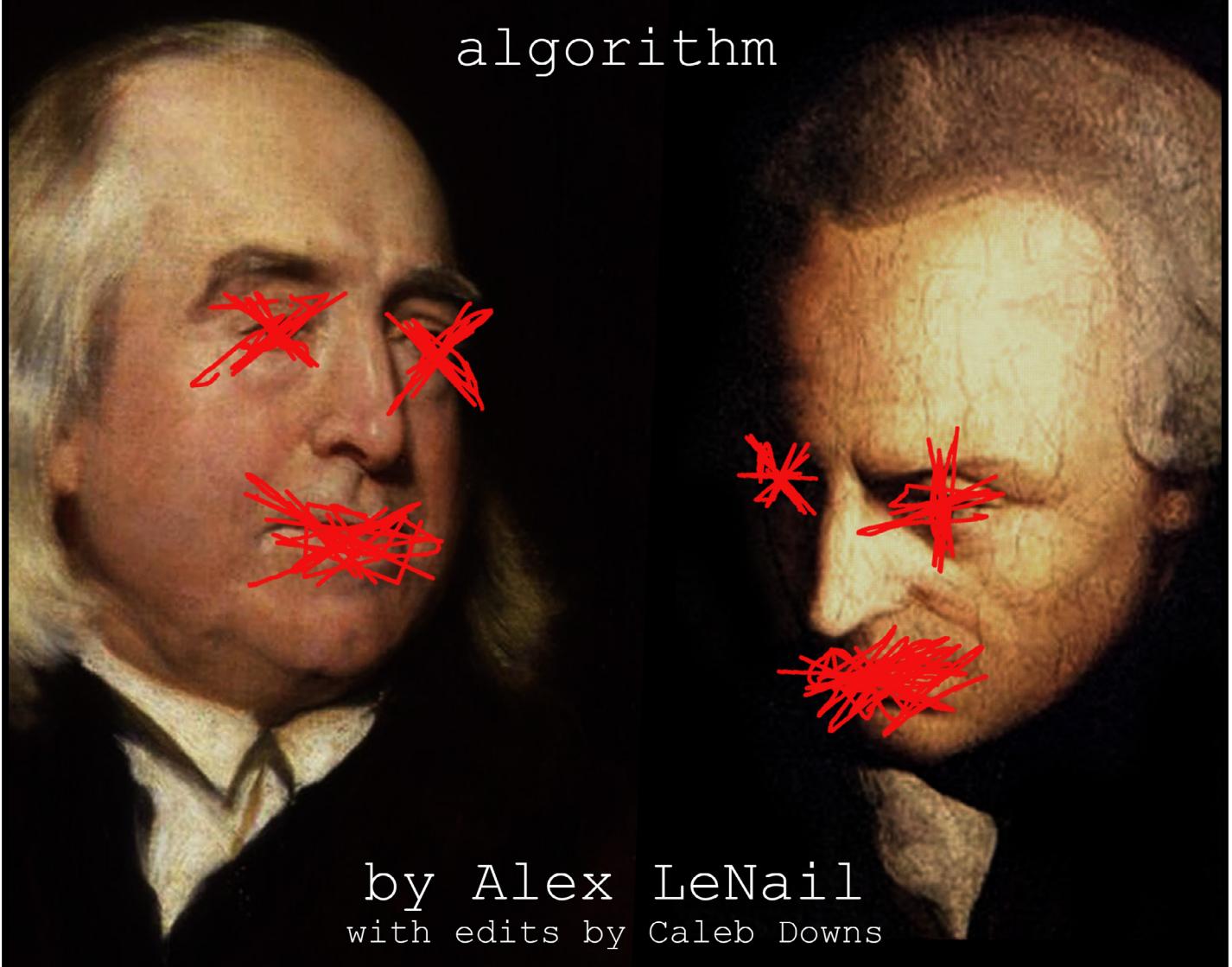
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“It is a grand and beautiful sight to see man emerge from obscurity somehow by his own efforts; dissipate, by the light of his reason, the darkness in which nature had enveloped him; rise above himself; soar intellectually into celestial regions; traverse with giant steps, like the sun, the vastness of the universe and - what is even grander and more difficult - come back to himself to study man and know his nature, his duties, and his end.”

- Jean-Jacques Rousseau  
*Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*

# ethical theory is broken:

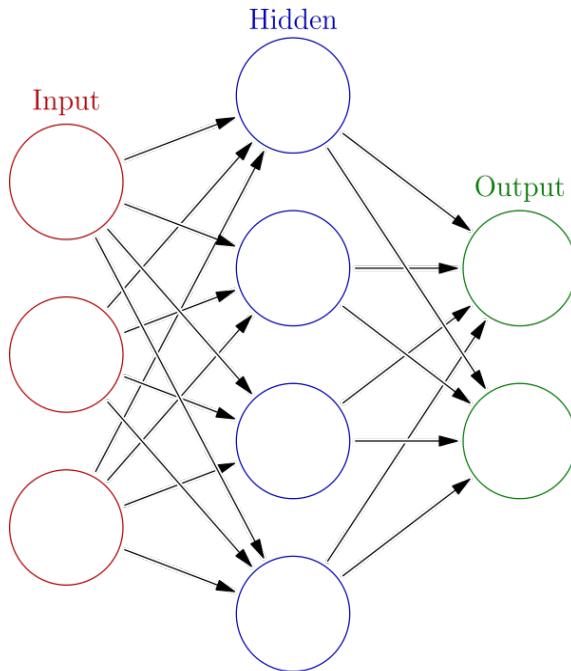
an analogy  
with the  
neural network  
algorithm



by Alex LeNail  
with edits by Caleb Downs

**D**iscussions on the subject of ethics, especially of the abstract variety, in which seemingly logical postulations about the nature of morality form structures for decision-making processes, are not only entirely futile but morally hazardous. Certain ethical systems, like utilitarianism and deontology, have demonstrated over time that they are unable to account for the “grey areas” that make up the bulk of the human experience.

However, recent advances in the fields of machine learning and artificial intelligence have provided us with a way to restructure discussions on ethics so that they may reveal truer insights about our decision-making processes. Before explaining exactly how they do so though, a rudimentary understanding of machine learning and artificial neural networks is necessary.



Artificial neural networks (hereafter referred to simply as “neural networks”) were inspired by the human brain decades ago. Within the brain, neurons send out patterns of electrical input signals. Dendrites receive these signals, process them and send an output signal based on the input they received. There are numerous other complexities in the brain, but it was that aspect of the brain’s operations that inspired the creation of neural networks.

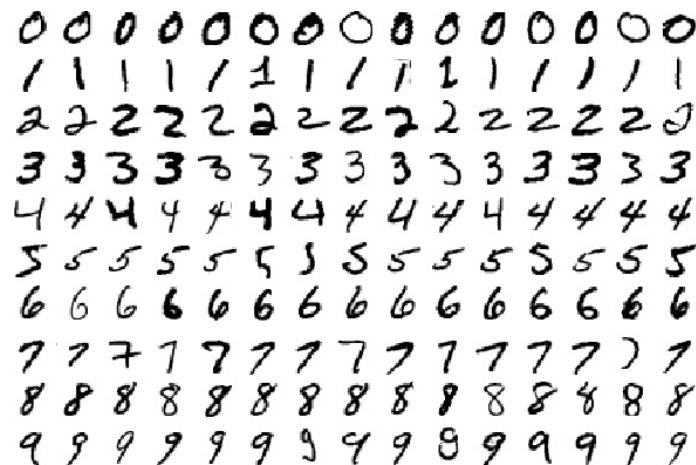
Today, neural networks are a class of algorithms within the realm of machine learning, a field of

computer science that deals with algorithms designed to recognize simple patterns and learn over time.

One can imagine a neural network like interconnected layers of “neurons.” The first layer sends input signals to the subsequent layer via artificial dendrites to produce some output, much like in the brain. However, the neurons are only able to send signals if they receive enough input signals from the previous layer of neurons to exceed some threshold.

The most important feature of a neural network is that it has the ability to update itself as it processes input data and determine what the proper thresholds are on its own. This allows the algorithm to actually learn from the inputs it receives.

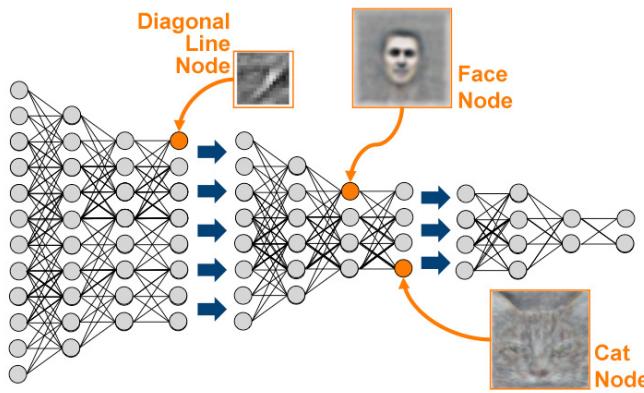
Generally speaking, neural networks take numerical features from some input - pixel density, text patterns, etc. - and attempt to find the thing they represent. The classic problem of neural network algorithms is recognizing handwritten digits, a task with which humans have no problem.



In the above image, the input is a picture and the output is a number. From a computer’s vantage point, the task is rather difficult, because the machine’s representation of each of the digits is a long string of pixel intensity values. Our visual cortices quickly extract higher level features from this pixel data (9, 8 and 6 have loops; 1, 2, 7 have straight bars), and assemble them into even higher level representations of the input, until the meaning, or in this case, the actual number, is derived from the raw image data.

A neural network is “deep” if the topology of the neural network has many hidden layers, which are

layers of neurons between the input and output layers that transform input data into recognizable information for the output neurons to process. This is the origin of the nomenclature “deep learning,” which represents a class of algorithms that learn to recognize patterns more complex than lines or shapes, such as faces, or, famously, cats.



This genre of neuromorphic computation has existed for decades—the recent hubbub about deep learning comes from the fact that this class of algorithms scales rather well with large data sets and computer processing power. Other types of algorithms don’t benefit as much from additional information or processing power. This means that with the progression of Moore’s law, which basically states that computer processing power doubles every two years, deep learning algorithms overtook domains in which they were traditionally outperformed.

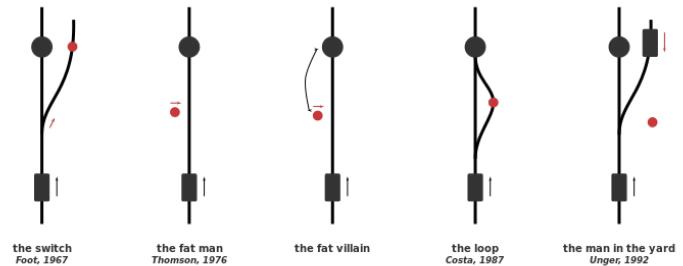
Deep learning is changing the way many artificial intelligence tasks are being carried out. If you have a smartphone, you probably have a voice assistant (Siri or Google) both of which rely on deep learning to decode your speech into language and decode your language into meaning. This approach is quickly becoming ubiquitous in a variety of artificial intelligence tasks. But what does this have to do with ethics?

\* \* \*

The canonical ethical dilemma used to gauge popular moral leanings and probe young students in ethics classes on their biases is called the trolley problem.

It is formulated by Wikipedia in the following way:

*There is a runaway trolley barreling down the railway tracks. Ahead, on the tracks, there are five people tied up and unable to move. The trolley is headed straight for them. You are standing some distance off in the train yard, next to a lever. If you pull this lever, the trolley will switch to a different set of tracks. However, you notice that there is one person on the side track. You have two options: (1) Do nothing, and the trolley kills the five people on the main track. (2) Pull the lever, diverting the trolley onto the side track where it will kill one person. Which is the correct choice?*



Additional variants of the problem posed by later philosophers modify the original premise, for example the “Fat Man Scenario” developed by American philosopher Judith Jarvis Thomson:

*As before, a trolley is hurtling down a track towards five people. You are on a bridge under which the train will pass, and you can stop it by putting something very heavy in front of it. As chance may have it, there is a very fat man next to you. Your only way to stop the trolley is to push him over the bridge and onto the track, killing him to save five.*

Or further, the “Fat Villain” in which the fat man on the bridge is the man who tied up the five men on the tracks. Or, “The Loop,” where you must actively choose to kill a man to prevent the death of five rather than simply choosing the death of one over the death of five.

Ethicists claim that depending on your response to these scenarios, you are a follower of either utilitarian or deontological ethics.

Utilitarianism (or consequentialism), first developed by the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham, is

the notion that actions have consequences and the most ethical action is defined as that which leads to the best outcome. It is most famously summed up in the phrase “The ends justify the means.”

Deontological ethics, often referred to as “Kantianism” after its founder Immanuel Kant, is the stance that individuals have a moral duty to adhere to a rules-based decision procedure (i.e. killing is wrong, no matter the consequences). The motives and intentions of a person who carries out an action are the sole basis of its morality, rather than the outcomes of that action.

The way humans respond to the trolley problem sheds some light on the nature of the gap between human decision-making and these two famous ethical approaches. Recall the first scenario: “The Switch,” in which the decision to save five results in the death of one. What would you do?

Most people will flick the switch. However, hardly anyone claims they will throw the innocent fat man to his death, even though from a utilitarian standpoint, the outcomes are identical. If most would flick the switch (anti-deontology) but not push the fat man to his death (anti-utilitarianism), then a majority of polled humans don’t abide by either of them. Yet, many people devote themselves to coming into alignment with one of these systems. This misguided endeavor results from old, broken ethical rhetoric being allowed to retain a primacy it should have ceded long ago. These two systems, endlessly debated, do not actually drive our decision-making, nor should they.

Abstract ethical debates seem to eternally revolve around the merits and costs of these two approaches to decision making. Both systems are well-defined and logical, but humans hardly ever abide by either of them.

\* \* \*

Ethics fundamentally concerns itself with the rightness of decisions. In theory, an ethical system can be formalized as some function on the domain of the infinite set of scenarios and decisions that maps each of those (scenario, decision) coordinates to a level of righteousness. It should be noted that quantifying right and wrong in this manner is essentially impossible in practice. However, in the realm of abstraction, thinking about ethics math-

ematically allows one to visualize decision-making processes.

Most ethical discussions revolve around morally hazardous (scenario, decision) subspaces and boundary conditions. The trolley problem, for example, is such a subspace, which helps us gauge the general shape of the “ethics function” a person abides by.

Under this analogy, if we temporarily assume all decisions are either right or wrong, with no option in between, learning ethics becomes akin to the common task of binary classification in machine learning, which separates elements of any given set into two groups. Let’s extend this analogy a little further and see what we find.

Deontology, recall, is a simple analysis of the space of decisions: in any situation, some set of decisions is always wrong, independent of outcome. In the analogy to machine learning, this system of ethics maps to decision stump models, which make predictions based on the value of a single input. These models are some of the most naïve and simplistic in machine learning.

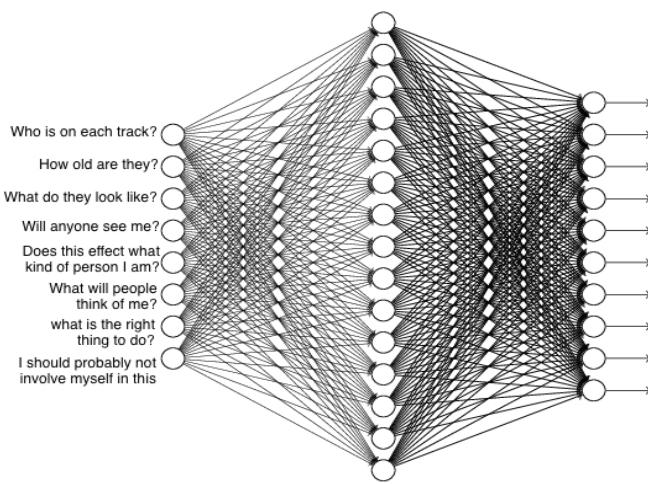
Utilitarianism evaluates likely outcomes of each decision and ascertains which one to take based on the results of that analysis. In machine learning, similar evaluations are made through feature transformations. Feature transformations occur when a set of widely varying (non-linear) inputs are processed into well-defined (linear) outputs. Likewise, utilitarianism posits that the moral rectitude of a decision has varied inputs but a predefined outcome, namely that which causes less harm. Once it has been determined which outcome causes less harm, ethical decisions are simple, according to utilitarianism.

But decisions aren’t made in either of these ways, nor should they be. Neither of these models accurately nor satisfactorily approximates the distinction between right and wrong or describes how humans face ethical choices. There’s some amount of subtlety for which these models can’t account. They’re far too mechanical to cope with all of the grey areas of human existence.

\* \* \*

How might a more complex machine learning model approach the task of discriminating be-

tween right and wrong (situation, decision) coordinates? Imagine for a moment a neural network's approach.



What are the hidden layers and internal nodes that transform our sensory data into recognizable information in this metaphorical algorithm? They are each unique transformations of the features of the (situation, decision) coordinates into deeper, less articulable, yet more salient features. They are the concepts and ideals which as a whole represent the inexpressible notions of right and wrong.

When confronted with the trolley problem, humans first envision the scenario. They then pull from any experiences that are similar by a variety of analogies and approximate values for a huge number of variables (How does this affect me? What are the legal ramifications? Etc.). They do all this while making many predictions and assumptions about numerous potential decisions at once. They finally choose one of the imagined decisions they are most drawn to by some inexpressible intuition, which they may subsequently seek to justify, perhaps even using utilitarian or deontological rhetoric.

Humans flick the switch but refuse to push the fat man for reasons they can hardly express. We don't have the declarative semantic structures to handle all the complexity of our decision-making. Instead, we use metaphorical language, describing situations as "grey areas."

However, we usually make good decisions the vast majority of the time, because decision-making is a task for which we have an extraordinary aptitude, greater than any mechanistic model, greater than we can even describe in words. Deontological

ethics and utilitarianism are not only wrong; they dramatically undersell human potential.

Our behavior has been meticulously refined for our entire lives, performing an optimization algorithm that researchers in the field of machine learning have yet to invent. Given a situation, we perform a series of deliberations based on the inputs we receive through our senses. A combination of contextual cues, instincts, learned motives and ideas provide an intuition of rightness, which is the source of our decisions.

Jeremy Bentham and Immanuel Kant were pioneers of ethical thinking in their time, but the fact that humans have flouted their teachings for centuries indicates they must have missed something. Abstract ethical arguments around these two simplistic paradigms only serve to undersell our own capacity for righteous action and may lead us to worse decisions.

Machine learning and neural networks provide a framework and language for re-examining the human decision-making process from a mathematically regimented standpoint. It also gives us a language to grapple with some of the more sophisticated phenomena it produces, such as ethical decision-making. Thus, in the same way the brain inspired the neural network algorithm, the algorithm can inspire ways of understanding the brain.

*This essay is an adaptation of an essay that previously appeared on Medium. You can find the original post [here](#).*

~CAUTION: MISSING PORTRAIT~  
 &  
 ~I THINK WE'VE MET BEFORE~  
 Alyssa Fernandez

## *I Think We've Met Before*

---



---



*Moss Wall - Diane Tyler*

When you scurried into my lane  
 You begged for it quickly  
 I'm not one to complain  
 I think we've met before  
 As you unloaded on my belt  
 Nervous?  
 Frightened?  
 You looked to be in a rush

I think we've met before  
 As I anxiously waited for you to come closer  
 Did you hold onto your cherries?  
 It might be hard to maintain your composure

I think we've met before  
 Only the fruits of our labor scanned by  
 Even feeling your melons  
 - Boy, was that a surprise

I think we've met before  
 As you grabbed my cucumber to help me unload  
 Helping myself to get the job done

I think we've met before  
 When you smiled at the end  
 Looking back I said, "You saved \$2.49 ma'am."

# *Caution: Missing Portrait*

---



---

I was born a blank canvas  
Draped in my own designs until you came along  
Then decided to paint me blue.

Once you left I hid in red.  
It wasn't enough so I shredded  
Part of the delicate fabric off.  
Now I know that I'm not entirely blue.

-Oh boo hoo.  
Listen to me woo and wail  
Why whine when I whisk away wine  
Winners can't whither still I whittle to a whisper  
Wah, wah.  
Oh boo pathetic me-

I paint a faux white while I  
Lay disengaged  
Roots still shine  
They can see that I'm really  
a beige liar.  
Still I try half heartedly to  
convince.

Bathed in obscurity a blanket of abyss warmth  
I'm black like all others, completely unlike myself.

Black  
Negro  
Noir  
Dark  
Space

Swelled up in this hollow  
I'm the same as you.  
I pretend to hide  
Now I strut behind a curtain  
Before my standing ovation.

Hooray hooray!  
As I perform my final trick  
Watch me matriculate  
And tear my spine from my canvas

Applause applause!  
Encore encore!

Face down on the dirty floor  
I spot my reflection, I finally see me.

*Fiction*

PAULA  
or  
JOHN  
or  
JOAN

JAMIE GILLINGHAM

Dear Michael,

I'm writing to you about something that happened while Joan and I were away. In a sense, I guess it's news, though I hate using that word because it gives a formality to things that frighten me. Progress, more than news, I suppose.

We went to Toronto for two weeks last month, Joan and I, to visit her sister, Paula, and Paula's husband, John. The afternoon after we arrived, we had been walking down Queen Street and the sun was out and I was very hot and I had a hotdog in one hand and a coffee in the other. Before long, I had spilt ketchup all down my shirt. Joan pointed out a nearby thrift shop.

Paula's house is so far, Joan said. Let's just go in and get you a cheap t-shirt. That'll do until we get home. You can change before dinner.

You're right, I said, and the two of us crossed the street.

The store was split down the middle, men's on one side and women's on the other. Joan and I went to the back corner where the men's t-shirts were kept. I started at one end of the rack and Joan at the other.

What about this one? she said and held up a grey t-shirt with the Toronto Maple Leafs logo on the front.

No, I said, I don't think so. Joan laughed. She knows I'm not a fan.

We continued to rifle through the t-shirts and eventually settled on a red one with the faded logo of Queen on the front. Joan had found it.

This one, she said. You love Queen.

Fine, I said and smiled at her.

I don't love Queen. I don't even particularly like them. I'm not sure why she thought I did. But I did not have the heart to tell her otherwise.

At the till an older woman who wore a large gold and turquoise necklace and matching earrings and perhaps a little too much makeup ran us through.

This must be for you, she said. She smirked and gestured with her head toward the ketchup stain down the front of my t-shirt. It was strange, but I felt embarrassed to be in front of that elegant-looking woman in my soiled t-shirt.

I went into one of the dressing rooms to change clothes and it was after that, on the way out of the thrift shop, that I saw on a mannequin in the window a black wrap-around dress that had a deep V-shaped neckline and a slit up one side. How had I not seen it on the way in? It was all I could do not to tell Joan how perfect it was.

Who could have given this away? I thought. It looked remarkably soft, and new, pitch black without any fading at all. After I made sure Joan had left the store, I took a route towards the exit that led me behind the man-

nequin in order to graze the dress with my hand. There was a brief moment when I did not care whether my wife noticed or not. I increasingly find myself craving those moments.

On the streetcar back to her sister's house, Joan was trying to speak to me about dinner-dates and visiting relatives, but my head felt as though it were coming in and out of focus. I would catch only half of what she said and then return to working out how I might get back to that thrift shop and under what circumstances I could try the dress on without being questioned.

Hollooo, Joan said, waving her hand condescendingly in front of my face.

Yes, darling, I said. I'm sorry. She was getting angry now. I could see it in her face, her anger and her impatience.

She looked at me and said, Paula is cooking dinner tonight. She wants us to dress nicely.

I nodded in consent.

She's always been like that, Joan said. She takes every opportunity to wear a dress.

I wondered if Joan had said that on purpose. I grew anxious. I wondered if she could see it on my face, in plain sight, like a freckle. But it didn't matter, my mind veered back to that thrift shop. Staring not at Joan but at her individual features, as if she were the reflection of who I wished to be, I dreamt of a time when I could wear to dinner a black wrap-around dress with a V-shaped neck and a slit up one side. When I will have no reservations about the choices I make.

Am I ruining her the longer I stay?

Where are you? Joan asked.

I'm sorry, darling, I said. That sounds great. I'll be sure to change for dinner and gestured to my Queen t-shirt. That made her smile and I was glad for it.

The streetcar was crowded and smelt of drying sweat. I was pleased to get off of it.

It was a short walk to Paula and John's house. Once there, Paula offered both Joan and I a drink. She had red wine and I had whisky. We changed and then waited for dinner on the couch, sitting next to one another but not talking, while Paula and John finished in the kitchen. Then, we all sat down to eat.

John had a way of unnerving me, primarily because I sensed that Joan wished I were more that type of man: one whose sureness of himself filled a room. John looked quickly between Joan and me and asked, What did you two get up to today?

Oh, not a lot, I said. You know, just walked around and went sight-seeing. We enjoyed ourselves.

This one, Joan interjected and gestured toward me with a nod, split ketchup from his hotdog all down his shirt, so we had to go into a thrift shop to get him another. She smiled at Paula and John. She did not look at me.

Paula laughed.

John said, I hope the hotdog was worth it.

How about you two? I asked, wanting to steer the conversation away from myself.

I had some things to take care of at the office, John said.

And I had some things to do around the house, Paula said. Then she looked at me and asked, Another whisky?

Yes, please, I said. I considered the way Paula began her sentence with 'And,' as though conjoining her day with John's, despite having spent it apart.

I'll have another glass of wine, Joan said.

The waning light was moving down Joan's face. I put my hand on top of hers on the table. She half-smiled at me and then slipped her hand out from under mine and put it in her lap.

The food is great, I said to Paula as she set down our drinks.

Well, John said, it would be a shame to get it on your shirt. He laughed staunchly. Then he said, I was in there too, though I will say Paula did the majority of the work, and what fine work she's done.

Paula raised her eyebrows playfully at John.

He grinned at her.

Joan briefly touched my thigh underneath the table, which made me feel good. I wanted her to care for me the way John and Paula cared for one another, the way we had cared at one point. Yet, I knew that in three months' time I will break her heart. I felt like a hypocrite.

After dinner, each one of us admitted that we were tired and decided to turn in early. In bed, Joan had her back to me and I ran my hand over her side. Her nightdress was soft to the touch. I thought of the dress in the window display of the thrift shop.

Stop that, she said. Not at my sister's house, not now.

I told her that I was embarrassed by her story at dinner.

You're being ridiculous, she said softly.

I rolled onto my back and left her alone. Before long, I heard her breathing deepen and I knew she was asleep. I lay awake for some time until finally deciding to get out of bed and go downstairs to the kitchen to have a drink, hoping it would put me to sleep.

Easing out of bed, I put on the clothes I wore for dinner as I had forgotten to bring proper pajamas. I crept down the stairs and into the kitchen where I poured a glass of whiskey, sat at the table and drank it, staring out

of the window at Paula and John's car parked under the streetlight.

I started to think about the thrift shop and the older woman who wore too much makeup, the black wrap-around dress with the V-shaped neck and the slit up one side.

I poured another drink.

I stared at the parked car.

12.30 p.m.

Before long I felt drunk and almost unconsciously, I put on my shoes, found the car keys in a bowl on a shelf next to the front door and drove in the direction of the shop. The streets were dark and busy. Pedestrians were darting out without much attention to passing vehicles. Young women in beautiful dresses and sky high heels were walking the streets arm in arm with one another.

I was aware suddenly of how much I had drank.

Further up the street, outside of a nightclub, a line of people, all of whom seemed to be laughing, extended along the building and rounded the corner. Further still, on a quieter part of Queen Street, was the shop. I had nearly driven by before I noticed it. I pulled into an empty space, got out of the car and crossed the street.

I did not go straight to it. Instead, I walked continuously back and forth in front of the window. In the back of my mind, I thought Paula or John or Joan might have heard me leave the house and followed me there. I thought as long as I did not stop walking they would not find out what I was doing.

The lights inside the thrift shop were off and because of the angle of the streetlight I could only partially make out the dress: the V-shaped neck, the slit up one side, the overlapping of the two sections wrapping around one another. Underneath they had placed a pair of black heels.

The distance I walked each way past the shop before turning around gradually decreased. After fifteen or twenty minutes I stopped in front. I stared at the dress through the window, then refocused until the dress gave way to my own reflection in the glass: a weekend beard, a little too drunk. I refocused on the dress. The curve of the mannequin. The slit up one side. The deep neckline.

I had not noticed, but the entrance to the apartments above the thrift shop was to the left of where I was standing and a man who looked to be in his twenties had opened the door and was now standing in the frame.

I could feel him staring at me.

What are you doing, man? he asked. You can't loiter here.

I'm going to buy that dress, I said reflexively and poked the glass with my finger. I'm going to buy that dress.

I had said it and now I could not stop.

That's great, buddy, the man said. But keep moving. You can't hang out

here.

I'm going to buy it for myself, I said.

Alright, the man said. Come back when the place is open. He went back inside.

I said it once more out loud to no one in particular: I'm going to buy that dress, I'm going to buy it for myself.

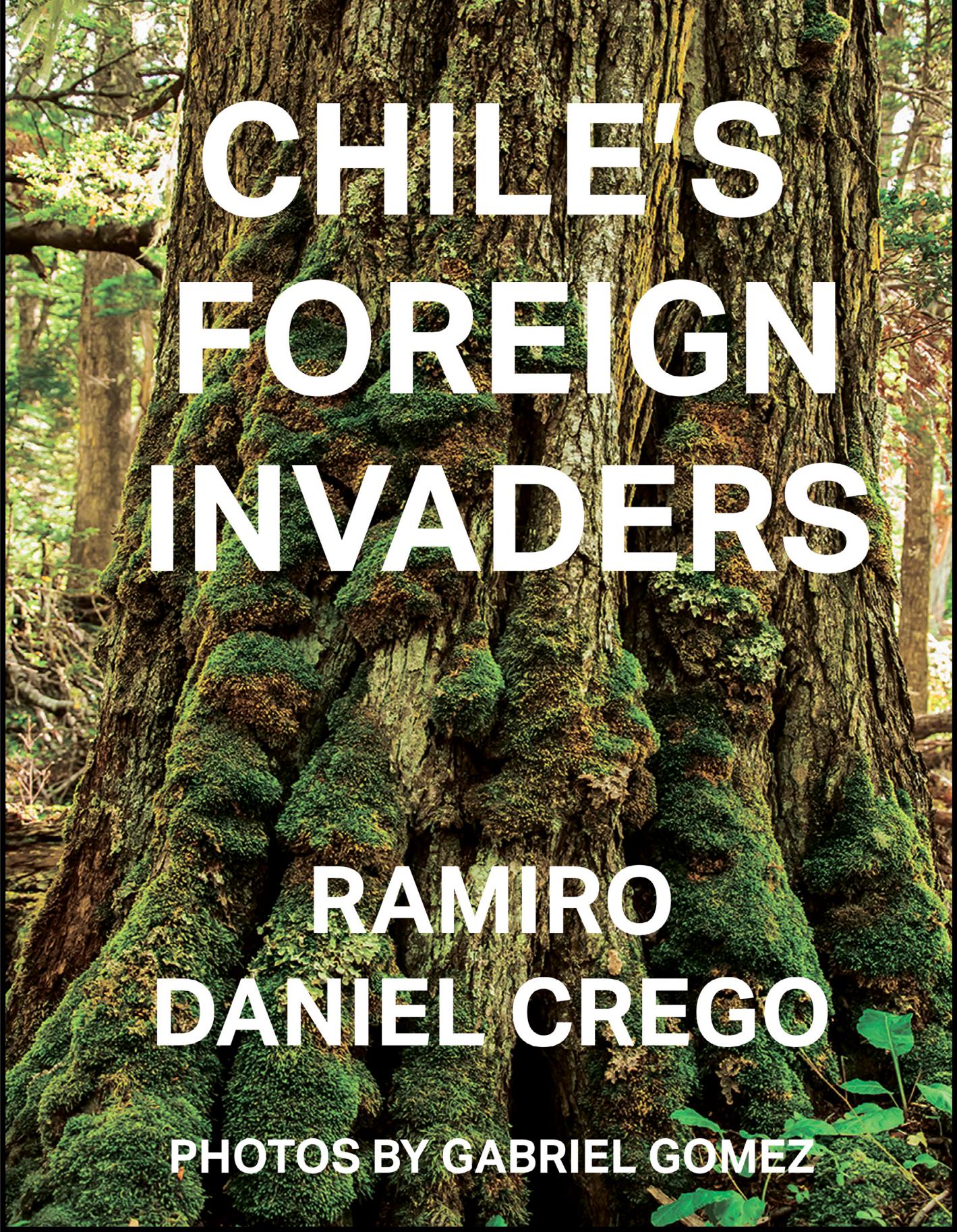
I said that, Michael. I said it out loud to that man.

Can you believe it?

Yours,

S

*Essay*



# CHILE'S FOREIGN INVADERS

RAMIRO  
DANIEL CREGO

PHOTOS BY GABRIEL GOMEZ



*Navarino Island is located at the southernmost tip of the Patagonian mountains in Chile. It is located within the Cape Horn Biosphere Reserve, and is one of the last untouched areas of wilderness on the planet.*

The day begins early in Puerto Williams. Earlier than in other latitudes, as this is the southernmost town of the world and in summer the sun rises between 4 to 5am.

Puerto Williams is located in Navarino Island, within the Cape Horn Biosphere Reserve in Patagonia, Chile. It is one of the last untouched areas of wilderness on the planet. The low human population, large extensions of forests and considerable distance from centers of pollution keep this place pristine, healthy, and wild.

I am conducting my doctoral research on invasive species here. My study concentrates on the impacts of the invasive predator, the American mink. Invasive species are species that expand their range of distribution through a process facilitated by human activities, such as transportation around the planet. This relocation of foreign species commonly affects the native species in some manner, and is one of the main drivers of biodiversity loss worldwide.

Industrial Western society has triggered many radical changes on this planet, among them the loss of certain species. Scientists say that we are facing

a new era of mass extinctions. As a conservationist studying the threat the American mink poses to the native diversity of one of the last pristine areas of the world, one question I'm interested in exploring is why people should care about the effects of invasive species.

At this southern latitude many things are different from other regions of the world. The charismatic megafauna are absent, and there are only six terrestrial mammalian species native to Navarino Island. Birds are the dominant vertebrates, and several species sing every morning. Some of them come from far away to breed. They evolved without mammalian predators. Consequently, they are not afraid of humans nor most other predators walking on the ground.

There are only a few species of vascular plants, compared to the majestic diversity of non-vascular plants. Mosses, liver hoods, and lichens embellish the ecosystem, although their beauty remains largely unperceived by the casual passerby or nature enthusiast scanning for larger animals and plants.



*Top:* A rainbow glides down a mountain in Navarino Island. Scenes of such majestic beauty are not uncommon in these untrammeled lands.

*Left:* To study the ecology of the American mink, Ramiro Crego uses camera traps to monitor their behavior. Over the course of his research he has installed almost 100 such cameras throughout the forests of Navarino Island.

*Right:* The species of trees that grow in Navarino Island are not adapted to live with roots underwater, thus they die when beavers build dams. The situation is different in North America, where beavers and trees co-evolved for millions of years and trees are able to survive in flooded soils.

In the 19th century, this region ignited the imagination of a young naturalist travelling through the area: Charles Darwin. There is little doubt that his experience in the area greatly shaped his later theory of evolution. During that time, European expeditions started to become more frequent in the region, which began an equally important, but unseen process.

Europeans did not arrive alone, and, as has happened with other regions, many other species were transported and introduced to Navarino Island either intentionally (livestock) or unintentionally (rats).



*Beavers on Navarino Island are able to cut down massive trees. They use the branches to build their dams. The trees are utterly defenseless against the beavers.*

It was not until the mid-20th century, however, that the Argentinean government began to pursue the same type of development and heavy resource-use emerging in the West. The wild Patagonia was seen as a desert, and many exotic species were introduced with the goal of enriching the “desert” with northern fauna and developing new industries for the economic future of the region. In particular, the government wanted to develop a fur industry, and in 1942 twenty beavers were released in a lake on Tierra del Fuego Island.

At approximately the same time, muskrats were introduced and American mink farms were established. In the following years, the production of fur did not prosper as well as the populations of these species. Each of these three species – beaver, mink and muskrat – flourished. They successfully established and reproduced in these new forests, eventually expanding into the whole archipelago of Tierra

del Fuego and Cape Horn Biosphere Reserve. The effects of the introduction of these animals to the native ecosystems, however, were substantial.

The native trees that constitute the beautiful forests of Navarino Island are not adapted to survive in flooded soils. But beavers are impressive animals, capable of modifying or engineering the environment around them. They build large dams to create ponds, where they can live and protect themselves from predators. However, there are no predators of beavers on the island, and the trees have no defense. After all, these trees evolved without beavers foraging on them. As a result, when you walk in the forests and cross a river, you can see a vast area full of dead trees and many ponds where the beaver population prospers uncontrollably.

In contrast to the visible effects of beaver behavior on the forest, the mink is not as easily seen, nor is its impact on the ecosystem. That does not mean, however, that their effects are any less drastic. Mink are excellent nocturnal and evasive predators. The birds and small mammals on the island, which have evolved without terrestrial predators, are the definition of easy prey.

For example, the Magellanic Woodpecker – a bird of great aesthetic beauty and one that has a lot of cultural and symbolic value in the region – usually feeds up in the trees in the continent, where the presence of wild cats and foxes taught them the risk of predation at the ground level. In Navarino, however, woodpeckers spend long periods of time eating larvae from fallen logs on the ground. They never experienced high-level predation until the mink arrived, placing them on the mink’s dining menu. Similar things happened with several duck species, which nest on the ground; as well as small rodents that never experienced predation from mink in the past and as a result did not develop anti-predation behavior.

Since my research is focused on finding out more about the mink and its activities, I must have access to them. However, that is easier said than done given the notoriously elusive nature of the animal. Because they are not easy to find, I use camera traps. These are cameras with a sensor that detects heat or movement, registering all animals crossing in front of it. During several months of walking long distances under the unstable weather conditions of Navarino Island, I installed 98 of these cameras

throughout the forests of the island.

From the information I've gathered so far, it has been established that unlike mink in North America who are highly related with aquatic habitats and prefer a water based diet, the mink in Navarino Island tend to prefer a more terrestrial life and diet. As the rivers do not offer much in terms of food here, some mink eat seafood on the marine shore, whereas other mink have moved away from the river banks and travelled towards the forest instead, enjoying a diet of small mammals and birds.

These new inhabitants of the forest create imbalances in evolutionary history. When changes occur in nature, species either adapt or go extinct. This process has happened since life first

appeared on earth. However, the changes imposed by the actions of Western cultures occur at a rate several times faster than those of nature, allowing fewer chances for the affected species to adapt. This is especially significant in island ecosystems, where species evolved in relative isolation. Thus, they have not developed survival mechanisms for externally introduced predators. This trend is becomingly increasingly prevalent on many other islands around the world, such as Hawaii, the Galapagos and New Zealand.

If nothing is done to control the beavers, mink and other introduced species, the new community of animals and plants will follow a different evolutionary line. The landscape will certainly look far different, and many species will be lost.

Despite these environmental changes occurring globally, the question still remains: why should we care about invasive species?

Any question like this will have an answer pertaining to values. For instance, we can argue that

it is economically attractive to control invasive species and protect native animals and ecosystems. Think how much money we would invest in machinery if we had no trees or algae producing the oxygen we need. Similarly, if bees went extinct, we would have to spend large amounts of capital hiring people to hand-pollinate plants so we could have food to eat. In this sense, allowing ecosystems to suffer is simply not economically beneficial.

The answer could also be found by reference to human health. Many invasive species in particular are life-threatening diseases. Smallpox, and measles and other diseases killed thousands of American aborigines when Europeans transported them into the new world, and

syphilis killed many Europeans when the disease was transported from America to Europe. Also, the potato blight (an invasive fungus) led to the famine in Ireland. Or for a more recent example, think about the economic efforts to prevent the Ebola virus from spreading out from Africa.

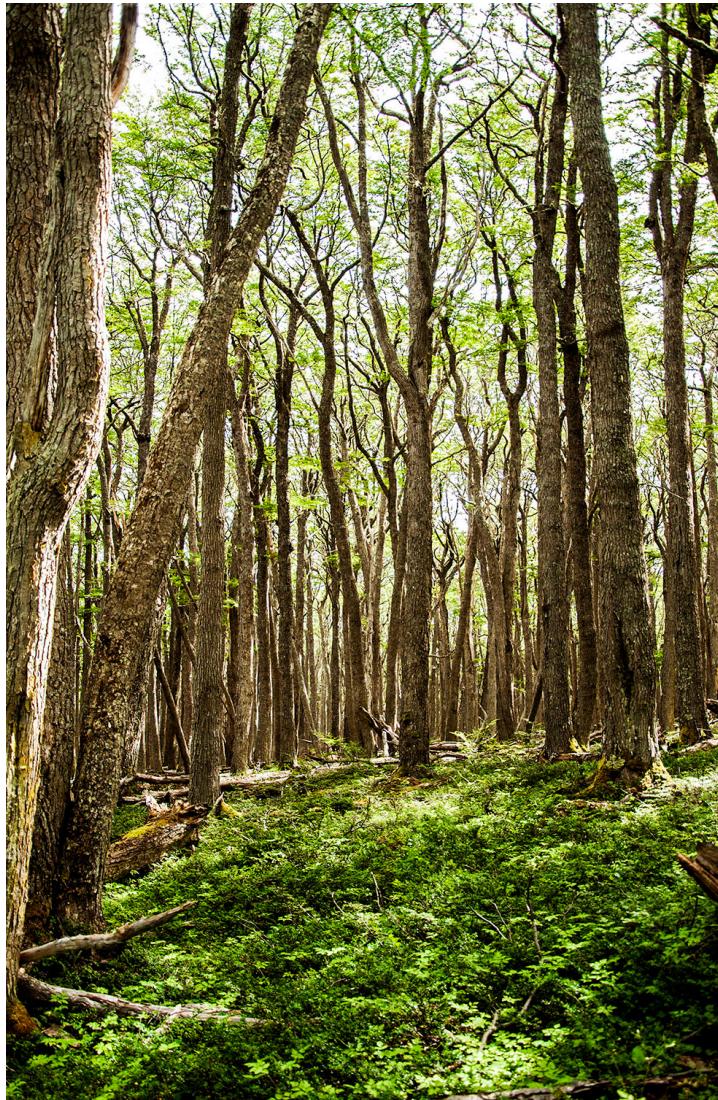
However, there is also another, and perhaps older, response to this kind of environmental problem: protect nature for the sake of nature itself. We are fortunate to live in a geologic time where the diversity of species is at the highest level ever known. This process can be explained by the drifts of continents and the diverse habitats that we can find today on Earth. Continents like Australia and South America have been massive islands for millions of years. This has allowed distinct life forms to evolve over time, giving rise to unique species that have evolved in isolation from other species. The same has happened with many islands, including Navarino Island, where there are species that cannot be found anywhere else on the planet.



*Ramiro Crego walks along the shore of a lake on Navarino Island. Crego is studying the effects of the American mink on the island. His research requires him to travel long distances on foot to set up camera traps so that he can monitor mink activity.*

The uniqueness of these habitats have provided an amazing array of biodiversity.

Yet, biodiversity is now being threatened by Western cultures more than ever before. In a globalized world, ships and planes are bridging all gaps between distant regions, facilitating the relocation of several species. As the rate of intentional or unintentional introductions of species increases, we begin to encounter a situation where ecosystems are becoming more and more similar to each other and where rare species disappear. This process is known as biotic homogenization.



*The light penetrates the forest ceiling and illuminates the understory vegetation, where numerous species of plants, mosses, lichens, and small animals live. The American mink hunts for its main prey, small birds and rodents, in areas like this.*

From my perspective, it is important to protect and ensure the continuation of the diversity that evolution has created over millions of years. That means we need to control the species

that we have introduced to foreign environments, and we also need to prevent the introduction of new ones.

Besides my reasons, as a society the question remains: Why should we think diversity is important? One option is to acknowledge what comes naturally to all of us: our primary love, our love of nature. As philosopher Ricardo Rozzi says, the diversity crisis stems from a lack of experience. Modernity has left us incapable of perceiving the life that surrounds us.

Recent history has proven that rationality cannot create change. Despite all the knowledge we have on climate change, we continue burning oil minute after minute. Change comes from the heart, from our emotions. To appreciate natural diversity, we must learn to love it again. And to do that, we must experience it. Experience the wonder and diversity of nature for ourselves and recognize that nature has a beauty and value completely independent from us. We need to feel that the protection of the unique diversity of Navarino Island and many other unique ecosystems of the world is important.

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I walk in the forest and am fascinated by the life around me with each step I take: the smell and sounds of the forest, the diversity of life surrounding me, so uniquely adapted to the cold temperatures and the wind of these latitudes. Suddenly, I hear the noise of the majestic woodpecker searching for larvae. I see the "rayaditos," small and curious birds, approaching me while making alarm calls just a few steps away. I appreciate the diversity of beautiful mosses growing on a single tree branch.

I instinctually feel that this diversity should be protected against biotic homogenization. Not just because it advantageous to us both, economically or physically. There is something else, too. There is also a sense of tragedy in the destruction of a diverse, natural environment of such aesthetic beauty.

In the words of Darwin, "from so simple a beginning, endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved."

Over time, evolution has created a majestic diversity of life. If we connect and identify with such diversity, we may better understand Darwin's words.



Gold. Fame. Citrus.

The American West's triumvirate of attractions have dried up or disappeared in Claire Vaye Watkins' new novel. What has replaced them is the Amargosa dune sea, a massive, ever-expanding desert extending from California to the Rocky Mountains.

In the pixel promises of satellites it could be the Grand Canyon, its awesome chasms and spires, its photogenic strata, our great empty, where so many of us once stood feeling so compressed against all that vastness, so dense, wondering if there wasn't a way to breathe some room between the bits of us, where we once stood feeling the expected smallness a little, but also a headache where our eyeballs scraped against the limits of our vision, or rather of our imagination, because it was a painting we were seeing though we stood at the sanctioned rim of the real deal.

Watkins places much of the blame for the environmental disaster on man's effort to thwart nature. In order to quench the thirst of urban cities and the wealthy, federal agencies drained aquifers, channeled rivers and drilled holes in lakes. The

earth is a central character in the novel, and it punishes man for his hubris, reminding him that there are greater forces in the cosmos.

"Gold Fame Citrus" follows Luz and Ray, a couple who have decided to live in the new wasteland. It fits them. Luz is a B-list model and former poster child for a conservation movement/propaganda campaign in Los Angeles that utterly failed, and Ray is a military deserter turned surfer-vagabond. One night they come across a child, Ig, who has been raised by delinquents in the forgotten shell of Los Angeles. Luz and Ray kidnap her and begin a journey across the Amargosa, hoping to find some greener, more inhabitable environment in which to raise her.

"Gold Fame Citrus" was Watkins first attempt at writing a novel. "I wanted to do everything a novel can do," she said. The book is a joy to read, and Watkins' creativity is on full display throughout. The novel dexterously shifts from underground talc mines, to bonfire raves, to outer-space views of the desert. Watkins uses numerous narrative devices to tell the story, including imagined desert field guides, personal reference questionnaires, interview notes and poetic third-person narration.

In Watkins' first book, "Battleborn," a collection of short stories that earned numerous awards including the Story Prize and the New York Public Library Young Lions Award, family and history were the two themes her stories orbited around. This is not without reason. In Watkins' own words, she has a lot of material to draw from.

Her father was Paul Watkins, who was at one point Charles Manson's right hand man. Paul was handsome and charming and he brought girls out to Spahn Ranch for the Family's group sex sessions. A month before the Tate-LaBianca murders were committed, Paul became aware of Manson's murderous intentions and left the Family. He later testified against Manson after members of the Family almost burned him to death when they set fire to the Volkswagen van he was sleeping in.

Claire Watkins was born in Death Valley and raised in the Mojave Desert by her mother, Martha. Paul died of Leukemia when she was six. When Watkins was a teenager, her mother was diagnosed with Lyme disease. Watkins says her family "plummeted" after that.

All of this is told with elegance, bravery and masterful prose in Watkins' story "Ghosts, Cowboys." It is truly a work of genius. While the other stories in "Battleborn" aren't quite as breathtaking, they're beautiful, innovative and fearless in their own ways.

I first met Claire at a public reading of "Gold Fame Citrus" at the University of North Texas in Denton. She was kind enough to invite me to an after-party, where we talked about cats, dogs and books. The idea of conducting the interview was brought up, but cats and dogs and books seemed like more appropriate conversation topics at the time, so we went with it.

She spoke to me two days later over the phone for the real interview from her home in Ann Arbor, where she's currently a professor of creative writing at the University of Michigan.

*This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.*

**Q:** You're a professor of creative writing at the University of Michigan. You also founded and co-direct the Mojave School, a creative writing workshop for high school students. What is it that draws you to teaching?

**A:** When I was a student taking creative writing classes, my teachers seemed like the coolest people. I was completely charmed by my idea of their life, which I thought had to do with reading books all day in your pajamas and drinking coffee and writing stories and then being famous. So, I guess I just wanted to try it out. I knew it was very competitive and very hard to publish books and get teaching jobs. But I just thought, "Well, I'll try it, and if I have to do something else, I'll do something else." I never had to do something else. In a way, I fell into my dream job.

**Q:** Would you say it lived up to your expectations?

**A:** Well, not exactly. There were some things that I was of course pretty naïve about. Universities are flawed institutions. Sometimes they're run a lot like a corporation. That's kind of discouraging to learn. Some are better than others, and certain situations are better than others. I guess it could be summed up by saying that I was dismayed to find that universities were in fact part of the real world. They're not these bubbles of intellect that are apart from capitalism, or apart from sexism, or apart from violence. We have enough evidence of that to last us all a lifetime. So, there was a little bit of dismay and disappointment at that aspect of it, but that's because my ideas about it were so naïve. Overall, I do still spend a lot of time reading books in my pajamas, writing stories myself, making art and talking to other artists and young artists who are at the beginning of their careers. That's exciting and really a blessing.

**Q:** What's it like watching them progress with their writing and knowing that you played at least some role in that?

**A:** It takes a very long time to grow as a writer. Teaching writing, you often don't get to see progress right there in the semester. When you think about it, a semester is what, 10, 12 weeks? That's just a blink in the life of a writer. In one sense, you almost see no progress at all sometimes. The shortness of my time with these writers is also coupled with the fact that artistic development is not linear. It's not Aristotelian, where you wrote a story that was a two, and the next story was a four, and your next story was an eight and don't we all feel good?! It doesn't work like that. You could knock it out of the park, and then your next 10 stories could be stinkers.

It's the same for me, too. Every time we sit down at the page, we're beginners. Maybe they're not ready to hear some of what I'm saying. That there's a really complex process that you have to go through. But I hope that at least some of what I'm giving them will be in their heads when they need it. Even if it's 10 years after they leave my class.

**Q:** What are some of the lessons you teach them or some of the techniques you like to focus on in your classes?

**A:** For one, I would be very happy if, instead of becoming writers, all of my students simply became readers. Lifelong, regular, rigorous readers. I would be completely thrilled if that happened. I want to instill a love of reading and give them some techniques and show them how to notice how cool a short story is. How it looks easy and it looks natural, but that's because it's so difficult and well-executed.

There are a lot of other things too. Writing is sort of an afterthought to other habits of being in the world. Particularly for very young writers, I try to encourage them to make room in their worldview for contradictions and paradoxes. I get them to think of character and what it means to be human. Humans are really complicated, sometimes in a conflicting way.

I want them to become allergic to simplicity. I hope they cultivate a certain vulnerability within themselves so that they can notice an interesting bit of dialogue, or an interesting gesture. Or, on a deeper level, something like realizing that their

parents are human. Big, eye-opening stuff. These are all pretty grandiose, so I guess that's why I learned to make peace with the fact that I may not fundamentally transform someone's worldview in 12 weeks. But when I think of good teaching and the educational experiences that meant the most to me, it took years for that stuff to sink in.

**Q:** Do you think writing is a way to get at those life lessons in a way that other subjects aren't able to?

**A:** That's a really good question. I don't feel very well equipped to talk about other disciplines and how well they approach this stuff. But I do think that one of the things that is so energizing and vital to me about writing and teaching is that the values of good art and good stories are in line with my own personal values.

Avoiding simplistic, binary thinking is great for a young person who's growing up in our political climate to learn. Thinking critically, reading closely, looking for subtext, being able to discern the connotation or denotation of a word. I think that is all really useful in our culture because we sling a lot of bullshit rhetorically. Young people need some tools to figure out questions like, "Why does it feel like everyone is always lying to me?" Because they are lying to you!

It's really exciting and empowering to see them start to see why that might be. I think essentially all of the humanities are great at this; from women's studies to sociology to history to the classics. They strike me as all being really good at this. I don't think I could teach something that didn't have a foundational value system that I could embrace.

**Q:** I wanted to talk a little about "Battleborn" now. The reception to it was pretty amazing. What was that change like, bursting onto the scene like that?

**A:** Sometimes I feel like I don't really know what it was like because I have nothing to compare it to. It was my first book and I would often have the extraordinary myth of its reception explained

to me by other people who knew better than I did. I think what I wanted to do was keep my head down, do the work and not worry about all of the awards and things like that. What I would do is enjoy some good news for about half a day and then just get back to work.

I think I knew in the back of my head that our literary culture is obsessed with debuts and first books and young writers. The reception of "Battleborn" reflected that. The awards I won were often geared to people who were under 40 or 35. In one case, I won something like \$45,000 dollars for an award that was for people under 30 years old. I was 28 when I won it and I was the oldest finalist. That's kind of crazy! That really reflects that we have this obsession with youth. I wanted to be grateful for the recognition and for the opportunities that they allowed me, but also maintain some sort of skepticism about the whole, larger mechanism of a culture that is obsessed with youth. Plus, there was this idea of the genius striking when you're 25 or something. That seems ridiculous. I would hope that "Battleborn" would be the worst book I ever write. If you ask some critics, it already is not.

It kind of felt like being the king of the little kids table.

**Q:** What do you think this obsession with youth stems from? Do you think its being tired of reading the same authors over and over or something that's more societal?

**A:** It's probably a confluence of several different factors. One of them being that, in general, our culture is pretty youth oriented. Our media is all geared towards 18 to 25-year-olds. That larger

cultural environment feeds into the publishing industry. For debut books, its like, "You could be the next [blank]. You could be the next Cormac McCarthy. You could be the next Annie Proulx. It's all possible. It's all in front of you." Well, the fact is I'm probably not the next Cormac McCarthy or Annie Proulx. Before my first novel came out, it was like my potential was infinite.

So, you get a lot of attention. But look at the way people's third and fourth books are noticed or not noticed. Mary Gaitskill is somebody who's writing tremendous prose. Or Joy Williams. I think they're some of the best living writers we have, and neither of them are on the National Book Awards list this year. It's people with their first or second book. I'm talking about the quality of books that are on the list, but it just seems indicative to me of the way that we get like, "Oh, something sparkly, something new, something shiny over there," and don't pay attention to the people who have been around for a long time and are doing tremendous work.



**Q:** One of the things I noticed while reading "Battleborn" was that in many of the stories the female characters are depicted as outsiders or they're isolated in some way. It's these same women that often suffer the violence or the depravity of men. Meanwhile, there are women that fit into what one might call a "normal" life, and they're shown as happy or at least not in danger. Do you think the better life comes from this easy, normal, happy existence or from the struggle in finding one's self and coming into one's individuality?

**A:** Man, that's a huge, huge question. To me, it's a question about consciousness. Is there such a thing

as too much consciousness or too much self-awareness? And does that become emotionally burdensome at some point?

When I think of people I know who seem to have a more conventional way of living in the world, or at least don't seem like they're on the periphery, I simultaneously envy and pity them. It seems like a plastic existence and it seems much less agonizing emotionally, but it also seems like a kind of death. If you can walk into an Applebee's and not be overcome with a tidal wave of dread, I worry about you. That suggests that there's some critical faculties that are not firing on an intellectual and emotional level. Our culture is pretty poisonous, and if you find yourself having no issues with it at all, or being able to ignore the issues and not be disturbed by the catalog of injustice that we see every single day, then that's a very disturbing inner world.

**Q:** I think the story I most had in mind with that question is "The Archivist," where Nat doesn't deal with those types of societal problems, but she's obviously suffering from her own personal issues and thinking about them very deeply. Whereas her sister, Carly, is focused on her baby, and dressing up for Halloween and baby showers. She kind of embodies that conventional lifestyle.

**A:** Well, I've been talking these two types of people as being complete poles, but there's a tremendous amount of middle ground that I'm ignoring. I think Carly has found that kind of happiness despite feeling tremendous pain. That's what I think I'm after on a personal level. Being conscientious, being a feeling and thinking person, yet being able to find beauty, joy, love, transcendence and all the good stuff without having to turn on the tube and turn my brain off.

**Q:** That's a good counterpoint. So, what impressed me most about "Battleborn" was that almost every story was told through some sort of different narrative technique. When writing those stories, did the story come to you and then you came up with the narrative technique through which to tell it, or was it the other way around?

**A:** It was more often the other way around. I identified some technique, or I saw something that I really admired and I wanted to try it out. The thing about "Battleborn" that is very apparent is that it was written during my education. It is my MFA put into book form. It's an archive of my desire to try on different ways of telling a story and trying to reconcile seemingly disparate influences. Or I was just having a good time and asking "Is this allowed?"

I often have a contrarian streak. So, if I read somebody like John Gardner, who says, "You can't have a story where there is only one character," I think, "Why not? I'm going to try that." I was energized by experimentation, and I didn't want to feel stagnant.

A lot of this comes from the fact that I came from a working class background. The idea of an arts degree, particularly the idea of one that was being paid for by the taxpayers of the state of Ohio, is a special luxury where I come from. It's actually an unheard of luxury. I didn't want to squander it. I felt like I had essentially been extended an invitation into the middle class. Whatever else I did, I didn't want to waste that time, that gift of three years with a stipend and health insurance, which I had never had before in my life. For me, that translated into writing all kinds of stories.

**Q:** That touches on one of the questions I had for you. You've called yourself a "class leapfrog" before. How do you think that's helped your writing?

**A:** It's good for an artist to travel, and I mean that in many different senses of the word "travel." For me, it was kind of an economic travel I was taking. When I was born, my family was pretty much as poor as you could get. We were on welfare. We had food stamps. My father was dying and we weren't able to give him the care he needed. Later on, my mother, through hard work and through marrying someone else who had a job and was in a union, got us a toehold in the lower middle class. So, I did some lower middle class stuff. I played baseball in the summers and I went to summer camp on a scholarship.

Then, when I was a teenager, my mom got really sick. She had Lyme disease, which led to an addic-

tion to oxycontin and other prescription drugs. My family basically plummeted. My mom lost her job. Towards the end of her life, she basically became a vagrant.

Before I moved out of my parent's household I had belonged to three different economic classes. Through education, I probably have traveled to two more. I feel I can see those strata of American society a little bit clearer, because I haven't belonged to one my whole life. It's hard to see the place you come from when you're in it. When I moved to Ohio, I started to write about Nevada. When I became a professor, I became much more interested in poor people and their experiences. It was easier for me to be familiarized with my experiences because of that travel.

**Q:** Do you think that period of time when your mother was sick and times were really rough was when you grew the most and affected your writing the most? Or do you think it's equal to all of the other chapters of your life?

**A:** It wsas certainly a more emotionally intense time, which would suggest that it was more impactful than other times. But it also required a lot of self-protection. I shut down emotionally in some ways. Even though I write about mothers and the brief outlines of their biographies matches up with my own mother's, addiction and then suicide, I don't feel like I've ever really written about her. I still feel afraid of that material. I don't think I've gotten to the core of it at all, actually.

It's funny, I was doing the thing that you should never do, which is Googling yourself. And I was on Twitter looking for whatever people have to say about me. You get what you deserve when you do that. I saw this tweet that some guy had written that said something like, "I was always curious what Claire Vaye Watkins would do when she was finally tapped out of lurid family material. And it turns out she would just write the same shitty apocalyptic novel that everybody else writes."

**Q:** Jesus.

**A:** My friend Karen calls that "ego whiplash." It's like, "Oh, that review was nice." And then, "Oh, fuck! That hurt! That really hurt." But, one thing that came to mind immediately was, "Dude, I have not begun to tap out my family material."

**Q:** One of the stories from "Battleborn" that really interested me was "Virginia City." The characters - Danny, Jules and Iris - are shown throughout the story doing disingenuous or ironic things. That's something my generation, the millennials and hipsters of the world, are quite keen on. Do you think this ceaseless need for irony is going to be something that haunts us in the future, whether in our individual relationships or on a societal level?

**A:** I doubt there's very much I could say about irony on a societal level that David Foster Wallace hasn't already said much better. What I was interested in with that story was if it could be emotionally corrosive in a primal, not an intellectual, way. One of the hallmarks of striking an ironic pose is you're not allowed to say what you really want. You have to say the exact opposite of what you mean. That seemed to me to be a really painful place to be, especially if you are as wracked with desire as Iris is. I wanted to write a story where you feel the stuff that David Foster Wallace makes you think.

That story was almost cut from "Battleborn," actually. My editor or agent, I can't remember who, but somebody at one point said, "It seems a little over-determined." Maybe it does, but I thought, "Yes, but that is what the characters are wrestling with." To them, everything does seem over-determined or pre-determined, or wrote and empty. After I got that feedback, I played that up to signal that that is in fact what I was interested in.

**Q:** In the opening paragraph of "Ghosts, Cowboys," the first story of "Battleborn," you wrote, "I can't stop thinking about beginnings." And it's obvious throughout the book that you're very interested in history and how it affects the present. I was wondering if you could speak on how you use history in your stories.

**A:** I'm not sure if this is exclusive to the American West, but my experience growing up there was that history was very close to the surface.

My parents ran a museum, a natural history museum. They told me a lot about the natural history and the geology of any place we went. There was some sort of narrative in the past that seemed to be almost like a slow motion volcano bubbling up to the surface. And it mattered. That's the only way I can phrase it.

In my family, we don't have very deep roots. I don't know anything about my great-grandparents, for example. I only knew three out of four grandparents. I don't have a lot of immediate family history, and I think what we looked to instead was natural history and geology. Stories about the 49ers, or stories about the geologic formation of a certain valley. It was a way to say, "This is who we are." Maybe the way some families would say, "Your great-great-grandfather was a Norwegian oil man outside of Houston, and that means that you are resilient." So, we used to say, "This valley used to be underwater, and that means something about us as a people." It was not an embellishment or an interesting side-note. It was an urgent and essential part of every story, especially the story of who we were as a people. Certainly, the history of the American West is problematic and ignores a lot of people's experience. But it was my experience moving through that landscape that you have to look backwards in order to look forward. That worldview seeped its way into the stories.

**Q:** I'd like to move on to "Gold Fame Citrus" now. A recurring theme throughout the book is motherhood. Did writing "Gold Fame Citrus" teach

you anything about family life or motherhood.

**A:** No, not at all. I turned in "Gold Fame Citrus" about a week before I went into labor with my daughter. I think what I was doing in "Gold Fame Citrus" was rehearsing. That's the word my colleague, Peter, uses. "Rehearsing" for motherhood. I was working out on the page something I was thinking a lot about.

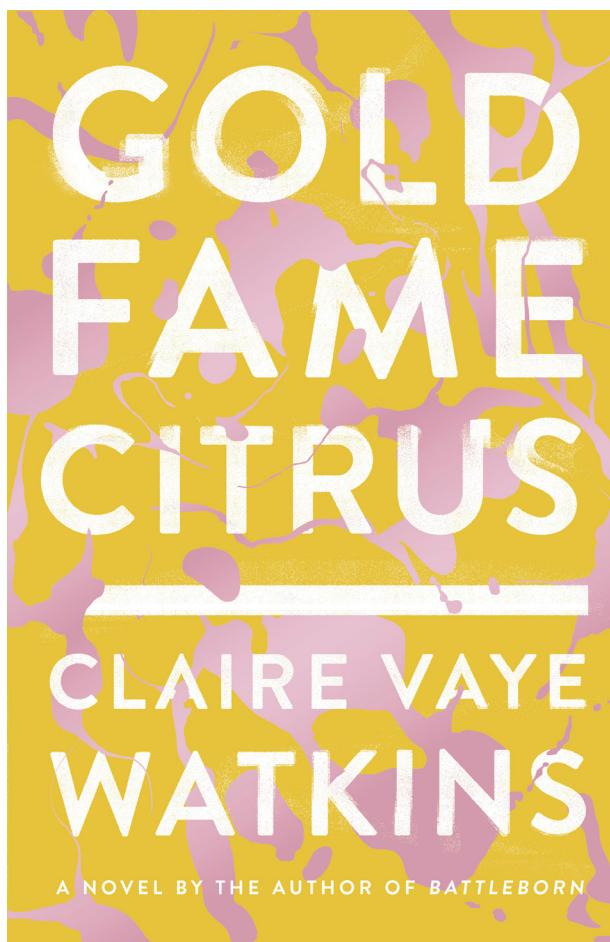
But writing "Gold Fame Citrus" did get me to think about the way we treat mothers. Particularly, the Madonna/Whore binary. It seemed to me that motherhood immediately catapulted a whore into a madonna. I was interested in what that would feel like.

Some of what I've written about motherhood holds up to my experience. It rings true, but motherhood is probably one of those experiences that is as wide as the number of mothers there are out there. It is the opposite of a monolithic experience. Essentially, writing that book taught me about what Luz thinks about motherhood, and what Dallas thinks about motherhood and family, and what Ray thinks about fatherhood, masculinity, heroes and faith.

I guess what I really learned about myself in writing "Gold Fame Citrus" was how envious I am of people who are faithful and who believe in a type of

higher power or God. I think that's what emerged as the thing that I was curious about.

**Q:** It's interesting that you bring up hope. A reviewer in The New York Times said that you were fearless because the characters in "Gold Fame Citrus" who were "shiftless and irresponsible before the disaster, are shiftless and irresponsible afterward." I thought that was an apt observation, but it's also an upsetting observation as well. Do



you think that there's any hope that we're going to avoid the impending disaster that climate change is bringing closer to us with every new day? And, if you don't, how do you cope with that belief?

**A:** I actually have a lot more hope in my life than I do on the page. I think that those two things are related. I'm actually quite a buoyant, resilient, I guess even optimistic, person because I work out my fears and hopelessness on the page. George Saunders is a perfect example of this. I've never met him, but his writing can be truly, truly bleak and difficult. Yet, by reputation, he's pretty much the nicest person alive. I think that's part of the work. We were talking about making room for light in your life even though you acknowledge the darkness and look at it straight on. In my case, writing helps me do that. It's a way of facing it down.

Then again, sometimes I wonder if I just don't think about it that much. Do I really feel, on an urgent and emotionally immediate level, something as abstract and confounding as climate change? I don't think I do. I don't know that our brains are actually capable of that kind of abstract thinking.

**Q:** Maybe that's why we continue doing the things we do.

**A:** Right. Exactly. I heard this little tidbit on the news about a study that some insurance companies did. What they learned was that, neurologically, human beings think of themselves in the future as a different person. It's like the way you think of me or a classmate or a colleague, rather than thinking of your future self the way you think of your current self. It's not that we're not self-interested. We are very self-interested. I don't know if it's cultural or neurological, but we're not able to think of ourselves in the future as ourselves, let alone our children or grandchildren. We can grasp it intellectually, I think, but we have a hard time acting that way.

**Q:** Immediately after reading "Battleborn," I started reading "Gold Fame Citrus" and I was stunned at the difference between the two works. In "Battleborn," your stories are set in either the

present or in the past, and your writing is extremely chiseled and precise. "Gold Fame Citrus," on the other hand, is set in the future, in this absurd and bizarre reality, and your writing seems to reflect that. It was very different from what was present in "Battleborn." What caused you to change your style, and what was that process like?

**A:** I think what you're picking up on is the way that the form and scale of the novel addresses language registers. I felt that I did not have to be quite so chiseled, quite so taut and disciplined. That there was room for ornaments, play, digressions and long lists. I certainly still wanted to be precise and evocative. I don't ever want to write flabby or lackluster sentences. I think at some point it occurred to me that the novel is a far more forgiving form, and it welcomed many types of writing and approaches to pacing, scale and language registers.

"Gold Fame Citrus" was the first novel I ever tried to write. I don't have a novel in a drawer somewhere. I had never tried to write one before. I think you can see that I just dove head-long into it. I wanted to do everything a novel can do. I wanted to write in third person limited and have passages that are omniscient. I wanted to write very clinically and I also wanted to write poetically. And I wanted to have a postmodern pastiche. I just wanted to do it all really.

**Q:** Were you intimidated at all when you first started coming up with the idea of the novel you wanted to write?

**A:** Definitely. I had the idea for this novel in my head for probably six months before I started writing it. The first thing I wrote was the description of the dune sea from above. Even when I started writing that, it felt ridiculous. To me, it felt like a silly but also completely overwhelming project that I did not want to take on for my first novel. Instead, I had this other project in mind that was, as I considered it, very contained, small. It was a novel about a married couple who kidnapped a child. I considered that novel to be a serious book, and one that was also doable. I could write it. It was safe. I was like, "Just try it out. This is your first novel. You have to walk before you can run."

I was working that way for about six months. But I was also secretly cheating on that book with my sand dune. I was reading all about sand, and that was the work I was really drawn to, but I felt it required too much world building and was too speculative, and therefore not serious. After a year of having these bifurcated desires, I essentially meshed the two projects into one project. Suddenly there were people who could see this sand dune and do something about it. Also, there was a place for this couple to be. They were no longer in suburban Ohio, but in a mansion in Laurel Canyon. That was the first time I realized that the book could be whatever I wanted it to be as long as I admitted that I wanted it.

**Q:** What do you think modern literature is lacking? Or where do you think it is failing?

**A:** That's a really good question. The first thing that comes to mind regarding American literature is class. I very rarely see a convincing depiction of poor and working class people on the page. For some reason it still seems okay to romanticize poverty. This all makes sense because we are reluctant to talk about class as a culture, so naturally our literature would reflect that. I still see a lot of poor characters being broke but happy. That's not my experience of being poor at all. We don't see writing that captures a sense of grief and internal emergency that poverty puts you in all the time. There's an implicit denial of structural inequality that happens in a lot of contemporary American literature. It would be exciting to see work that didn't subscribe to the "Mo' money, Mo' problems" school of economics. Because, in fact, it's "Less money, Mo' problems" after all.

For what it's worth, one of the most confusing responses I've gotten to my own work is that it is gritty or unflinching or brutal. I've spent many years thinking about why I'm so confused by those descriptions. What I come up with is this: that formulation suggests that hardship is an aesthetic choice. A difficult way of life is a style that the writer chooses. In my experience, coming where I come from, "grit" is not a stylistic embellishment or a literary writing style. It's the way life fucking is! I suppose it's like a critical approach in fiction

to slumming. It's like it's so exciting to read about such a gritty, hardscrabble existence that we treat it like a style, instead of saying, "Wow. For some people, that is their life." I've been unhappy with my own depiction of class too, to be completely honest with you.

**Q:** Have you read Barbara Ehrenreich's "Nickel and Dimed"? That's one of the things she talks about in that book. Any attempt to try to depict what it's like to live in poverty is ultimately going to fail because that's not how she really lives.

**A:** Right. It seems to me to be a bit of a catch-22 because one of the characteristics of being poor is a lack of access to education. In our society, reading and literature have been elite activities. When I became well-educated, and as I finished college, got a master's degree and read more, I became less credible as a poor person. It's almost like in finding the words to talk about the condition, the condition is erased. Which seems to me to be the fucking evil genius of capitalism.

**Q:** Yes, it's like trying to catch your shadow.

**A:** Absolutely. Very well said. It's like trying to capture your own shadow.



Claire Vaye Watkins

# AND THEN AT TIMES

by  
Charles Bane Jr.

And then at times  
the dips of our marriage are  
no different than the falling  
into love in Richmond Park  
before we started home, and I  
wrote every day until the motion  
of the ship made me certain that  
for every berth going out,  
new souls put in, spit from  
foam. If I could read Greek or  
understand the errand of the  
cardinal we watch for with coffee  
in our hands, I could make poetry  
on the tips of fence spears where  
he stops and the fire of you would  
go urgently from land to land.

*Untitled - Allison O'Meara*

*Memoir*

# KAREN STEPHERSON



## THIS CROWD OF PEOPLE

ART BY DIANE TYLER

*This crowd of people in the mirror I see,  
who all dwell within me.*

I love meeting people. I may not remember all of their names, but I never forget faces. Whenever I look in a mirror, I see the faces of everyone I've ever met: from my favorite thrift store worker in Dallas, to Victoria, the Ghanaian seamstress I met in Accra.

*Their souls have no home.  
They come to me when I'm all alone to  
remind me of who I truly am.*

My reflection harbors the conversations I've had with these people. I see their smiles, frowns and tears. Tears they cried after hearing my story. I see their faces reflect my own pain. The pain I feel when asked, "How are you doing today?" I don't think they want to know, but since they ask, I share with them, pouring out my heart's disappointments.

*Some were there from the start.  
They knew my brain.  
They knew my heart.  
I call them mama, daddy, uncle and aunt.  
They were my eco system.  
They kept me aloft.*

My heart broke when grandmother died. It shattered at the death of my mother. My estrangement from my father makes me angry. He doesn't know me, his only child, like my mother knew me. The last of my grandmother's siblings died three years ago from pancreatic cancer. My favorite aunt who made the best preserves and pickles died in November from colon cancer. My favorite uncle who always gave me ice-cream money when I was a child died four months later from colon cancer. On the ride home from his funeral, I received a call that my favorite singer, Whitney Houston, died from an apparent drug overdose. I ache. My heart aches, but I continue staring in front of this mirror hoping one of those faces might offer a word of condolence.

*Some were strangers who'd lost their way and  
found me on their path one day.*

Sometimes, it helps for me to drive. Saturday mornings, if the weather is clear and I have extra money, I fill my gas tank and pick a highway. Any highway. I drive with no particular destination in mind. The journey is what I live for. In solitude, I'm able to think. The noise of life seems to die down. It's peaceful. My soul needs that peace. My heart needs the release. Rest stops become my therapy. I meet strangers who are afraid to cut my conversation off before I'm finished sharing. Perhaps they feel my anguish.

*A few left marks to be remembered.*

*Yet others left only scars.  
Some of which are still tender.*

All people aren't nice. Some of them have cursed me. Some of them have hurt me with their eyes when I've stopped at gas stations in certain towns. Towns where it's obvious my kind isn't welcome. Their eyes do their talking. They say "Nigger, we don't have a bathroom you can use."

*There were those who came along and stayed awhile.  
Because of them, my heart wears a smile.  
I call them friends, companions and angels, but  
the ones dearest to me, I call family.*

Some people I've met on my journey are still with me. They call sometimes. They write at others. They make sure to check in. Even if it's only once a year. I especially love these people and make an effort to remain in contact with them. Even if it's only a Facebook message.

*There were those who were considered wanderers.  
They didn't exactly know what their lives were for.  
Many taught me lessons I'll never forget.  
Others took from me and left me wet  
like an abandoned animal in the rain without a home,  
they took what they needed,  
then they were gone.*

I embrace all people and have a soft spot for the down trodden. I've gotten into trouble at times trying to help some. I was almost robbed by a homeless man begging for food. Another time I was nearly raped. My mother warned me about talking to strangers, but it was flooding that day and he was caught in the downpour. I stopped and asked if I could take him somewhere. I should've known better.

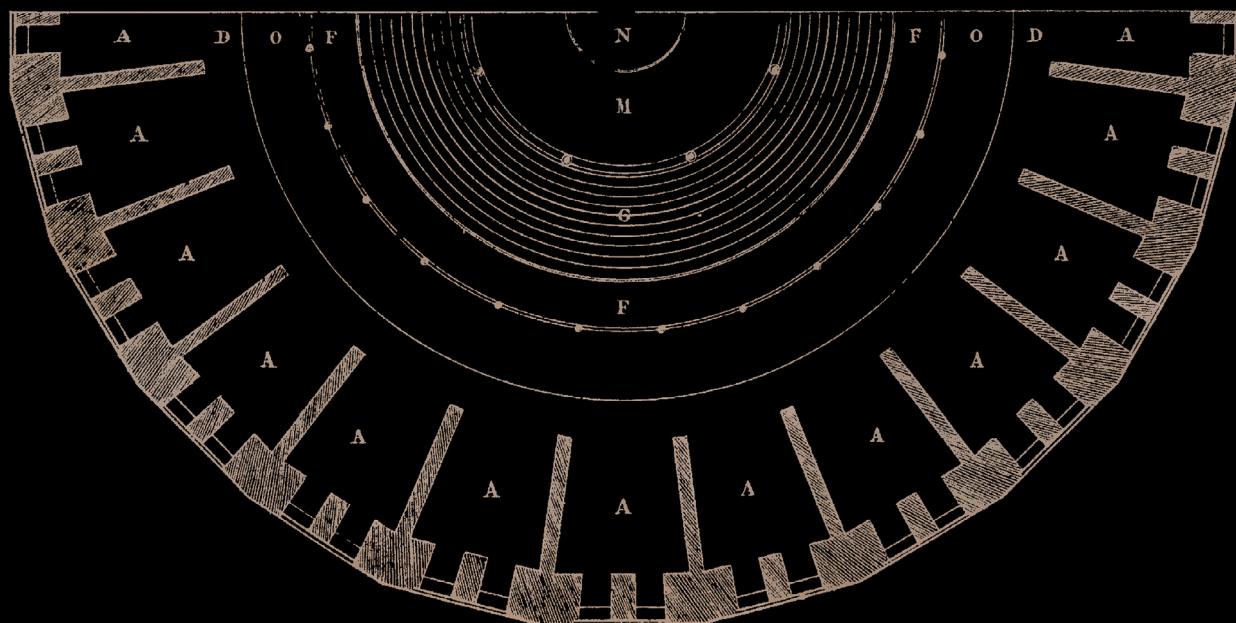
*The person you see today  
has been transformed  
into someone new.  
Not because of the ones who came in,  
but because of those that passed through.*

My family says they worry about me when I'm on the road alone. My friends say they stopped worrying long ago. They say I'm covered with the blood of Jesus that protects me. I reason with disillusion, but I understand. I thank them for their prayers.

*And this crowd of people in the mirror I see,  
are really only reflections of me.*

Essay

# THE ALL SEEING EYE



# HAZEL LARSEN



*Demonstrators protest against the U.S. National Security Agency's PRISM data mining system in Berlin, Germany. - Mike Herbst*

June 5, 2013 marks the beginning of the Edward Snowden leaks and a new era in the modern consciousness. Working together with Glenn Greenwald, a reporter at The Guardian, Edward Snowden, a former contractor for the National Security Agency, revealed to the world the depth, range, and accuracy of the NSA's surveillance techniques. To many, these revelations were shocking; to others, expected. Snowden himself came to be viewed as a hero and torch-bearer for liberty by some; as a traitor and detriment to America's safety by others. However, regardless of one's political or ethical view, Snowden made it clear to the world that we are being watched.

This knowledge gives rise to a question: What does it mean to be watched? How does the mod-

ern surveillance-state affect oneself? Does it mean anything for the average citizen, who has never broken a law in his life, to be watched? Perhaps, for the individual answering these questions, the NSA's all-encompassing surveillance seems irrelevant to his life. But to truly understand the political and social repercussions of such surveillance, it is necessary to examine the issue on a much broader scale than that of the individual. Fortunately, one of the greatest thinkers of our age, Michel Foucault, the French philosopher and historian, gave us a framework that will help accomplish this endeavor with his book "Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison."

"Discipline and Punish" was published in 1975. The book functions both as a history of prisons and

social critique. Foucault himself describes it as an attempt at a “correlative history of the modern soul and of a new power to judge,” or more precisely, “a genealogy of the present scientifico-legal complex from which the power to punish derives its bases, justifications and rules, from which it extends its effects and by which it masks its exorbitant singularity.” Despite its age, the book serves as a salient comment on the current surveillance state in which we live. A multitude of articles have been devoted to comparisons between George Orwell’s “1984” and this

new world revealed by the Snowden leaks, but, in truth, Foucault’s “Discipline and Punish” serves as a more prescient work when examining the NSA’s massive, blank stare.

“Discipline and Punish” opens with a comparison between

different methods of punishment by the state. It looks at the punishment of Robert-François Damiens, a servant who made an assassination attempt on King Louis XV’s life and the methods of punishment described in Léon Faucher’s *“De la réforme des prisons”* published in 1838.

Damiens, the would-be regicide, was shown no mercy for his acts. Flesh was torn from his body. Molten lead and burning sulfur were poured on areas of his body where his flesh had been removed. He was drawn and quartered. Finally, he was burnt to ashes.

Faucher’s *“De la réforme”* presents a subtler approach to punishment. He recommends a strict schedule of work, school, prayer, and rest. Shortly after his work was published, his ideas quickly gained favor in an age exhausted by its own bloodlust. In 80 years, punishment for crimes evolved from the appalling execution of Damiens to the

ascetic lifestyle prescribed by Faucher.

How was such a drastic change accomplished in such a short period of time? Foucault explains that while there was a humanitarian aspect involved in the prison reform movement, there were other social, economic and judicial factors involved as well. First, public executions had the tendency to glorify the criminal and give cause to disturbances at the execution. If the people felt that someone was being killed unjustly, they might’ve formed a riot to try to save him; or worse, they may recognize

their struggle against the monarchy in the relationship between the executioner and the criminal.

There was also an economic reason for the shift in mentality. Due to the advent of industrial capitalism in the mid-18th century, society was better able to acquire

and maintain capital. More goods were created at a quicker rate, and trade flourished once states abandoned protectionist policies and embraced the idea of free trade. Capital quickly became the most important aspect of society, and it was necessary to protect it. Police forces were improved and enhanced. Their main objective was to prevent the “development of organized, open criminality” and shift crime towards more discreet forms. Violent crime reduced drastically, but petty larceny was rampant. Criminal trials flooded court houses. There was a general belief that morals were declining and crime was everywhere. A new system of punishment was needed in order to deal with the rise in crime and prevent it from growing any further.

Lastly, the judiciary system before the time of the prison reformers was practically unnavigable. Lower jurisdictions, the prosecution, judges, royal



*Presidio Modelo prison, Isla de la Juventud, Cuba - Friman*

magistrates and the king all had too much power. There was a “badly regulated distribution of power” that led to severe overlap and confusion. A new system was desperately needed.

In an effort to answer this need, prison reformers came up with a system of representational punishment in the early 19th century. When reading about their new system, it almost seems like they used Dante’s “Inferno” as a guidebook. “Speculation and usury will be punished by fines; theft will be punished by confiscation; ‘vainglory’ by humiliation; murder by death; fire-raising by the stake,” writes Foucault.

They didn’t stop there. Reformers wanted to make sure that the laws and the punishments for breaking them were well known by all citizens. Ideally, they thought, there would be a direct link in an individual’s mind between committing a crime and the punishment for doing so. To strengthen this link, they decided the punishment had to be visible. They organized chain gangs and areas specifically designed for criminals around the city, and they created costumes depicting the criminal’s offense.

Finally, within the new system, punishment was custom-tailored to every individual and the crime they committed. For example, if a corrupt and greedy bank executive tells his employees to target low-income families for sub-prime housing loans and causes the economy to collapse, he will be punished much more severely than a teenager that steals a package of cigarillos from a gas station. “One sought to constitute a Linnaeus of crimes and punishments, so that each particular offense and each punishable individual might come, without the slightest risk of any arbitrary action within the provisions of general law,” says Foucault. A genealogy of crime had to be invented so that crime could be punished justly and animosity towards law enforcement could be prevented.

It is at this point that we first see a shift from the punishment of the human body to the punishment of the human soul. Along with the genealogy of crime that judicial powers were creating, a sort of human science had to be developed in order to categorize criminals correctly. The question was no longer a binary matter of whether or not the law had been broken. Rather, a person’s life, his soul, his behavior, his likes, his dislikes and his anomalies were all on trial. This shift from the punish-

ment of the body to the punishment of the soul forms the basis of Foucault’s argument and gives way to a social critique based around the concept of discipline.

Despite the arguments of the reformers, Foucault argues that their ideas are not the basis for the modern prison system. The ideas of the reformers were popular, but they were overshadowed by a much more sophisticated idea. Rather than constructing prisons and justice systems that kept watch over criminals, why not develop a society in which everyone could be watched?

Thanks to the ideas of a British philosopher and social reformer named Jeremy Bentham, they had the perfect tool to accomplish just that: the “panopticon.”

The panopticon is a circular prison with an observation tower in the middle. Cells line the circumference of the building and have openings at the front (facing towards the central tower) and at the back. The criminal inside is completely isolated from those around him. He has no ability to see those in the central tower (his superiors), yet they can observe him clearly. The panopticon allows guards complete knowledge without ever having to make themselves known. It also requires minimal effort: those under observation believe that they are always so, and discipline themselves based on the knowledge that someone might be watching them at any given time.

The concept of the panopticon, Foucault argues, was not only used as a model for reforming prisons, but also for reforming hospitals, barracks, factories and schoolhouses: the city in its entirety. The disciplinary techniques created by Bentham spread throughout Western society rapidly. The principal object of state authorities was to create docile but economic humans. They wanted citizens that could be controlled without the thought of rebellion. They wanted a society in which eyes are always upon it, and, should anyone make the decision to misbehave, they will receive swift punishment without doubt.

The penal system changed from an institution created to revenge wrongs done to the crown (torture) to a system with the object of detailed surveillance so that one might gain knowledge of an individual and therefore gain power over him. Foucault argues that this dynamic plays into the larger structure of class struggle. The bourgeois



*National Security Agency Headquarters - Fort Meade, Maryland*

and the proletariat both have their illegalities (the bourgeois have tax evasion, while the proletariat have petty larceny), however the people enforcing the laws are also the same people that made them. There is an inherent contradiction in that relationship according to Foucault. He believes that the modern “carceral” system is a subtle, yet overwhelming way in which the bourgeois can maintain power over the proletariat while keeping them docile. It is a machine whose function is to create uniformity.

One consequence of this carceral system was the invention of the modern delinquent. Furthering the idea that it is no longer the body that is punished but the human soul, Foucault argues that once an individual misbehaves and breaks the social code as created by the bourgeois, he is labeled as a delinquent. This label will then affect every

aspect of life once he is released from prison. An important aspect of the panoptical society is keeping records of behavior: criminal records, medical records, work history, education, etc.

Once labeled a delinquent, jobs are more difficult to come by, law enforcement maintains close observation and rumors about oneself spread. Before a delinquent is aware of what has happened, he is in a dire situation in which his only option for survival is to break the law once more. This continuous cycle of prison and desperation has been a facet of the carceral system since its birth, Foucault argues. If one considers the downward-spiral that “felons” in modern America face, it seems as though Foucault is correct in his analysis.

One can easily see a direct connection between the panopticon’s design and that of the NSA. To see without being seen. To discipline without actively

disciplining. To know movements. To detect anomalies. The NSA's surveillance techniques seem to be the logical conclusion of the panoptical society. It possesses knowledge of everyone's behavior, everyone's acquaintances, everyone's daily routine - everyone's being. With the explosion of the technological age, the panoptical system has also been freed from its geographical, intelligence-gathering, and uniformity-inducing restraints.

What is most astounding about the development of the NSA is the almost simultaneous advent of social networks. As surveillance techniques became more refined and efficient, public display of one's self became vogue. It is now normal to reveal all of one's experiences on an easily accessible platform. Further, social networks tend to be uniformity-inducing machines. We customize photos and statuses to receive the maximum amount of likes and retweets. We unconsciously conform, or at least attempt to conform, with every piece of information we post on social networks.

Further, companies like Facebook and Twitter make enormous profits selling our information to private companies. This allows them to market specific products to us based on our demographic information and the community we interact with on social media. In one sense, social media has created a subtler, more accommodating approach to advertising. But it is alarming that social media companies are able to make profit from our experiences. It's even more alarming that private companies have access to all of this information, which they are then able to exploit for their own gain. In this manner, the NSA and social networks have formed an almost perfect Panoptical society: we discipline our behavior in relation to the law through the knowledge that we are being watched by a judicial machine. We discipline our behavior in relation to the society through the knowledge that all of our "friends" are watching. Corporations and the bourgeoisie have vast amounts of data that allows them to perpetuate the consumerist culture by which we now live.

What does it mean to be watched? "Discipline and Punish" tells us it means that we are being controlled in order to acquiesce the desires of the bourgeoisie. But, perhaps it means more than that. Maybe it means we're handing over hard-fought freedom to the same entities we wrested it from.

Foucault only briefly addresses society's loss of freedom in his work, yet it is a phenomenon which necessarily occurs as surveillance increases. As Foucault points out, being watched compels one to discipline oneself, and thus our freedom to do as we please diminishes. Our desire to have creative, to rebel and be different slowly evaporates as we come to realize that we are being observed. Something in our nature seems to tell us to transform into a docile animal when others are watching.

Having every moment in our lives recorded is at once an incredible and terrible thing. How are we possibly to deal with this knowledge? Due to the secrecy of the NSA, we still don't even fully know what we're dealing with. Any type of resistance seems futile or melodramatic.

Perhaps the problem is that we're just used to people watching us. In essence, our souls have on a metaphysical trial since the birth of the idea of God. He sees and judges all. Now, we are simply dealing with the physical representation of that idea. After all, the modern surveillance apparatus is omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent.



*Untitled - Allison O'Meara*

## WHERE WE COME FROM

The son cooks a spoon over candle light,  
Plunges needle into soaked cotton  
And swaps blood for ocean water.  
Millions upon millions of micro organisms  
Packed into so many drops;  
Building blocks of life  
Now pumping and pushing  
Through his meaty veins.  
His artificial serenity born  
From The Fear of omnipotence.  
He cannot see that he became God long ago.  
Back when his mother and father  
Collided their pointed hips  
In hopes of covering up the empty spots  
A trembling single cell split  
Into two, and then four.  
Back when a tiny, vital cry  
Pierced bubbling afterbirth and rang  
Throughout the neonatal ward.  
His father held him and wept  
As any man would.  
Less like the stem of a flower  
And more like a lost little boy  
Reconciling science and poetry.  
God is in the tether between father and son;  
A tether strained when the son returned  
To a flailing Mother Ocean.

## THE FALL

Buzzing stadium lights, brassy fight songs,  
a sea of laughter dressed in school colors.

Two kids grasp at each other's essence  
in the parking lot. November blooms roses  
on their cheeks and in their chests.

Gaps of history separate me from floral mystery,

but its echo from across town tells me

I'm still here, and my youth is fading.

Less like the end, more like a beginning.

I find myself searching not for heaven,  
but for someplace where I won't feel lost.

So, I found you through white noise  
and shifting channels.

I could not picture our future  
and that felt good to me.

I will ask this of you:

Please forgive the lines etched  
into the corners of my mouth,

I have been overcome more than once.

Cry the folly of apology and envelop me.

Swallow the shadows, then whittle me down.

Make me into something new.



*Untitled - Allison O'Meara*

Poetry

# THE ROAD TO PRZEMYŚL

DENNIS  
GONZALEZ

I  
**WARSZAWA**  
**OCTOBER 25, 1993**

---

Snow dreams come  
And I awaken thinking  
I hear your voice.  
Sirens sing on the balcony,  
And snow is on the roundabout  
Just in front, but it's not snow.  
It's sand from construction  
In the plaza. My dreams  
Don't come again.

II  
**KRAKÓW EXPRESS**  
**OCTOBER 25, 1993**

---

We travel the last cold days  
Of October and black birds  
Circle overhead.  
Red and blue buses roll  
On the streets near  
The center of town.  
As we leave, autumn  
Leaves with us, trees waiting quietly  
For the last leaves to drop,  
Woodpiles assuring that winter  
Will come soon to Poland's  
Country lanes. This rare light  
And my love of travel  
Among other people  
Color my life,  
Color these short seasons  
Like brushes and watercolors,  
Like fog on damp chilly days.

III  
**TRAIN TO PRZEMYŚL - PART I**  
**OCTOBER 27, 1993**

---

Coal smoke hangs heavy  
In the freezing air.  
We near the Ukraine  
Leaves turning,  
Fields lying close,  
Farmers and old horses  
Plowing fields that give way  
To thick woods and grasses  
Beaten down by the hard wind.  
Village paths carry old women  
On bicycles, the pattern  
In their pedalpushing  
Like the rhythms in Jonkisz's  
Words about Polish autumn  
And American time. Old cloth  
Tied to sticks flaps in the wind  
And scares birds in the fields.  
Jonkisz says, "Your first life  
Is ending. Even so your next  
Life begins."

**IV**
**TRAIN TO PRZEMYŚL - PART II**  
**OCTOBER 27, 1993**


---

An old singer from L'vov  
 Sits in our compartment  
 And sings the old songs  
 Of balalaikas and the Caucasus,  
 Of youth and hard times.  
 His crooning awakens  
 Two Cherkish women  
 Who'll be on this train  
 Another two days traveling  
 Home to Yekaterinodar,  
 Near the Black Sea.  
 I ask in Russian  
 If they worship in Arabic,  
 And smiling shyly they're glad  
 That I know they're Muslim.  
 It's a long road from Tarnów.  
 Outside, schoolboys redfaced  
 With the cold breeze  
 Wait at a crossing.

**V**
**PRZEMYŚL**  
**OCTOBER 27, 1993**


---

Russia is in the air  
 Two kilometers over the ridge,  
 And children celebrate  
 In the main square.  
 Chopin is on the shortwave,  
 Remote broadcasts bleeding through  
 From Azerbaijan.

“Chopin was genius,” Jonkisz says  
 From his side of the room.m  
 We rest in the hotel,  
 Sleet falls over the land,  
 and early sunset leaves  
 Only night and music.

**VI**
**PRZEMYŚL - KRAKÓW BUS**  
**OCTOBER 28, 1993**


---

We move from town to town,  
 Our eyes burning from the harsh  
 Exhaust of this bus rocking  
 back and forth, stopping often  
 these six hours for horses  
 blowing cold air  
 and pulling carts.  
 In Tarnów, people  
 at the market buy flower  
 for *Zaduszki*, the Day of the Dead,  
 their lost ones' faces filling  
 their sad eyes with fall leaves,  
 an old man scything his field,  
 the bus struggling up steep hills  
 on the outskirts of town  
 near the new cathedral.  
 A schoolgirl claps her hands  
 and sings as she walks  
 down the side of the road  
 to Łapczyca.

*Fiction*



# WARM, SOFT, VELVET

**GARRETT WEAVER**  
ART BY DIANE TYLER

# T

The highway stretches out ahead of us, framed by an ocean of sand on both sides, dotted with sparse patches of grass and dense brush. My twin sister is next to me in the driver's seat, humming something off the radio. The only billboard in sight reads "JESUS SAVES" in plain black lettering, with directions to a curio shop and gas station underneath. We drive on in silence, our tank and bellies nearly empty.

"God, it's so barren," my sister says. "All these towns with double digit populations. What do people do out here? How do they pass the time?"

"Jesus," I say as a headache behind my eye throbs in step with my heartbeat.

Another billboard approaches, on it a girl with a drink in her hand. Her face is familiar, and as I stare, I fall into memory.

*A tear rolls down her face toward a somber smile, and the smell of her hair fills my nostrils. We sit at a Dallas train station in the cold emptiness of late January. Warmed by the bliss of heroin, we wait for a train that isn't coming. I wander the quiet downtown streets searching for the sun. A man won't sell her cigarettes because he thinks she's too young.*

"Pull over," I say urgently to my sister, so she does, and I puke my dark guts out on the side of the road to be eaten by some animal, or swallowed up by the earth. I get back in the car and apologize.

"It's alright," she says. "I understand."

We sit in silence a while, the sound of the car muffling those of the outside world. The landscape is still empty. The silhouette of a mountain slowly creeps up in the distance. My muscles ache.

"Wanna hear something weird?" my sister asks.

"Sure," I say.

"There's a site on the deep web with all these pictures of dead children in fields. Just hollow-eyed kids laid out neatly in the grass, with these picturesque, snow-capped peaks in the background. People say that judging by the landscape in the photos, they're being taken somewhere in Montana."

"I hear there are more cows out there than people," I reply. "Who knows what goes on up there."

"Some people even think the emptiness there attracts multiple killers, who use it as a dumping ground. Kind of like the Highway of Tears in British Columbia, or that stretch of I-45 between Houston and Galveston."

"Or I-5 in the Pacific Northwest," I add with a shudder. I think about the people out there who roam the land like sharks, sniffing and snuffing out the vulnerable. Who are these people, these active and unknown serial murderers, who fly beneath the radar so smoothly?

Then I see a face flash in my mind, like the momentary ghost of a nightmare. Un-

kempt beard, thin hair, grubby paws and that horrid smile. I shut it out as best I can.

"I wonder if I've ever met one casually," I say, trying to play off my anxiety.

"Keep thinking like that and you'll never trust anyone," she says.

The silence returns, as dark clouds run down the horizon like watercolor, blocking out the sun. The mountain is obscured, and eventually the rain starts to beat against the windshield.

"We need gas," she says as we approach a lonely station on the side of the road.

She pulls in and parks. "I need to piss," she says.

"Same," I say, and get out to stretch my legs. We head inside and a small bell rings as we open the door. An Indian man glances up from a magazine, and immediately back down again. Muzak plays eerily on low quality speakers in the ceiling, and the fluorescent lights hurt my eyes. I head to the bathroom where I vomit again into a dirty toilet.

I come out of the stall to splash cold water on my face, and I look up into the eyes of my reflection. They are sunken and purple as always, though that seems to have lessened of late. My skin hangs on my slender frame. I paw at a paper towel with my bony fingers.

I go up to the counter and ask the man how much cigarettes are.

"\$6.15," he says, still looking at his magazine.

I search my pockets and pull out a few dollar bills with a handful of change. As I count it my sister walks up.

"Are you getting anything?" she asks.

I realize I don't have enough money. "No," I say. "Go ahead."

She hands the man a twenty for the gas. As we leave the clerk absently says, "Drive safely."

My sister goes to fill up the tank, and I see a man smoking by the corner of the store under the roof's outcropping. He wears a thick mustache and a bolo tie, with silver and turquoise jewelry studding his wrists and fingers. His hair is a pure white, and he has deep set wrinkles in his dark, leathery skin. I walk up to him.

"Hey man, would you mind if I bum one?"

He stares at me a second, and silently pulls out his pack. He hands me one, along with a lighter. I light it and take a long drag.

"I haven't had a Camel in years," I say. "Makes me feel like a kid again."

He inhales deeply. "I smoke 'em every day," he replies, as he releases a cloud of smoke into the hard rain. "Keeps me young," he says smiling. I chuckle and turn towards the mountain ahead of us.

"Where ya headin'?" he asks.

I gesture in the direction of the mountain and say, "Another thousand miles or so that way."

"Home?" he asks me.

"I guess so," I say.

"Where'd ya come from?" he asks.

"Home," I reply, shrugging.

He takes another drag and shakes his head.

"Don't pretend to be a poet with me, son, just give it to me straight," he says slowly with a stern tone. "I'm a stranger from the middle of nowhere that you'll never see again. You don't have to put on airs with me."

He motions in a circle with his cigarette as he talks, and the smoke wisps toward the sky in strange patterns. I see the leering face in my mind again. Fear and nausea rise within me. But my sister is within eyesight, and the man in front of me with the silver and turquoise jewelry looks harmless, bored almost.

"So, where ya headed, kid?" he asks again.

"I'm heading toward Bronstone – a mountain town in the Coconino forest. It's where I grew up, but I haven't been back since I left. It's been a good while since I've seen it."

"You miss it?" he asks. He's missing a tooth, and whistles slightly when pronouncing his S's.

"Not really," I laugh, "but in a way I guess so. The closer I get, the more I remember, and the more I think it might not be so bad. I remember the silence of the forest, and how serene that was growing up. Exploring it was one of my favorite pastimes as a kid – stepping out of the backyard into this huge expanse of evergreen wilderness, the sounds of birds and animals around you, the blanket of pine above and below you."

"Sounds like it could be pretty alright there," he says, blowing out smoke. "Somethin' nice about goin' back to where you grew up. It makes you feel good, and a little sad too. Sad for the past, or what you remember of it, I guess. Even the people you didn't like much aren't so bad when you go home. Time gets mixed up, seems like. Everything is new and different, but you see the past beneath it – they blend into each other a little, and skew the way you feel about it. Somethin' nice about goin' home."

"Weird," I say, lost in his thought. "A memory paved over by reality, but still sitting beneath it, influencing your experience."

"Just about, yeah," he says.

We keep smoking, with only the sound of the crooked rain coming down onto the metal roof. The smell of hot dust and cigarette smoke fills the air before it's washed out in the downpour.

"Where'd ya come from?" he asks.

"Chicago, most recently," I say, "but that answer's changed so many times."

"Rootless, huh?" he says. "You know, it's hard to really get anywhere if you don't stick around long enough for something to happen. You know what I mean?"

"I think so," I say, "but I never knew what to wait for." A strong wind roars around the building, but somehow our space beneath the tin roof remains still and quiet, as if

the rain is just there to provide a muffling shroud between us and the rest of the world.

"Why'd you leave home in the first place?" he asks

"I don't even remember."

This isn't the complete truth, and I think he knows it. He's kind enough to not press me on it though. I carry on in half-truths, not ready to confront my reasons fully.

"Following dreams I guess. I wanted to be something great, achieve, or whatever. You know that story. You ever feel that way?"

"Nope," he says decidedly. "Been living out here all my life."

He takes a drag on his cigarette, and lets it out slowly. As he does, I look around at the barren land through the rain. The mountain stands like a monolith in the distance, solemn and powerful, propagating a respectful fear of things ancient and unmoving.

"So what happened?" he asks. "Did you ever catch what you were going after?"

I shake my head.

"I don't know what happened man," I say. "Life I guess. Just can't avoid the shit sometimes." I begin to want to tell the white-haired man everything. About the face and its grubby fingers. About the pervasive smell of fast food. About the rocking chair that creaked gently in the afternoon, watching me as I walked home. My teeth clench.

I'm stopped by the man's thin, jovial laugh. "Well I think you've got some time, kid. Could still be some greatness left out there for you somewhere. Just gotta wipe your boots and trudge on."

"Well here's hoping," I reply, relaxing my jaw and taking a final drag. I drop the cigarette on the ground and snuff it out with my shoe.

My sister finishes filling up and beckons for me to leave. I turn to the man and say, "Thanks for the talk and the smoke. I appreciate it."

He gives me a nod and waves his jeweled hand as I pull my jacket over my head and run to the car.

"It was good to know you, friend," I hear him say through the rain.

I get to the car and sink into the passenger seat. My head is still throbbing. I shiver, and feel sweat on my back. My head feels hot with fever.

"Who was that?" my sister asks me.

"I don't know," I say. "A desert oracle or just some old man."

We drive in silence a while, the mountain coming ever closer, towering further upward into the clouds as we approach.

"You're lucky you know," she eventually says. "Not everyone has a home to go to, much less someone to get them there."

"I know," I say. "Thanks, I guess."

I rock slowly back and forth itching, and aching in the back of my mind to shoot up again— to fall into that quiet hole no one else could enter, and from which I couldn't escape; that hole of warm, soft, velvet. I remember the feeling of a brown plastic bag

in my pocket and my whole body hurts. Will this call ever leave me? Will this constant tapping on the thin glass of my mind ever cease?

I let out a yearning groan and clutch my stomach.

“What?” my twin asks me.

“What the fuck do you think?” I say.

She shakes her head and says in an angry tone, “I don’t know how you ever put that shit in your body in the first place. Now here we are – you moaning like a wretch, with nothing to show for yourself but dope-sickness and a bad attitude. It makes me want to puke.”

“You really don’t know?” I say. “Not all of us were lucky enough to live in a bubble, Emily. Sometimes the shit around you just eats you up and you gotta find something else to pour yourself into.”

I start to feel myself slipping out of control. I’m speaking louder than I want to.

“I mean for fuck’s sake Emily, go outside and look around you. Just because you’ve managed to avoid eating the shit doesn’t mean we all have, and I can’t stomach it. Women and children vanish every day across the world, only to show up in a dim brothel somewhere, under the vigilant eyes of evil men—”

“Or dead in an empty field,” she interrupts with a sharpening voice. “You think I don’t know that? You think I’ve never had anything awful happen to me? Fuck you, Sam. You’ve always been so selfish, with your heart on your sleeve and a fucking soap box under your feet. You’re not special. You threw your life in the trash, you’ve got no one to blame but yourself. I’ve had my share of pain, but you don’t see a kneedle hanging out of my arm.”

“Oh yeah? I say bitterly. “Did some boy you loved leave you for someone better? Couldn’t deal with all of your own faults? Did you not get the job of your dreams and have to lower your standards? Your idea of bad is so tame, Emily. I didn’t get on junk by some rash misstep at a teenage party. It was a decision I made. I went out, and I searched, and I found it. I was desperate for a crutch, so I could keep going through life. You think I’m weak for that? I had to adapt. Sure, without a fix I’m useless, but if I was fixed all the time I’d be worth something.”

I saw in her face that I’d hurt her, that I’d brought forth some awful memory inside her

It’s quiet for a moment, and we both begin to calm down, realizing how petty it all was. Then she says, “Sam, I want to tell you something I’ve never told anyone else.”

“Alright,” I say, apprehensive. Stories with that beginning have ends that make you cry. “Shoot.”

She pauses for a moment to regain her composure and clear her throat.

“Remember how I wanted to be a model?”

“Of course I remember. You’d catwalk all over the damn house, flipping your hair

and posing. You acted like there were cameras everywhere.”

She chuckles at first. “Yeah, that’s right.” Her face twists, and her voice shakes for a moment. “Ever wonder why I suddenly didn’t want to be one anymore?”

I can sense what is to come and I start to say something, try to just tell her I’m sorry, but she cuts me off with her hand.

“It started out with a man saying I was ‘beautiful’ – that sacred word every girl wants to hear used to describe them, especially a naïve fifteen-year-old with star-studded dreams. He pulls up next to me in his car, rolls his window down, and with a crooked smile on his face, he says it – ‘You’re beautiful.’ He had a greasy ponytail and I knew something wasn’t right, but the optimist in me wanted to hear him out. Nobody ever said I was beautiful before. So, he goes on, says he’s a photographer, and that he could make me famous if I went to his studio with him. Says I could be on the cover of *Vogue*. ”

She laughs lightly at this and runs her blue fingernails through her hair. I try not to look at her, my own sense of shame slowly growing.

“And back then I thought I deserved to be,” she says.

The face returns to me swiftly and suddenly. I remember coming home from school that day, joyous over an A on a math test. He was sitting on his rocking chair on the front porch. It’s old and wooden and I hear it creaking from the sidewalk. He waves at me. I divert my attention back to Emily.

“He says if I went with him he’d take headshots of me, and send them to an agency in Los Angeles. He’s like, ‘This is it, you’re being discovered. Now come on sweetheart, and get in the car.’

“For a second I was exhilarated, so ready to believe that my dream was coming true, but that feeling didn’t last for long. It wasn’t right; I knew that it wasn’t right. This isn’t how I pictured it – some creep in an old Buick with ripped up seats, scents of musk and cheap vodka, him cruising beside me down a quiet street in a small town. No.

“It was wrong, and I was scared.

“Then he pulls out a stack of photos from his glove compartment and starts to show them to me. They’re of other girls that he’s ‘worked with.’ They were all so young. All of their tiny bodies posed provocatively, artificially. It made me feel queasy, like a rock was rolling around in my gut.

“Get in, we can go now,’ he says to me. Then I look in the seat behind him, and all of my feelings solidify into a dense mass of fear. There, in an open bag, next to the camera he said would make me famous, is a roll of duct tape, rope and a hammer. The hammer had a black handle and a yellow neck. The head of it was stained with rust, or worse. I can’t remember what the duct tape or rope looked like, but that fucking hammer. I still remember it exactly, sitting there in his backseat.”

She shudders. I want to tell her to stop, but she’s too far in now. She has to get it out,

and I have to listen. I try to look out the window for the outside world, but the rain is too heavy and obscures my view.

"I'm terrified of course, so I say, 'I should get home now,' and start walking away. I hear his car door slam shut and walk faster. Then I feel his hand clasp around my arm. 'This is happening, this is it,' he grunts at me, and starts dragging me toward his car. So I scream. I scream bloody murder. You ever hear a mountain lion scream in the night? It was just like that.

"Scream and shake was all I really could do. So I flail wildly, and I piss myself out of fear. Tears stream down my face and I start to convulse like I'm having a seizure. One of my shoes comes off as he drags me kicking and screaming to his back seat. Then I hear a car turn onto the street, thank God. He looks at me with rage, drops me and walks away. Just drives off like nothing happened."

She pauses a moment, and glances at me. Her face loosens a bit, and she lets out a nervous, crippled laugh. It was the sort of laugh you let out when you're tense or afraid, when there's nothing funny, but you can't relieve yourself any other way.

"I just lay there on the sidewalk staring at the clouds," she continues, "looking for some comfort in the heavens. I didn't know what to do, I was paralyzed. What did I want now? How could I ever feel safe again? Awareness of how small you are is one thing. But when it's shoved down your throat, and you truly know what it means to be powerless in the face of real evil – that'll fuck you up good."

A moment of silence passes, filled only by the sound of the whirring car and the beating rain.

"Christ," I say forcefully, in a feeble attempt to cleanse the air. I have goose bumps, and stare wildly but blankly toward the mountain ahead. It stunned me to learn that the world had gone after someone so close to me, my own twin sister. And somehow she got away.

"Eventually I get up and walk home," she says. "When I get in the door, I dead-bolt it, and collapse in tears. Mom came in and told me not to be so delicate, that I won't get anywhere if I cry so much. Then she moved me aside and walked out the door. I went upstairs and took a long bath. Afterwards, I went to bed. Got up the next morning and went to school, behaving the same way that evil man did – like nothing had happened at all. I could never force myself to believe that completely though. The person I was had changed. A part of me had died and gone away."

"Emily, I'm sorry," I say. "That's terrible." Her story left a bitter taste in my mouth and taught me never to demean my sister again.

"You're the only one who knows that story, Sam. Me, you, and that terrible man. Now that I've told you I feel a bit better about it though." I smile lightly at this, happy to help my sister with her burden. We drive on through the rain in the silence again.

I want to say something definitive to her, that nothing like that will ever happen

to her again. That I'll make sure of it. But I know those words will be empty, and she does too. How could I – a whiny, insignificant, junkie tool – stop something so ubiquitous and so terrible. The faces of missing children are plastered across America in the hundreds of thousands, called 'runaways' for the comfort of their families and towns. They met the same evil my sister had, but were not so lucky as to be able to escape, and simply live with the awful memory of a nightmare – they were forced to live the nightmare itself.

"You hungry?" she asks me as we approach a diner on the right. It looks old, but only in its sentiment, and not its condition. I see a single waitress through the window, sitting alone on a barstool inside.

"I could eat," I say, though the thought of eating makes me nauseous. I figure I'll be nauseous anyway.

We park in the empty lot and walk toward the door. A pair of tennis shoes and some clothes are strewn callously on the sidewalk near the dumpster. I wonder who they belonged to. Were they innocuous or did they hold a dark story, like the shoe my sister lost on the street that day?

We walk in and sit in a white booth with red cushioning. The waitress puts down the crossword she's working on and greets us.

"Hope you folks are hungry," she says. "Can't beat the special today – chicken-fried steak with pepper gravy."

"That's okay," I say, motioning with my hand as I scan the menu. Just bring me a coffee for now, I need a minute."

"It'll change your life. It's that delicious," she adds.

"I'm good," I reply.

"Coffee for me too," my sister says, and the waitress leaves to retrieve it.

"What're you gonna get," I ask my sister, who hasn't even glanced at the menu. I see the strength gleaming in her eyes and written on her face. I wish I could be as strong as she is.

"The special," she says. "I'm ready for a life-changing meal. Get one with me."

"I'm a vegetarian," I say. She scoffs lightly and says with a sarcastic tone, "Sam, if we don't eat all those animals what are we supposed to do with them?"

"Release them," I say in a monotone voice without looking up from the menu.

I see my sister shake her head in my peripheral vision, trying to hide a grin. I look up at her smiling. Maybe we can help each other.

The waitress sets our coffee in front of us with a handful of disposable creamer cups. My sister pours two into her coffee, and stirs it around with her finger. I take a sip of mine and burn the tip of my tongue.

"Know whatcha want?" the waitress asks, pen in hand.

"The special," my sister spits out quickly.

"I just want a grilled cheese," I say.

The waitress leaves and we sit looking out the window as the rain continues to fall. Lightning flashes across the landscape followed closely behind by sharp thunderclaps.

"Awesome," my sister says with a cold seriousness in her voice. In the foreground across the highway, under the sparse shade of a Joshua tree, a vulture tears at the skinny carcass of a raccoon.

As the lightning flashes in the distance, I see myself standing on his porch. He's asking me about school. What are my favorite classes? Do I play football? Am I making good grades? I tell him about my math test that day. He leans forward in his rocking chair. "That deserves a reward," he says. "How about some ice cream?"

The waitress brings our food out quickly and we eat together in silence. Old country music plays softly from the jukebox in the corner, and the waitress returns solemnly to her crossword.

"Have you talked to your old roommate recently?" my sister asks suddenly.

"Who, Simon?" I ask.

"Yeah, that's right. How is he?"

"He's dead," I say, taking a bite of my sandwich. "He shot himself a few years ago."

"Oh my god," she whispers in shock. "I'm so sorry."

"That's okay," I say, shrugging. "It was nothing unexpected. He told us he'd thought it out and that it was what he wanted."

"You let him do it?" she says with confusion in her voice.

"I mean, we couldn't stop him really. He'd had stint after stint in the institution, adjust his drug cocktail over and over, but every time come out feeling the same way – craving oblivion. Eventually we just had to accept it. So he set a date, quit his job, and we all tried to cherish our last days together."

I thought of those few days as I took another bite and chewed slowly. The rich cheese spilled through my teeth as I thought of Simon smiling and laughing.

My sister asks grimly, "What'd you do those last days?"

I swallow and continue, "He took us to all the places that were important to him as a child, and as a man – a rickety tree fort tucked away in the forest of his youth, the edge of some old bridge where he sat to think. He even took us to a cul-de-sac of empty lots where he said his old house was. He pointed out innocuous objects, telling us little stories about them; how they had contributed to the person that he was. I admired his honesty about his faults and his failures. It was complete, leaving nothing hidden. But at that point, what did he have to lie about? He just wanted to preserve himself, his full and honest self, in the depths of all our memories."

"That sounds really depressing," she says as she saws off a hunk of her steak and spreads it around in the thick gravy.

"It wasn't that bad. I mean, yeah, of course it was really depressing. But he was really

happy those few days, joyful even – it felt really strange. But when I think about it, I suppose it's not. His joy came from the acceptance of his death – that it was coming, and would arrive soon, and he knew exactly when. He gave himself a period of life free from real consequence, and free from fear of dying – a period between deciding to, and then actually dying by his own hand, as if when he was ready to leave he would hail the hearse like a taxi cab, and there it would be. For his friends that period was one of feigned ignorance – of reconciling the fact that what you hope for is so often not what you get, and that truth has no sense of compassion.

"The last day arrived quickly, and he hadn't shown any sign of indecision. So we got a handle of decent scotch and drank every bit of it, remembering all our experiences together, living them again in our minds. His eyes sparkled with life that night, while all of ours were dim – yet we laughed with him, cackled wildly over the stupid things we'd done in our lives. Eventually it died down, and one by one people left. They said things like 'See you later,' 'See you around,' still pretending for what they thought was his sake, but was actually their own.

"I was the last one there. I couldn't bring myself to leave. So we sat together talking a while until there was nothing left to say, and eventually I just wept in the silence with him. I remember asking, 'Why tonight? Why on such a beautiful night?' and he said, 'We made it beautiful to hide its ugliness. Tonight would've been meaningless without it.' I woke up the next day shivering and sick, on the floor of an empty room."

She had finished her meal and pushed her plate away.

"I'm sorry, Sam. That's awful," my sister says weakly.

"Yeah, it was. But what was worse was life afterwards. Something about watching a man stroll so casually toward his death, like it was just another step forward, and not an end. It was a big part of why I got on smack. It took from me that fundamental assumption that life was worth living. Why didn't he think so? Did I miss something, or did he? I thought about taking the same path, but I couldn't. I just laid around thinking about it in front of the TV. I felt my small patch-quilt sense of purpose become a pile of tattered rags in my hands. Eventually I found purpose again, in that silly, endless pursuit of distilled bliss."

"How'd that work out?" she asks, a patronizing tone in her voice.

I shrug and say jokingly, "Got me here didn't it?" Neither of us laughs.

"Let's go," she says, getting up and placing a twenty on the table.

"I need to use the restroom," I say. I gulp down my coffee, enter the bathroom and vomit again. I splash water on my face and meet my sister outside the door, and we leave the waitress to work on her crossword in silence.

The rain is still falling. We pull out onto the highway and speed off once again toward the mountain.

"Today I want to cleanse myself," my sister says, "and unearth the things I've buried. I

have another story that no one has ever heard. I want to share it with you too.”

“Alright,” I say in admiration. “Let’s hear it then.” The rain beats softly against the roof of the car, reiterating the size of the metal box we occupy.

“Do you remember the old man that lived next door, Mr. Daniels? The one who always greeted us when we’d pass by on our way to school?”

Hearing his name makes my body go rigid.

“Yeah, I remember,” I reply. My nausea rises when I see his ugly face in my mind. The scraggly beard. His thinning hair. His bulging stomach. His grubby fingers. The smell of old fast food and body odor.

“One day when you were sick, I was walking home from school alone,” she says. “He was sitting on his porch, and waved at me like he did every day, rocking gently back and forth in his chair. But then he began to beckon me over, saying, ‘Hey, come here real quick.’”

As she says this to me, I feel my heartbeat slow, and in that moment it felt as if time was coming to a hault. Breathing becomes more difficult, as if a noonday demon suddenly sits atop my chest.

“We saw him pretty regularly, so he didn’t seem like a stranger to me,” she says. “I just figured he was lonely and wanted someone to talk to. He asks me the basic questions all adults ask, you know – how’s school, what’s your favorite subject, whatever. I was a bit timid but I wanted to be polite. ‘Neighborly’ – you know. Then he invited me in for some ice cream, which I accepted shyly after some prodding, despite my better judgment. I remember it tasting funny, and after I finished I felt woozy.”

I remember the ice cream too. It had a chalky aftertaste, but I didn’t want to say anything because I didn’t want to hurt his feelings.

“Then he led me over to the living room and sat me down on his couch.” She cringes, and makes a sound of disgust. “He started talking to me about school again. Then he came over and sat next to me and placed his hand on my thigh.”

As she’s saying this, everything floods back to me. Everything that I had spent years blocking out. His big, purple couch. How strange I thought it that his hand was on my thigh. The sleepiness that was taking over my mind so quickly. Him telling me how beautiful I was, how he’d waited for this moment. How he took off his shirt. How he removed his belt. How he folded all of his clothes and sat them at the foot of the couch, like he was enjoying every miniscule moment. And me just sitting there, paralyzed.

“The rest is more or less what you’d expect,” she says. “I blocked out most of it, except for some hazy images I see in nightmares from time to time. Him leering at me from above with a wicked grin on his face, and the feeling of his couch cushions on my bare back. They were covered in warm, soft velvet. I remember the feeling of them on my back like it was yesterday. I still shudder at the touch of velvet today. The next thing I remember is throwing up in the bathroom, Mom patting me on the back saying ‘You

must be coming down with what your brother has.”

My sister starts crying softly.

“Emily,” I say, putting my hand on her shoulder.

“What?” she says through her tears.

“He did the same thing to me.”

She lurches with a loud sob, and starts to pull over. We both get out and throw up together on the side of the road, clutching our stomachs and throats as the rain continues to fall in sheets, soaking us. I finish first, and take my sister’s hair in my hands, moving it out of her face. She gets down on all fours and pukes until there’s nothing left, drooling over a pile of half-digested steak as she dry-heaves into the mud. I sit with her and hold her, and she holds me, and we cry for each other.

Eventually, I stand up and try to help her to her feet. The mud is slippery and thick, and we are both covered with it. She looks up at me and I look back somberly. She’s smiling through the downpour, and there’s a warm glow in her face.

“Let’s go,” she says.

We get in the car and start to drive again. As we do, the storms clear a bit, and the sun begins to set in an explosion of vivid color. The clouds diffuse the light across the horizon, in a spectrum of striking oranges, golden yellows, and deep, powerful hues of red and pink. The mountain against it makes for a breathtaking scene.

“You know what I’m excited for?” I ask my sister.

“What’s that?” she says back.

“Getting out of this fucking car.”

“Me too,” she replies smiling. “I’ll never get back in it again.” She starts to laugh, and so do I.

We come to the foot of the mountain, where we see a car smashed into the side of a large tree.

“That’s a shame,” my sister says cheekily. I turn away toward the sunset again, passing it by without thought.

“How you feeling?” she asks me.

“I feel alright,” I say back, as we begin to ascend the mountain.

“Me too,” she says, “but hungry again.”

