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LYRE MAGAZINE



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LYRE LITERARY MAGAZINE

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Readers,

I was in my first year at SFU when some of us started talking about the *Lyre*. Of course, we weren't calling it that yet, but in some capacity this magazine has been with me throughout my entire undergraduate career. It's been my endless project and constant companion for the last four years.

In this, our third outing, we have done something we had never done before - we set a theme. The theme of this issue is crisis. It's a theme we hold in common with the ACLA conference of this year. It is a theme that, given the state of upheaval in the world as a whole right now, is very relevant. Yet it is also a theme that runs throughout most of literature because crisis isn't just tsunamis and stock market seizures; crisis is change, especially when that change is uncomfortable. And literature that doesn't have at least a moment of crisis is ... honestly, I don't know what that literature would be. I know I have yet to encounter it.

Every one of the pieces in this issue experiences a moment of crisis. It begins with an interview with the talented French translator Christophe Claro, and concludes with the image of paper birds, fluttering futilely against their cage. All throughout there is a quality of honesty that is both beautiful and implacable.

I am so proud of what has been accomplished in this issue. I'm so proud of what we've accomplished over the last three issues, and so excited to see what the *Lyre* does next.

Brittany Vesterback
Editor-in-Chief

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CHRISTOPHE CLARO

My Conversation on Translation with Claro

By Krysten Maier

I am sitting on a rooftop in Paris, waiting for the sunrise to paint the landscape in spectacular colour. The moon and stars of blackest night will die, but the sun and sky will be reborn. The mystery of night is illuminated by the glory of the dawn.

Okay, I'll level with you; I am not watching the Paris skyline at dawn. I'm sitting on a concrete bench in the SFU Surrey Mezzanine, waiting for Parisian author and translator Christophe Claro. I am hopeful that he will offer similar illumination of an ever-present issue of the World Literature Department. After a stint in Toronto as part of what he calls his 'mad balade au Canada', he flew in to a very rainy Vancouver at four in the morning to his rendez-vous in Surrey as World Literature's guest to give a lecture on translation. After warm greetings, we settle in to begin our discussion about the role of the translator and his personal experience in the practice.

Many of us may have pre-conceived notions of what a translator is: perhaps a failed writer who can't quite let go of their literary aspirations, or one of hundreds of bit players in an authors march towards publication. As I engage Claro in discussion of the issue of translation, I am surprised to find that this relaxed, quiet man has some rather startling opinions of translation - but opinions that align quite well with the rebirth personified in the daily death and rebirth of the sun.

Claro describes translation as an act of homicide, wherein the translator must murder an author's work and, through this creative destruction, engineer textual rebirth. He states that a translator must come to terms with the fact that "not one single word will remain" of the original text. This is a daunting prospect, but it is also the translator's duty to see to it that something of substance survives the process.

As Claro is author of eighteen novels, including *Madman Bovary* and *Chair Electrique*, I have to wonder if he truly accepts his own dogma of reinvention, knowing very well the feeling of ownership an author has for his text. When I ask, he states, "The translator is an artist in his own right, he is not a writer, but an author." He continues to speak of how much trust there must be in the translator-author relationship, and the necessity of putting ego aside.

For Claro, the translator is not an invisible figure but an active part of the dissemination of books. A rebel crossing the boundaries of world literature. As far as Claro is concerned, translating is about facilitating reading, and getting people involved in reading from different cultures. He states that, "Reading itself can be a creation." This is a sentiment that can surely be understood by any avid reader.

Christophe Claro desires that the reader "invent himself as a reader of this specific text" with his or her own language and rules. This is the same principle he applies to his translations—being that French literature has such a long tradition and heavily engrained style, Claro must "reimagine the French" in order to really portray an American novel, filled with specific Americanisms.

Herein lays one of Claro's central philosophies as a translator. He wishes not to domesticate his readers, but drive them into something completely unknown and

unfamiliar. He finds that in too many cases, the translator is “selling the country rather than the text” in a suppressed form of cultural empiricism. Translation has become politicized in the past as North American audiences craved the exotic “other” and found it in over-exaggerated, faulty representations of culture. Needless to say, this is the farthest thing from Claro’s goals as a translator.

While Claro is devoted to capturing the essence of each novel he translates, when questioned about the idea of a “correct” or “definitive” translation, Claro insists, “We cannot have simply one right translation, but many. One is not better than the other; they just exist. Language just wants to go on existing.” I cannot think of a better way to define translation than the passing on of words, preserving and connecting languages through great works of literature. As for the possibility of a translation adding something to a text: “It has to. It’s a kind of treachery, but you want it to work, so you have to do it.”

And what about the authenticity a translator wishes to convey? “Sometimes you end up imagining authenticity,” Claro states. “Translation is similar to forgery in this way.” In addition to this unconventional philosophy he adds, “Culture is supposed to be corrupted.” His French translations of American work do not dilute the French spirit in any way, but rather help the French literary tradition break free of cliché.

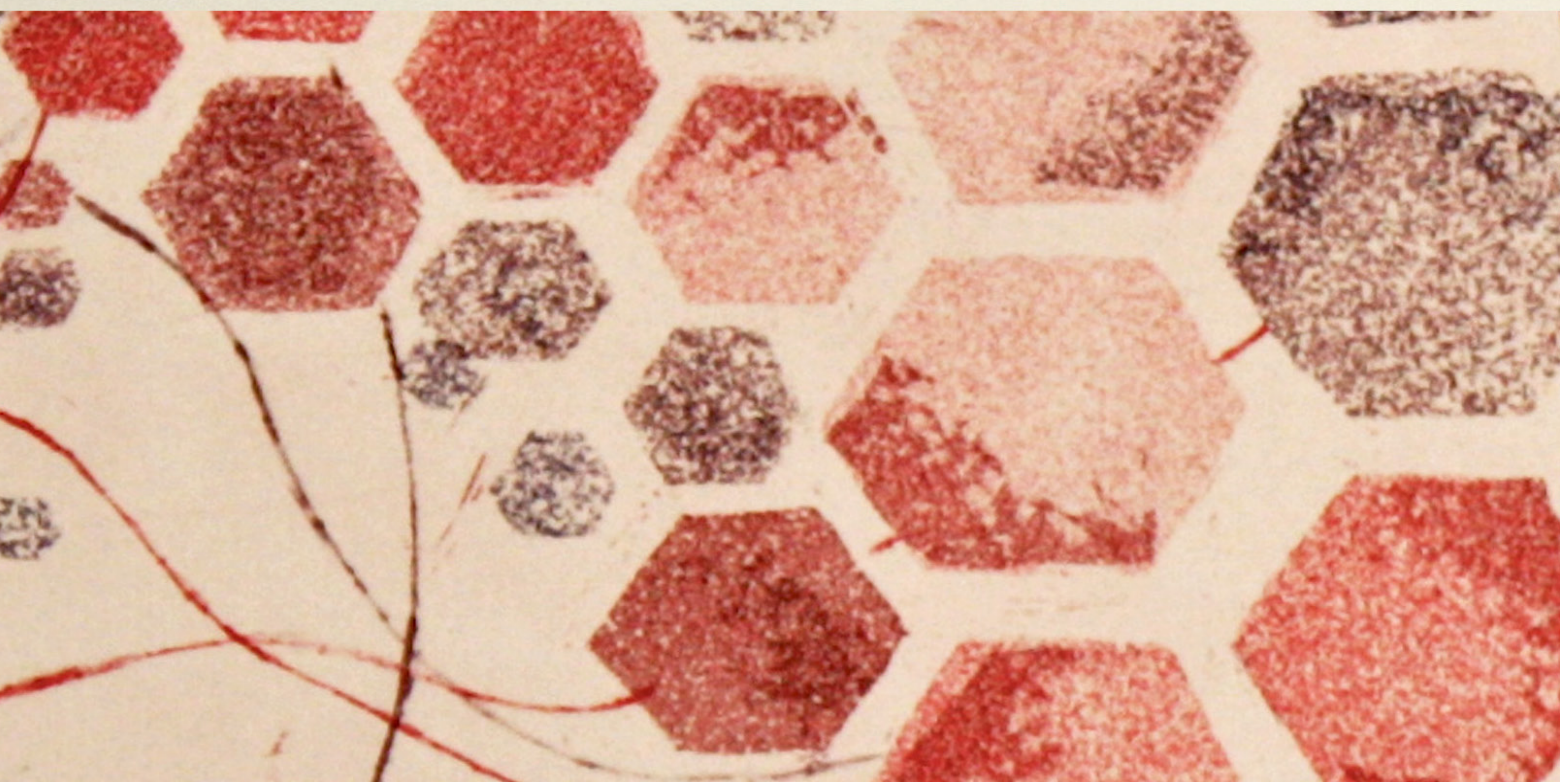
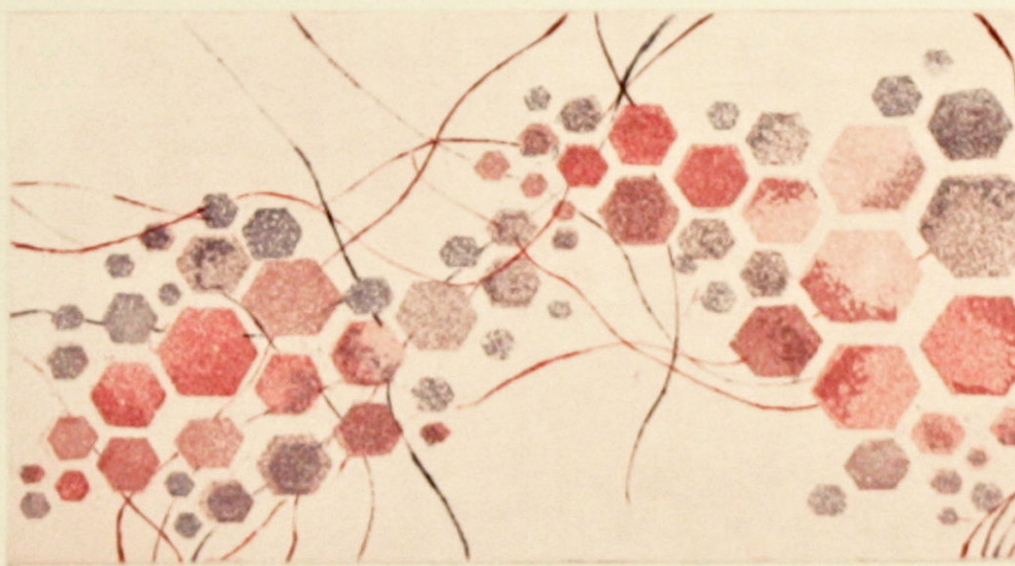
Christophe Claro chooses American novels to translate based on his tastes, always on the prowl for literary gems that challenge and intrigue him. This has included everything from William T. Vollman to Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*. He likes a challenge, as if texts are taunting him with their apparent untranslatability. I ask him if he has ever come across an aspect of a text that is simply untranslatable.

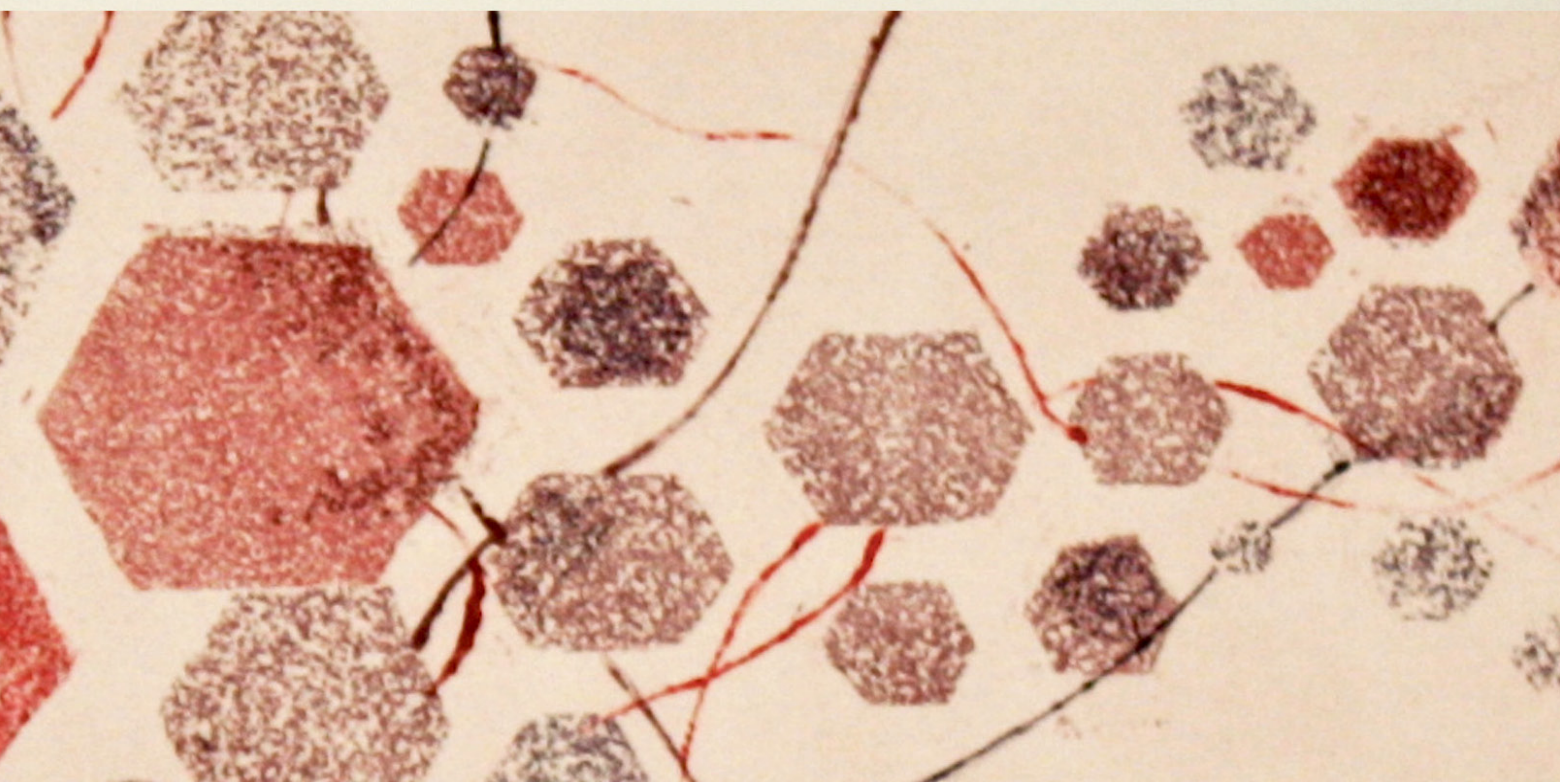
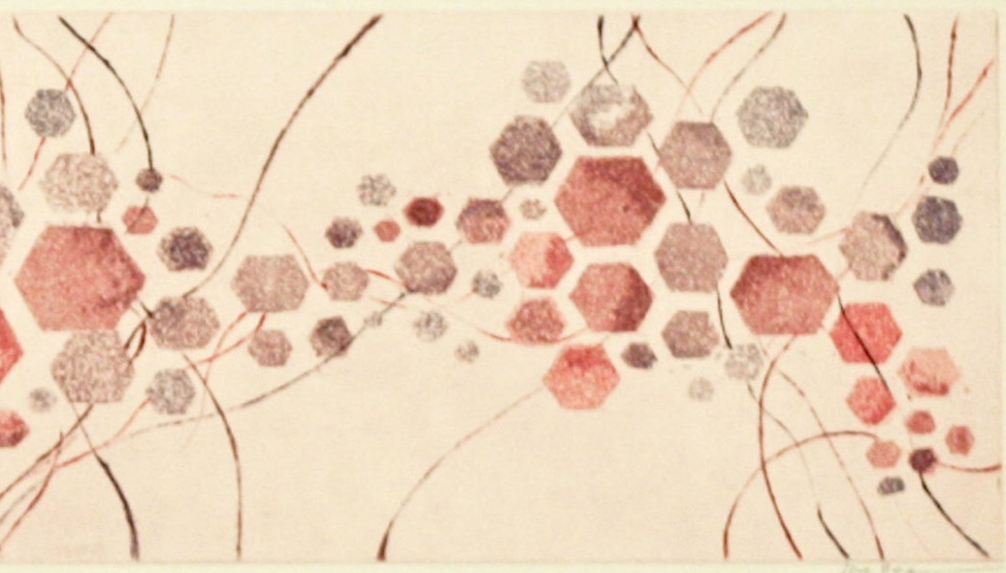
“No, this is impossible,” Claro insists. “Nothing is untranslatable.” Everything can be translated if only one applies himself to the job. When humour is the thorn in translator’s side realised in the form of the dreaded pun, one must absolutely find an equivalent in the language of translation. “Footnotes to explain puns are just lazy, giving up,” Claro declares. When the trouble is allusion, the translator must try to inhabit the text and attempt to “detect potential brothers or fathers of the text” and make allusions in that way.

The task of the translator is not an easy one, nor is it one that usually gains the attention or acclaim of international readers. Fortunately, for Christophe Claro this is not the case. He has been recognized with awards for his translations and, whether or not he believes in definitive editions himself, many of his translations are considered to be the right translations.

But even without these prestigious reminders of excellence, Claro would continue on the path of author and translator. “I get pissed off when people say they ‘want’ to write—either you write or you don’t.” For this man, the decision is clear and translation is just another way of writing.

Our conversation draws to an end and Claro goes on to give a wonderful lecture to a room of admiring students and academics. Through the course of the evening, accepted perspectives of translation have been challenged, perhaps even destroyed. In their place, the new potential for translation has been illuminated, urging all of us to unlock the creative potential of readers and writers alike.





THE BEGINNING OF WORDS

By Bonnie Tulloch

This story begins not with a word,
It starts with a language not spoken or heard.
My story, you see, begins with a cry,
The sound that we make when we're born and we die.

A cry that God in his sovereignty hears
Made in pain, joy or tears,
A cry that contains all that we feel,
A cry of life that makes us real

It was a cry like this that was made that night;
When darkness fled in the presence of light.
The cry of mankind, the cry of life,
It cut through the silence of space like a knife.

Mankind was born,
Right there and then.
Risen from dust,
Proud mighty men.

Adam and his faithful rib
Crept from their humble, earthly crib,
Took a few steps, then tripped and fell,
Tumbling down to the depths of hell.

What caused their stumble, their fateful miss?
A lust for power,
The Devil's hiss,
The knowledge that led their hearts astray,
Words gave them truth
But took meaning away.

Strangers, they searched for the
Silence they'd lost:
Knowledge had come
At a frightful cost.

Through science and art
They tried to regain
The meaning of silence
But all was in vain.

For the further they travelled
Away from that cry,
The memory of silence began to die.
Until silence became a noise in itself
Another book upon the shelf.
A sea of words, which could not express
The meaning of life,
In its emptiness.

The future, it seemed,
Would forever be grim,
Mankind clutching a broken limb.
But God in his grace
Quenched the thirst of Hell's coals;
He breathed into them the silence of souls.

A silence sometimes
Overshadowed by words,
Remaining intact
Left alone and unheard.

A silence that one can only
Express,
When all words fade—
To nothingness...

SYLAR

By Mike Despotovic

Please forgive me.
My eyes, I received them from a painter;
If they stare into yours, it cannot be helped.
My tongue is from a poet
Who spent the span of his life learning not to
speak... but to listen.
My ears, they belong to a musician.
Every note in your voice is a nymph-like echo.
My hands were given to me by a potter;
He knew the very seeds of pain, that rest within the
ground you tread.
All of these, I stole.
And would not return them, if given a chance.
Oh, but my heart?
It is mine, surely.
But now, seeing you in the flesh,
I have found my replacement.
Please forgive me.
It will not leave your body gently.

14112011

Autumn
Cold and lovely
She is the wind beneath the leaves.
Woolen scarf and dark demeanor
She is the in-between of Summer's lust and
Winter's bleed.
I remember her breath, her rising chest,
her tease between the
trees.

I am the fallen.
She is the Fall.



OPTIMISM

By Mike Despotovic

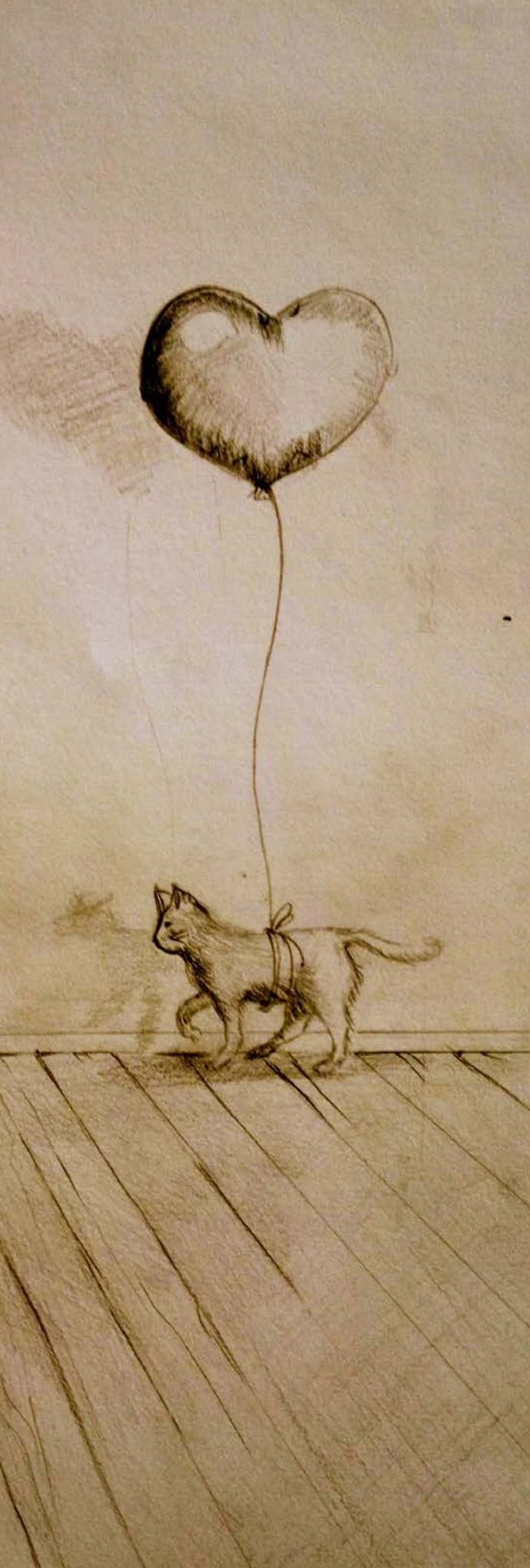
I'd never make a
girl happy like I made her
Nor bitter, I thought

Rule 30

There was a dead butterfly on the Skytrain today.
Summer nights turn strangers into friends,
I watched her,
within me I yearn,
"she must have wandered in by mistake."

Her wings flapped in the West.
I fell in love with the East,
there she lay, broken
and still beautifully intact,
I wish I could take her home with me.

Men are incomplete—
women are merely flawed.
She told me, "I don't want to waste my time
on anyone who doesn't give me
butterflies."
I told her there was a dead butterfly
on the Skytrain today.



TRAFFIC LIGHTS

By Alicia Blimkie

All of the lazy traffic lights
on this quiet suburban night
blinking green and red
so the few, lone drivers will look ahead
and note the concrete world
while everlasting questions are unfurled
in a dark but well known reverie,
underscored by an engine humming steadily.
On the edge of a cliff, the abyss of tomorrow
will life be something that you borrow,
or truly held in your own hands,
bowing to each of your confident commands?
And what is a person not bound to others,
whose heartstrings are cut,(n.c.) and always hovers
between glorified solitude
and relationships marked by a clashing prelude?
Is the purpose of life found within yourself
once insecurities have been left on the shelf,
in the glowing fire of the sunrise,
or in the depth of another's eyes?
It is strange that an engine and some tires,
a metal frame and electrical wires
can be a vehicle for exploration
of thoughts, words and motivation,
and without offering answers at the final light
can still reveal a world of insight.

GAIA UNBOUND

By Mary Grace Fojas

Open.

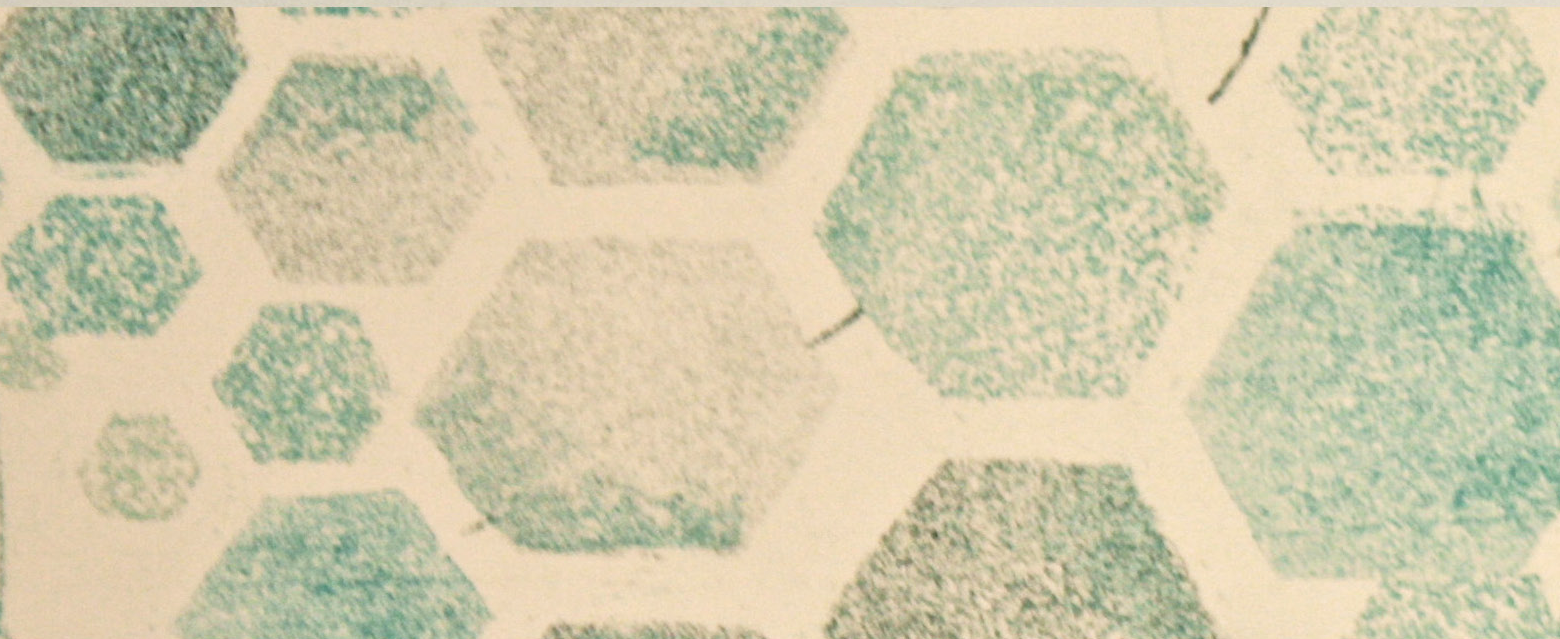
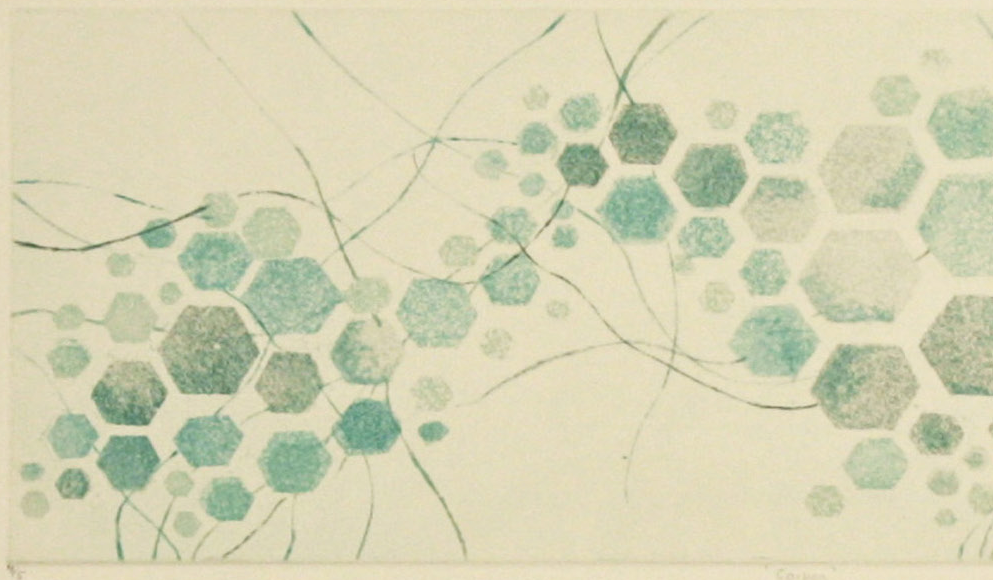
Her eyes are open, Her face half-submerged
In the piss-yellow depths of the sea-contained murk.
Her back arches, Her arms jolt in electric spasms,
And Her bare chest rises and falls in ragged desperation.
For a brief moment, for a brief, sweet moment,
The air kisses Her lips gently—the kiss of life—
And then it is gone, carrying the promise of safety and stability
With it.

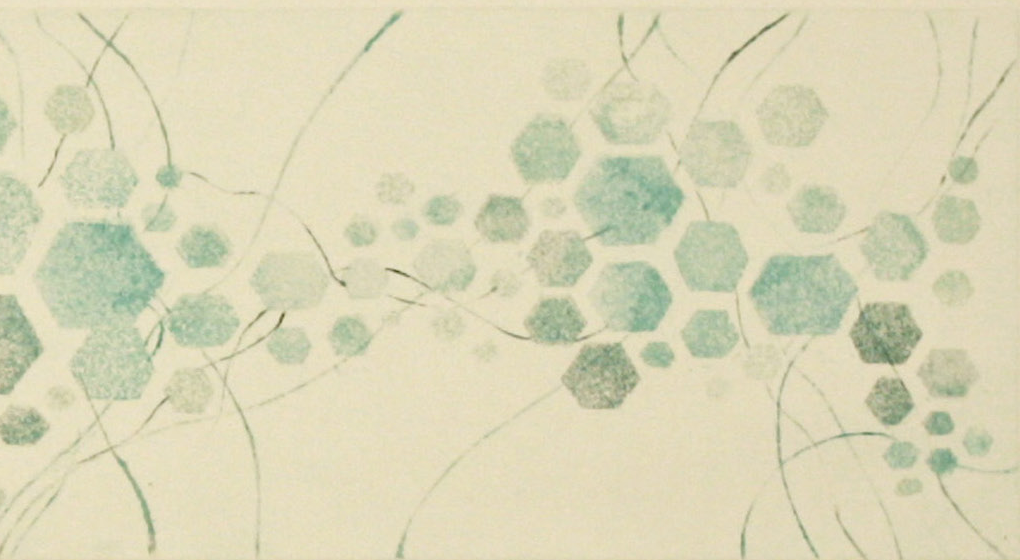
Viridian hair splayed like a delicate, open fan
Floating around a chocolate frame of angular sides;
A face that was once full, once filled with laughter and pleasure,
Now dull. Weary eyes and cracked, bleeding lips—a wilted rose
From a once blooming garden—She was
A daughter, a mother, a masterpiece,
A midwife of beasts and men.

She was timeless for a second,
When life seemed ever-abundant,
When the earth appeared to have an indomitable spirit.
But appearances deceive, and time decays,
Deteriorates, decomposes, destroys,
All things.

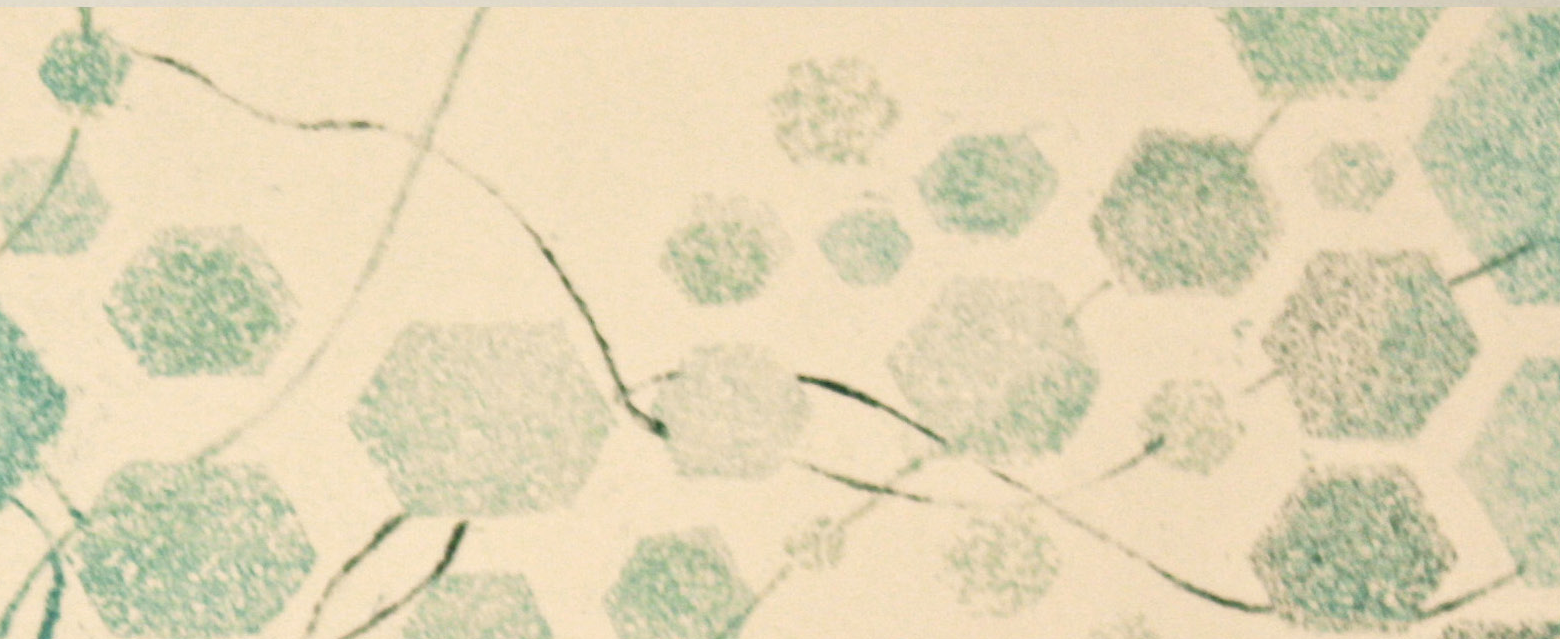
The tub tilts.

Water sloshes to one side, dribbles down the sandy floor,
Trickles down the stained, cast iron tub
Like relieved, uncontrollable tears—a release.
Once submerged, Her chin now feels the gentle tickle of water,
Caressing Her cheek in a slow ebb and flow rhythm.
Underneath Her, clawed feet lay defeated,
Already half-buried by the cruel sands of time.
Her shoulders relax, Her eyes flutter shut.
Closed.





Linn. H. H. H.



THE LAST MANUSCRIPT

By Brittany Vesterback

Ossuaries

The 18th left Salvage in the midst of a Great Drought, one that would go unbroken until their return.

They gathered on the hastily assembled stages in the centers of towns while the mayors spoke to the citizenry. They stared into seas of sunken eyes and cracked lips, their own expressions blank and bored as the traditional words were shouted at insensate populaces.

"Ages ago, people lived in a world of excess," said the mayors from the stages in the centers of the towns. "A world where everything was available, and available yesterday. Those days of plenty would not last, however. For our dear nation had enemies who masqueraded as friends—neighbors who asked for a spoonful of sugar and took a sounder of swine. Our leaders, in their wisdom, closed our borders to this quiet invasion but they were too late. The perfidious friends had already acted against us, and the product of their actions was the First Great Drought."

The mayors on their stages looked out at the people, who nodded or frowned, as was their inclination. The mayors were satisfied.

"When the First Drought began, they knew not what to do. They tried to carry on as they had, but quickly found it to be impossible. The world was no longer the one they had known. Many died in the First Drought. Many more simply became lost, dazed in the wake of the change that had struck them with so hard, and with so little warning."

The mayors were breathless, both from the heat and from the power of their own rhetoric. They gestured towards the 18th. "These fine men and women have been selected for their bravery, for their strength of character, and for their determination. All across our great nation, the 18th Search Party is mobilizing in towns just like this one. At noon today, they will depart to the far reaches of our land, as did their predecessors, in hopes of finding the next Manuscript."

The murmurs were expected, so the citizens of Salvage murmured. Across a nation, the 18th ducked their heads in embarrassed pride while mayors looked on with affectionate pomposity.

"When next we see them, they will be much changed. Now, they are our mothers and fathers, our brothers and sisters, our sons and our daughters. When next we see them, they will be heroes, carrying with them the lifeblood of this nation. When next we see them, they will be heroes, and the waters of Salvage will flow once more!"

The cheers that greeted this statement were genuine. For a moment the entire nation of Salvage felt a strange lightness in their chests, an inexplicable energy, and more than a few people smiled as they looked at the 18th, arrayed across the stages in the centers of those dusty towns. For the first time in too long they thought of something other than their thirst, their hunger. For the first time in too long, they had hope.

The mayors turned towards the 18th. "The future of our nation rests upon your shoulders. Those of you who fall, and some always do, will fall knowing that you died in the service of your nation."

The 18th left at exactly noon.

Cracks Underfoot

We're cold. So cold. So very cold, that when our feet crack through the upper layer of the Badlands, we're grateful for the heat. Until the ceaseless inferno underneath that fragile shell begins taking chunks out of our limbs.

Our gratitude doesn't survive that.

We step carefully. The shell is dark and deceptively solid in places. The bent trees that rise through it sometimes crack wide to expose ragged wounds that glow orange and red and black. Black and red and orange. Over and back, iridescent and mesmerizing.

We lose two to staring; one falls through the shell, the other fails to dodge out of the way when a cracked tree decides to rest its carcass upon him. We are grateful for them. We learn from their deaths, and they take no one down with them.

The same cannot be said of the others that we lose to the Badlands. One is driven mad by the sounds; the endless straining drone of the shell, the crackle and hum of the inferno beneath. We lose three to the attack that follows. Others drag us down with them when the shell cracks underfoot.

Others we lose not to death but to an inflated sense of righteousness.

It begins on the fifth day of our sojourn in the Badlands. We're used to the noises here. Mostly. Enough, at least, to recognize a sound that doesn't belong to this place.

It's a sort of scratching noise. Like nails on skin but somehow more. We ignore it for as long as we can, looking sidelong at each other and wondering which of us it is. When it finally becomes apparent that it is no one, we decide we have to talk.

We have our first argument. The incident with the mad one doesn't count; though words were said, that was definitely an altercation.

We are too far from the city to be hearing stray foragers. Besides, no one comes to this place in search of food. Search Teams and suicides are the only ones who pass through the Badlands willingly.

Which leaves only one other possibility: invasion.

We've all heard the stories. Our nation was built on them; our current task is a product of them. Stories of those dangerous neighbors who envied our wealth and resented the glory that we found in the world. They were the reason for the Great Droughts and the endless searching for the next Manuscript. And even after all these years, even after all we had already lost, they were still lurking outside our borders, just waiting for their chance to strike.

We argue about that, about them, about stories. We gather on the thickest sections of the Badlands and talk until it starts to crack. Then we move on to another section and talk some more. When the shell again begins to groan beneath us, we are at an impasse.

If we are being invaded, we need to stop them. If it's only animals, we are subjecting our families to a longer Drought. If we do nothing, the invaders could strike our families. If we do nothing, our families could die of starvation. If we break the Drought, we're handing over our wealth to the enemy. What wealth?

We're split. We've still got miles of Badlands to cover. We nap, and the hum of the Badlands burning gives us strange dreams.

When we wake, the dissenters are gone. We do not look for them. There is no point. We know where they've gone. And, despite ourselves, we wonder if we shouldn't



have gone with them.

The Next Manuscript

Some of the others died in the Badlands. It was inevitable. I said so, and you agreed. That was the beginning of our partnership. That was the beginning of you and I. Even more were lost in the fields beyond the Badlands. The great fields of blank nothingness, of endless grasses laced with hidden dangers. Snakebites and sunstroke and the endless pitfalls that may have arisen naturally or might have been yet another sign of the invasion that the continuing had rejected. You and I were safe and, I'll admit it now, that was all I cared about.

You cough, and your lungs sound heavy with the moisture that is so intrinsic to this place. You and I don't speak of it, but I can tell you are concerned. Many died coughing. Coughing for what seemed like forever, until their lungs expelled only blood. The rest were stolen by great cats with cold, canted eyes.

You and I are the last. Soon, you worry that I will be the last. That I will be the only. I worry about it, too. But we don't speak of that. Never that.

The border is close now. All the maps say that through the jungle is the border. You and I wonder about it, sitting by the fire at night. Whether it will be like a great wall, the way it looks on maps, or if it will be something felt, a kind of foreignness that tingles along the skin. You and I have seen no borders. Only Search Parties ever see borders. And you don't bother Search Parties. Salvage says the Search Parties have been through enough.

You and I soldier on, through this place made of words only ever written in books. Words like "sultry" and "verdant." And "feral." After seeing those canted eyes blink out of the darkness, the word "feral" springs to mind with amazing ease. Though you and I aren't sure how to say it.

You cough again, and the sound makes me flinch a little. I can't help it. I try to cover it by reaching up to push aside a section of hanging flora so that you can walk past. It's an unnecessary action. You know it and I know it, but like so much lately, it passes without a word.

The trees press close, vines choking the way forward. Pushing through them becomes almost like swimming through molasses, sweat sucking the clothes to our backs. You are ahead of me now, and there's no getting ahead of you. There's no way of getting anywhere but forward. You slow, and so do I. Soon I'm nearly pushing you onward through the trees.

You stumble, fall, through into a narrow clearing. I come out nearly on top of you, and barely manage to stay upright.

"We should stop," I say. Your chest is rattling as you fight to breathe.

"No," you say, pushing yourself laboriously to your feet. I try to help, but you shake me off. I let it go, let you go forward, towards the wall of trees on the other side of the clearing. I figure you'll see the futility soon enough and take the opportunity to rest.

You don't. You push forward, and I follow. You gather speed, just as I start to tire, and for large chunks of time I lose sight of you completely. Sometimes I just follow the sound of your breathing through the woods. This goes on for what feels like hours.

I don't like this. You and I have barely been out of each other's sight since leaving the Badlands. I rush to catch up to you, following your breathing around a bend but instead I find myself standing up to my knees in a creek. Where did you go?

Panic claws at my throat. I ford the creek at a run, slipping and nearly falling. I can't hear you over the sounds of rushing water. I can't hear myself over the rushing

water. I call for you and I can't hear myself. My own fear has deafened me.

I run a little ways into the trees, still shouting, though I'm only aware of it distantly. This jungle has never felt more alive, the roots grabbing for me, the branches slashing at my face. Everything about this place seems created to slow my progress, and the sudden sense of being confined makes me struggle harder, scream louder.

Finally I hear something, something that might be you, and I run faster than before. I'm covered in cuts but I barely feel them. You are gone, and that's all I can think about. You may already be dead, dying, and little lacerations are nothing in the face of that fear.

I find myself in another clearing, and my frantic eyes find you, hunched down among some trees. You are clutching something to your chest. Something strange and foreign. Something that belongs to this place. Not to me, not you.

Yet as I approach you, I wonder if that's true. There is something strange about you now, here. Something that might have been building for some time that I just refused to see. You still look sickly, but determination comes off of you in waves. Determination and ... strangeness. Strangeness akin to what I feel from what you even now clutch in your arms.

"What is that?" I ask, though in my heart I know.

You look up at me, your eyes unnaturally bright. An hour ago, I would have called it fever, but now I don't know. You smile, too bright, too big.

"The next Manuscript," you say. "It's the next Manuscript."

I can't seem to stop the words that spill from me. "Doesn't it feel ... strange to you? Wrong?"

"Wrong?" Your expression shows confusion. Confusion and something else. Something dark and cold that I choose to ignore.

"Yes. Almost ... foreign." That darkness in your eyes again. "Don't you think?"

You stand. It's been days since you've stood so tall. "No. No, I don't think."

Part of me can't believe what's happening. "It doesn't belong to us." I realize something, all at once. "We've crossed the border. The Manuscript is theirs."

You tense, and just as suddenly you relax. "You think we should leave it."

"I think we should keep looking for the real Manuscript."

You are nodding, slowly, your eyes never leaving me. You step forward, Manuscript still in hand.

I don't see you move until it's too late. Too late for me, too late for you, too late for all of us. We had all been given knives by Salvage when we left. We had sparred with them, foraged with them, fought with them.

You kill me with one of them, and leave me to bleed out in this foreign jungle.

The pain of the wound is somehow less than that of the betrayal. As I watch you leave the clearing, the Manuscript clutched close, the betrayal I feel is incendiary. My wound throbs, blood pulsing with each beat of my heart. My vision narrows, darkens, until I can see only your feet leaving the clearing.

Leaving me behind.



RUSH IN

By Sydney Vickers

You died the day the critics came
and put you out of work.
Your worn and sore and crippled fame
made nonsense out of murk.

And now the lines between your shoes
are not really made by you.
Like the texts left between the pews
unauthored except in lieu.

You were never very nice to me.
You cringed at my poor mind.
But no longer am I forced to see
What you have left behind.

And now you're dead and in your place:
Obscurity, new and blind.
But never can you fill the space
It formally seeks to find.

We all rejoice your death it seems;
A new theory to take hold.
We'll live in texts not of your dreams
And feel your blood run cold.

There you are, my loyal withered friend;
You lay forever in your bed.
Your coffin screams, the message sent:
He is here, the author – dead.





THEREIN LIES THEIR TRAGEDY

By Carlos Tamayo

III

She trembles underneath its weight. A thing
remembered from before. So many days,
so many midnights in so many ways.
And here, right here, and lightly on a string,

the pendant sits and keeps him lingering.
She fingers it and knows her touch repays,
for somewhere else another heart decays.
But here, right here, that isn't anything.

II

You're wearing the disguise. A masking look
of sorries in your eyes. So many words
of sorrow from so many sound so weird.
And here your look does not astound but lacks

the honesty of touch that you would like
when lying in your bed alone you want
for someone else to lie with you who won't
look sorry for your sorrow but just look.

I

I'm standing on the beach. The edge of worlds,
or their beginning. Here the sand itself
is sick with thirst. Yet, what a vast expanse
the ocean is. It smells of elsewhere, and
of strangers on symmetrical shores, left
to dry by ebbing tides. So distant.

WE THE ANIMALS AND LACAN

The Roles of the Symbolic and
Imaginary in Our Lives

By Krysten Maier

Jacques Lacan is renowned first and foremost for bringing a rereading of Freud's psychoanalysis into his own practice of psychiatric therapy, yet it lends itself so well to the reading of literature. This is due in part to the fact that Lacan's ideas are all underscored by what he considers the basest element of humanity: language. Lacanian theory postulates that by obtaining language as infants of eighteen months, we cross over from the Imaginary Order, in which we have the illusion of fulfillment and control, into the Symbolic Order, in which we have limited control over our needs, desires, and fears. In his novel *We the Animals*, Justin Torres blurs the lines between human and animal by endowing the characters with animalistic adjectives, thereby blurring the boundaries between the Imaginary Order and the Symbolic Order. Lacan recognizes that the distinction between Imaginary and Symbolic is not cut and dry, and that the Imaginary Order makes itself felt throughout maturity at times. Engaging with Lacanian psychoanalytic theory uncovers that imposing culture on nature the way we do with language both pulls us together as human beings and alienates us as individuals, portrayed by the familial relations in *We the Animals*.

Lacan's view of the human condition revolves around a loss or lack cultivated throughout life. Where animals are content with their situations and live without expectations or aspirations, people constantly crave more. Human life is fueled by desire not present in the minds of other animals, and this desire is born out of language. "The least one can say is that everything that is built up between these animals known as humans is constructed, manufactured, founded on language" (Wolff). In this statement, Lacan illuminates how language is the root of all human experience. It is for this reason that we experience a loss: we can never get in touch with the true Reality once we forge relationships with objects by use of signifiers. "The human experience is structured by culture" (Mac Cannell 79) and this sets us apart from any other species.

The title of Justin Torres' debut novel *We the Animals*, then, is an intriguing one. This title is clearly a play on the common locution "we the people", which figures in the opening statement of the Declaration of Independence. Torres takes this phrase and turns it awry. "We the people" fosters a sense of unity amongst mankind through their common rights and faculties in society. This idiom invokes a discourse, which Lacan defines as a "kind of social bond...an agreement" (Wolff) between human beings. This bond is present in the novel with the heartfelt words exchanged between the family members, comfort and expression of love. But this is to be problematized, as is foreshadowed by transmuting title. There is tension introduced right from page one. The reader hears himself say "we" and draws a linguistic line of we being people—for what is he but a person?—and then he is catapulted in the opposite direction with the notion of an animal. This title introduces the idea that there is something within the human being that is behind its construction via language, something primal and animal. Torres' take on the iconic phrase brings this unity that language allegedly conveys into question and reveals the way in which Lacan



finds language both a unifier and alienator. To understand this relationship better, it is necessary to take a closer look at what Lacan calls the Imaginary Order and the Symbolic Order.

Through the stages of human development, we move farther and farther away from what Lacan calls “the Real”, which we are closest to in the first six months of life. The “mirror stage” and subsequent entrance into the Imaginary Order marks a severance of the unity felt in the Real as one’s self-image is fragmented from the bodily whole, ushering in the assumption of an alienating identity (Felluga). The attaining of language, which was previously discussed as being a unifier for human beings, marks the entrance into the Symbolic Order. This is a further severance from the Real, and the integration into the restrictions of language and discourse. For Lacan, “the human being lives in a new order created by the symbol” (Mac Cannell xv) and therefore does not exist outside of these walls.

This transition is felt in *We the Animals*, as the book closely follows three young brothers, ages eleven, nine, and six. The youngest is the unnamed narrator, and he does not have a line of dialogue until the fourth chapter—even then it is sparse—when it is his seventh birthday. This resounds of the transition from the Imaginary Order into the Symbolic Order. His “Ma” begs him to “stay six forever” (Torres 16) so that he “won’t shy away from [her], won’t get slick and tough, and [she] won’t have to harden her heart.” For Lacan, culture (a word referring directly to the Symbolic Order) “is a system of arrangements in which immediate satisfaction of needs is doubly deferred...unlike the simple relational form, as with nature or with the mother” (Mac Cannell 79-80). This is the case with this chapter of *We the Animals*. Though words bring humans together as a whole, Ma is afraid that the Symbolic Order will isolate her son from her. However, at the end of the chapter, the narrator grabs Ma’s badly bruised cheeks to pull her in for a kiss, whereupon the narrator recounts: “she ripped her face from mine and shoved me away from her, to the floor. She cussed me and Jesus, and the tears dropped, and I was seven” (Torres 17). This scene is a manifestation of the loss of connection with the Real and the mother, and alienation experienced with entrance into the Symbolic Order. “The child-subject’s lost and forever desired presumptive unity with the (m)other becomes identified with images of the other” (Mellard, Using Lacan 19) as the narrator cannot sustain that closeness and is forced into the promise of satisfaction by filling the gap with *objets petit a*. Clearly we see here the problematizing of the idea that language and culture brings humans together, as the Symbolic Order is one of alienation.

Lacan recognizes that this transition is not formulaic. “The Symbolic...overlays the Imaginary and restructures cognition” (Mellard, Using Lacan 16), so elements of this bottom layer are still present in the unconscious. There can be, indeed, a crossover of the two in a mature state; we may glimpse the Real amongst our fabricated realities. James M. Mellard clarifies:

It must be understood that this ‘passage through’ the Imaginary to the Symbolic does not mean that the subject goes beyond the Imaginary. In constitution of the subject, the Symbolic enters the subject. Thereafter both registers will persist in the subject’s display of itself in behavior and verbal repetitions.
(Using Lacan 137n5)

These displays of behavior that reveal the Imaginary, according to Lacan, are the ones which do not conform to the norms of a given culture or discourse. This crossover is

embodied by the blurring of the lines of human and animal Torres achieves in his novel. Each main character is, at some point throughout the novel, described as animalistic in some way, the three brothers in particular.

“Mutts” their father calls the boys (Torres 10) for their mixed heritage. These boys are mongrels in the eyes of a prejudiced and prudent society. When the boys are playing they are “the Three Billy Goats Gruff” and later, half gruff, half troll crossbreeds outside the drugstore “[holding] out fistfuls of change and ask[ing] strangers to buy [them] troll things—cigarettes or beers or whiskeys” (Torres 27). Such is the case again when the brothers steal vegetables from Old Man’s garden. “‘Animals,’ [Old Man] hissed. He looked as if he could spit. ‘Locusts.’” (Torres 33). These are perfect demonstrations of the animal qualities revealing the Imaginary Order rising to the surface in the form of an unacceptable act in normal society. One of the largest factors in the reinforcement of Lacan’s Symbolic Order and acceptance of alienation into language is what he calls the Name-of-the-Father, which “is the symbol of authority Lacan assigns to the concept of Law” (Mellard, Using Lacan 31). The Name-of-the-Father keeps the Imaginary level in check and enforces the subject’s “‘fad[ing]’ or ‘disappear[ing]’ into the register called the Symbolic” and loss of any image of the “original self” (Mellard, Using Lacan 19). The brothers’ refusal to accept the Symbolic Order and constant avoidance of it as shown by the continuous attribution of animal imagery is demonstrative of the lack of Name-of-the-Father in their life. They do display a certain fear and respect for Paps, however, it is difficult to foster a strong sense of the Law when the father-figure is unreliable and absent from the boys’ lives for long, unpredictable stints. With this element missing, the brothers act wilder, more animal and remain with one foot in the Imaginary Order.

Animal imagery used to describe Paps furthers this theory:

He was like an animal, our father, ruddy and physical and instinctive; his shoulders hulked and curved, and we had, each of us, even Ma, sat on them, gone for rides. Ma’s shoulders were clipped, slipping away from her tiny bird neck. (Torres 45)

The father himself is still operating at times on the Imaginary level, as per this reduction of him to an animal. Also, to contrast Paps’ strong, hulking animal, Ma is presented here as a frail bird, confirming her fading out of the boys’ consciousness with their acquisition of language, but also her regress into the Imaginary. For Ma this regress is caused by inability to function in the Symbolic Order at times, often being described as “liv[ing] in dreamtime” (Torres 6) and not being able to keep Symbolic strictures like time and date straight, waking up and looking “like a raccoon caught digging in the trash” (Torres 5) with her mascara “tiger-striped down her face.”

Each character here is functioning in accordance with both the Symbolic and Imaginary Orders at times. The narrator has a particularly ambivalent relation to the Symbolic Order. This is depicted in the chapter “The Lake” when Ma uses an animal simile to describe her boys: “‘You grew up with all these lakes and rivers, and you got two brothers that swim like a couple of goldfish in a bowl—how come you don’t swim?’” (Torres 20). This is the first hint that the narrator will be different and embrace the Symbolic Order more than the other two. As the years pass to age the brothers at teenagers by the end of the book, the two eldest remain in defiance of societal norms—“They’ll flunk. They’ll roll one car after another into a ditch. Later they’ll trunk in all

manner of pornography. Soon they'll drop out." (Torres 103)—and the animal description of them perseveres: "They grew up wiry, long-torsoed and lean...They hunched and they skulked. They jittered. They scratched" (Torres 103). The narrator, on the other hand, is brimming with potential, "kept a journal...secretly, outside of the family, cultivated a facility with language and a bitter spite" for his kin who, to some degree, "hated [him] for [his] good grades" (Torres 105-6). His bookishness sets him apart from his brothers and alienates him from them despite language's ability to connect people. It is as Lacan expresses that "language both constitutes and alienates the subject" (Mellard, Using Lacan 16).

Regardless of the narrator's social normalcy in this extent, he is cultivating homosexual urges that lies outside of accepted ideology of society and the Imaginary Order can be seen, again through use of animal symbolism. When his family carts him away to a psych ward after finding out about his homosexual urges, he calls the place a zoo, for he had "behaved like an animal...did animal, unforgivable things" (Torres 118). Lacan calls "discourse that 'something' which in language fixes, crystallises, and uses the resources of language...and they use that so that the social bond between speaking beings functions" (Wolff). Here the narrator is outside of the discourse of the Symbolic Order and the social bond is in dysfunction. The speaker concludes the book with this passage: These days, I sleep with peacocks, lions, on a bed of leaves. I've lost my pack. I dream of standing upright, of uncurled knuckles, of a simpler life... They adorn me, these animals—lay me down, paw me, own me—crown me prince of their rank jungles.

This passage speaks to discourse very strongly. The narrator does not function within the boundaries that society has imposed upon nature in the Symbolic Order, so he is pushed to this seeming perpetual state of being on the outside, devolved into the Imaginary Order. However, this does not quite fit considering his immersion into the Symbolic Order. This passage shows the paradox of Lacanian theory: how this brings us together and separates us from our fellows. Where the narrator has found alienation from his family where there once was unity, he finds a new unity amongst animals, in the confines of a viewpoint that does not conform to societal norms. In short, where he did not belong to one discourse and ideology, he has entered into another. Keeping in touch with the Imaginary Order has allowed the narrator to not lose his identity in the system of the Symbolic and recreate himself in light of a new discourse.

From family unity and bonds of brotherhood to alienation in the coming-of-age, any attempt to reconcile the worlds of the Symbolic and Imaginary, leads to disarray in this novel. Where the Imaginary spells out alienation and fragmentation of the self from the world, it can still give comforting unity in a family, even if this is only an illusion. Where the Symbolic is supposed to represent a connection for all human beings, it can lead to further submission into a lonely world. How to reconcile these isolating and uniting elements in Lacanian theory? "For Lacan, culture...pulls us all together and makes us specifically human beings. But to do so, it must also keep us apart within this human sphere" (Mac Cannell xv). This is the central theme of *We the Animals*: how our loneliness, longing, and isolation is both caused and alleviated by our families. "Culture sustains intercourse—by preventing it" (Mac Cannell xv). The reason we can cohabit with one another is because language puts objects and others at arm's length, never to be seen for what they are in the Real, never to really interact. Lacan suggests that "subjects are born into a language that in effect creates them as subjects and...by virtue of their integration of the three cognitive registers (Real, Imaginary, Symbolic), can participate in ordinary

speech and situate themselves among those registers” (Mellard, *Beyond Lacan* 63). This malleability between registers causes the duality of language to both unite and untie as culture is imposed upon nature.

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