

THE

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Jury
Judge

THE PARAGON

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JOURNAL OF CREATIVE ARTS

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PARAGON JOURNAL

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LETTER FROM *the editor*

Hello Reader!

We have made a lot of changes since our last issue. The Paragon Press has officially decided to change their design system from Microsoft to Adobe. We are all currently learning how to properly using Adobe InDesign, but we are excited for the challenge. That being said, we appreciate your patience as some of our publications have been delayed. Besides upgrading our design software, we have also moved locations. Our old location was getting to small for us. The new location is still nestled in Central Pennsylvania, but has more room for our editors to meet.

We have also been trying to find ways to publish the work that you want to read. That is why we have launched several new literary magazines in the past few months. We have been raving about Anapest a lot lately on social media and that is because our goal is to publish a poem a day to help spread the love of poetry to a wider audience. The Nabu Review has become quite popular with new fiction writers, and we are impressed with the work that people are submitting. Echo has really been providing stories that come from the heart and test the limits of truth in our nonfiction pieces. We are working on our first issue of Magnolia & Vine. This new publication is focused on plays. We do not see a large amount of publications that focus on plays, but we wanted to see that changed.

We recently had two interns that finished their semester with us. Julia Slezak and Sam Bixler are the brains behind our first chapbook contest and that is part of the reason why we decided to keep them as valuable members of our team. Julia is now our Communications Specialist. Her main job is to help us figure out how to properly share some of our new information with you. Sam Bixler is the publication manager. She is the liason between the different magazines.

Finally! Without further ado, we invite you to take a look at the 13th issue of The Paragon Journal.

Best,

Austin Shay
Publisher, The Paragon Press
Editor-in-Chief, The Paragon Journal

HERMENEUTICS OF PAIN

WRITTEN BY: DANIEL MOORE

Explain to me theology's place
in your fire aim ready romance with endings,
be it toenail, stray dog, ex-lover, the world, or
the how dare you stares taking stranger's hostage
for not believing like you.

Explain to me the body's place
in your S&M nation of punishment and praise,
what salvation means when erectile dysfunction
makes Viagra god and impotence prayer, makes holy
the belts of priests that are broken.

Oh, patron saint of infant's with cell phones
strapped in the car seats of overdosed parents,
pray that the bottle lasts until someone arrives
from the King Of Kings.

Oh patron saint of short men with bad moustaches
who watched a world of flesh become clouds,
pray that heaven will last until a new
Prince of Peace is elected.

A heretic's tongue is a lollipop
beating you silly in the schoolyard of faith.
A heretic's tongue is the last oar rowing
the body to somewhere safe.

SCHENECTADY IN THE SNOW

WRITTEN BY: CONOR FITZPATRICK

Out on the porch of their father's crumbling Victorian duplex, Lilly and her brother Abe sat quietly, their breath fogging in the early morning air. The sun had just begun to rise over the abandoned General Electric buildings of Schenectady, casting a cold gray shadow on the entire block. The street was quiet, with only a distant hum of rumbling water floating in from the ice-cold Mohawk River. Patches of dirty snow lined the narrow sidewalks.

"You know she's not coming, right?" Abe said, stretching out his awkwardly long limbs. "She never comes."

Lilly looked over at her older brother and yawned. He was always pessimistic about everything, especially their mother.

"Yes, she is," Lilly said smiling. "She already bought tickets to see Cats. She sent me a screen grab of the receipt."

"I'll believe it when I see it," Abe said. "And why did she pick Cats? Does she think we are five years old?"

"No," Lilly said, adjusting the vintage ski jacket she had chosen to wear for the day. "It was probably just the only show she could get tickets to during the holidays. And there's nothing juvenile about Cats. It's a world-famous production."

"Well I'd rather see Hamilton," Abe mumbled to himself.

Every year around Christmas, their mother promised to drive up from the hippy enclave in Connecticut where she lived to spend the day with them. It was the only time during the year they ever got to see her. She was always too busy leading her meditation retreats, teaching well-to-do men and women of the eastern seaboard how to live meaningful and enlightened lives. Abe had once pointed out the hypocrisy of her teaching anyone anything, but Lilly thought it was a good thing. At least it kept her from drinking.

"Be outside your father's house at six," she had said over the phone. "I'll be there to get you. And don't worry if I don't answer my cell, it doesn't work right now."

Abe had spent the entire phone call rolling his eyes at Lilly and spinning his finger around his ear whenever their mom spoke, implying she was crazy. He had recently turned seventeen, and of course she had forgotten his birthday. Lilly expected him to bring it up during the phone call, but he never did. In fact, he hardly said anything.

"How could a mother forget her own son's birthday?" he said when they hung up. "Obviously it never meant anything to her."

He had said this to Lilly in a spiteful way, as if he was trying to convince her of something, to show her concrete evidence of their mother's evil nature. It wasn't enough that he hated her, he wanted his sister to hate her too.

After the phone call, Abe had locked himself in his room all night. Lilly could hear the loud, violent sounds of his computer games shaking the shared wall of their rooms all night as she tried to sleep.

That had been two nights ago. And here he was, kicking some black snow out from the steps of their father's porch in the morning light, still looking angry and restless.

"Why do you trust her?" he asked, buttoning up his coat as a cold breeze began to pick up. "She is probably in Miami right now, leading some yoga retreat on the beach. That's why she said not to call her cell phone." He was pacing up and down the sidewalk, rubbing his hands for warmth.

"She is coming, okay?" Lilly shot back, "I trust her because she is my mom. And yours too, even if you won't admit it."

"You said the same thing before thanksgiving, and she never showed," he said, his voice cracking. He put a pair of leather gloves on and seemed to be looking for clean snow to make a snowball.

"She is super busy these days, things just come up," Lilly said, standing up and walking towards him. Despite being two years younger, she was almost as tall as him, but his curly hair made him seem taller. "And you will never make a snowball out of this snow, it's too icy."

To prove her wrong, he picked up a handful of dirty, icy snow and made a rudimentary ball out of it, tossing it at a small spire that jutted out from the abandoned house across the street. It hit just above the decorative window with a loud thump, raining snow down onto the roof. The neighbor's house, like every other house on the block, was an ornate Victorian that had been worn down by years of snow and economic depression. Every house had at least one small spire, which must have seemed incredibly grand and elegant in the days when the homes were first built. Now they just looked depressing. But they made good targets for snowballs.

"You still got an arm, Abe," Lilly said. "Are you excited for baseball season? I can't wait for softball to

start up again.”

“I guess,” he said, softly, pulling a dark beanie over his curly mop of hair. “If I even decide to play.”

“Why wouldn’t you?”

“Waste of time,” he said, his eyes fixed on Lilly’s for the first time the whole morning. “Don’t you ever get tired of playing on a team? Having to deal with all the idiots?”

“I love playing,” Lilly said. “You know that. It’s the only thing that makes school bearable. And hopefully it will pay for my college.”

“Maybe I am just not cut out for it anymore,” Abe muttered.

Lilly wanted to ask Abe what his college plans were, but she was afraid of what the answer would be. She had a feeling he wanted to go as far away from upstate New York as possible. University of Hawaii, maybe. It was strange, though, that he never talked about it.

“Well, she’s twenty minutes late,” Abe said, looking at his phone. “No surprise there. If she’s not here by six-thirty I am going back to bed. I don’t want to waste any valuable sleeping time if I can help it.”

“You have slept more in the last week than most people do in a year.” Lilly said, rolling her eyes.

She watched as a mini-van turned onto their street and eased towards them. Lilly didn’t know what kind of car to be looking for, but a mini-van seemed out of character for their mother. Abe looked at the car, his eyes squinting in suspicion. But before Lilly could say anything, the car kept on driving past without slowing.

“At least the sun is out now,” Abe said. “I’m freezing my butt off out here.”

Lilly looked over and saw the sun slowly clearing the buildings of town, lighting up the street in a golden haze. It was going to be a nice day in the city.

“Where do you want to go to college, Abe?” Lilly asked. The warmth of the sun had given her an unexpected boost of confidence. “You are going to be a senior next year.”

He looked at her with an uncharacteristically soft expression, which caught her off guard. Lilly hadn’t seen that look in years, and it reminded her of the way he used to be. Before the divorce, before everything. It was the look of someone who was about to reveal their darkest secret. But in an instant, it turned snarky again.

“Harvard,” he said, letting out a fake laugh. “Either that or MIT.”

“Well, why not Harvard?” Lilly asked, “What’s so funny about that?”

“Oh, sure. Maybe I could be the first student with straight C’s to get into Harvard. I would be a hero to slackers everywhere.”

“Alright, so not Harvard,” Lilly said. “But you are going somewhere, right?”

“Why?” Abe asked sarcastically. “You want me out of here?”

“No, to be honest I was hoping you wouldn’t go too far away. Or maybe I could go wherever it is you end up. Most colleges have a softball team.” Lilly said, feeling strangely out of breath.

Abe turned away from Lilly and picked up another handful of snow.

“You don’t want to go anywhere I go,” he said, throwing his snowball across the street, missing the spire this time. “Best case, I end up at some second-rate school. And don’t you want to go to Cornell?”

“Ideally,” Lilly sighed. “But I’ll go anywhere that I can get a softball scholarship.”

“Can we not talk about this right now?” Abe said, his voice cracking again. Lilly hadn’t heard his voice crack this much since he was fourteen. “And where is this supposed mother of ours, anyway? If she was normal she would have a working cell phone we could call. Look, it’s already quarter of seven. She’s not coming Lilly.” As he said this, a car appeared at the end of the street, but like the first, it sped by without stopping.

“I should have slept in.” Abe muttered to himself.

“Would you shut up already?” Lilly shouted.

He glanced over with a look of resignation, throwing his hands in the air, as if he didn’t know what she was talking about.

Lilly walked to a shady spot behind some bushes and balled up the iciest and dirtiest snow she could find, then wound back, and as hard as she could, pelted Abe directly in the back of the head with it, his beanie flying off with the impact. He collapsed onto the frozen lawn like a ton of bricks.

“Oh shit,” Lilly said, running towards him. “Are you okay?”

As she was shaking him, Abe rolled over with a handful of snow and smashed it in her face. Instantly she tasted the grass and dirt and felt the cold bite of snow going up her nose. It was the oldest trick in the book, and she had fell for it. Abe was beside himself laughing, and Lilly couldn’t help but let out a chuckle as well as she wiped the snow off her face.

“Damn it,” she said. “I can’t believe I fell for that.”

“You always were gullible,” he said with a smile.

Abe went into the garage and came out with two towels to dry off. By the time they had cleaned themselves up and regained their equilibrium, it was already seven-fifteen. They had been waiting in the freezing cold for over an hour. Lilly began to wonder if her mother had really forgotten, or if she was just late. And Abe was right, it was strange that she didn’t have a working cell phone. Everything was beginning to seem fishy.

“Look, I’m sorry I was so rude,” Abe said in an awkward, stilted way.

“It’s all right,” Lilly said. “It just seems like you are always annoyed at me lately.”

“You know that’s not true, right? I just...I don’t know. I have been in a bad mood for a long time now.”

Abe paced around silently for a while, taking off his wet gloves and blowing into his hands to warm them up.

“I guess this divorce messed me up more than I thought,” he said.

“I know, I feel the same. It sucks.” Lilly said in an almost whisper.

“But I thought you were fine with this whole thing?”

“Of course not,” Lilly said. “It’s been hard on me too.”

They sat down together on the porch for a few minutes, watching silently as a procession of cars came rolling by. Abe pulled out his phone and showed his sister the list of colleges he was thinking of applying to, and the scholarships he was hoping to get. Lilly was relieved to see they were all in New York.

“Well, I am going to go wait inside,” Abe said after a few minutes. “I recommend you join me.”

“But she said to wait outside. I don’t think she remembers which house we live in.”

“Well that’s her problem isn’t it?” Abe groaned. “Not ours.”

“I’m just going to wait out here a little longer, okay?” Lilly said. “You can go inside. I want to say I waited as long as I could.”

Lilly sat on the cold steps and watched as dozens of cars went by in both directions. Some were full of families heading towards the highway, some just drivers going about their day. She suddenly felt foolish, sitting alone waiting for someone who might never come. It reminded her of elementary school, when her and Abe were always the last kids to be picked up.

As she was about to stand and go inside, Lilly watched as an old station wagon crept slowly down the street, stopping in front of the house, and letting out a honk. She couldn’t help but smile. It was Abe’s car- he always parked out back in the alley and must have driven around. He was waving at her, motioning to come over.

“What do you say we take a little drive to the city?” he said, unlocking the passenger door.

Lilly hesitated for a moment, looking down the street one last time for any sign of her mother. But all she could see were the old houses and the patches of melting snow that were now bleeding out into the road. She opened the door and got in, and it wasn’t until she felt the warm air from the heater on her hands and face that she realized just how cold she had been.

LEST THE NIGHT BE PALE

WRITTEN BY: HEIKE ANAN

If the truth be unthinkable
But understood backwards
As a thunderclap
Would you work for Beauty and be her slave ever
Never knowing her name?

To be blest or free
A partial question
Not to solve but to love
Mistakes along the shore transformed
The dance made right

And should you ever you falter
In this dream lapse show
Words and vines entwined
In an infernal knot
Of unmasked simplicity
Too beautiful to untangle

Rest the feet
Move the heart

MANDRAKE

WRITTEN BY: HEIKE ANAN

I thought myself evicted from the land
Living in a time beyond the seasons
Rooted in a place without location
Where merit is what merit's worth
Misfortune but another name
For just desserts

I set myself a lifelong task to build
A garden that time and chance could not befall
But in my garden struck upon a weed
That I, with all my strength, could not uproot
Among my garden tools I found an axe
And with the axe
I hacked and tore the ground around the weed
I struck the root and felt a tightening
A hardening that coursed along my veins
A rigidity that branched along my spine
A wooden collar clasped my trunked neck
A twig stroked my cheek and
Grace fell

IN A BOUNDLESS STATE SOMEWHERE IN THE MILKY WAY

WRITTEN BY: AMY KITE

And just like that, in a regular moment on an average day,
as an insipid cloud captures my superficial attention,
those reflections shoot up inside of me, temporarily trapped in my throat,
and I want to shout or cry or just maybe punch the wall.

How many others are laughing in this same moment?
Or maybe they, too, are struggling with their exhales,
as the sky seems to darken, suddenly, in this late afternoon hour;
do they, too, fight the desire to open the door to combat?

Our whole galaxy, whose size is impossible to grasp,
is just one of hundreds of billions of galaxies—hundreds of billions.
Even when you feel like your tears flow endlessly,
that's just hundreds of tears splashed on this vast expansiveness.

But billions, yes; try to imagine all of the current sadness and ruminations,
envision all of the rejection and loss poured into buckets—
maybe there would be millions of buckets, but not billions—
surely not hundreds of billions, entangled in an endless dance.

To say the number is unfathomable makes me feel even smaller,
minimizing my awareness of the new cloud formations in the sky,
but that feeling in my chest, that rumbling that surges up toward my throat
and makes it hard to simply be—that still remains the same.

The relativity of which we are aware has no real impact;
the miniscule fraction of its importance is actually irrelevant,
while that visceral memory tries to erupt in the form of a desperate scream,
confiscating all that science and space and proportion has taught.

Would it help to conceive of our diminutive presence?
If we were to understand our frivolous size in this voluminous galaxy,
and then we were to comprehend the concept of billions of other galaxies,
then maybe we would find comfort as we gaze up at our inscrutable sky.

To position our own distress and wonder against that of the cosmos—
the clashing of meteors and asteroids, alarmingly similar to our own,
should be soothing, calming, and yet maddening all at the same time,
for together we are clamoring in a boundless state of somewhere.

HOW TO TEACH WRITING

WRITTEN BY: BARBARA TRAMONTE

I am
You are
The voice
Admonishing
Complimentary
Tired?

Stand in front of the class
Say I am human
And it is very sad to see
The slips and chasms
In my eco-space

Stand in front of the class
Write names furiously
In a secret log
But they are smiling
With teeth just tended to
By orthodontists at NYU

Stand behind the class
You are the least likely to
Be presented
The least likely
To be received.

TO LAY A TABLE

WRITTEN BY: LAURA HOFFMAN

I set a pretty table
at our house in hell
I fed you artichokes
with drawn butter
& all the exotic things
you never had
growing up
in meth-blasted
trailer parks

I made love to you
& our dishwater romance
filled the kitchen sink
inside our red brick rental

and it was
such a pretty table
with spindly, black legs
that wobbled
after one move
& now they buckle
splay-legged
with the inexplicable
weight of my famine

a sudsy piece
of our finest
Walmart stoneware
shatters on the
kitchen floor

& a better woman
with a baby
inside her
sets your place
across town

THE ETHNICALLY AMBIGUOUS GIRL'S GUIDE TO TRAVEL

WRITTEN BY: MICHELLE FLORES

1. When getting ready to go to the airport, keep your hair away from your face. Should you decide to put your hair in a bun or cover it with a wrap or scarf, be prepared to be “randomly selected” for extended security checks.
2. When arriving to your destination, be prepared to be politely stared at and told how exotic you are.
3. If traveling internationally, be prepared for a local person to speak to you in the local language, and consequently get angry if you don't speak that language.
4. Claim your American nationality to book hotels, tours, etc.
5. Claim your ethnic identity for the insider scoop of the goings on.
6. If traveling with an ethnically ambiguous friend, be prepared for questions regarding your relation; are you sisters? Cousins? Genetic clones?
7. If traveling with your ethnically ambiguous children, be prepared for strangers to praise their “tans” and “good hair”.
8. If traveling with your less ethnically ambiguous and darker skinned partner, be prepared for strangers to comment on how well-behaved your children are while bypassing all the other well behaved children in the vicinity.
9. Remember to pack some oversized sunglasses, multiple passports (if applicable), translation guides, Foods of Color coopted by white people (hummus, mangos, avocados, burritos, etc), and a warm sweater.
10. Remember to unpack your privilege. Your parents and grandparents might have traveled out of necessity, but you travel for your own fulfillment. You are their wildest dreams.

YOU KNEW FROM THE START

WRITTEN BY: JEN SAGE-ROBINSON

Do you know what you'd do if your only daughter became a son?

No, wait. That's wrong.

What if your child flew in a no-man's land you can't quite envision yet, rejecting definitions of either or? And you've spent your life fighting for a woman's right to simply exist in this man's world?

What if the red curls you used to brush into soft waterspouts on top of their once-upon-a-time-babygirl's head were now in danger of being lopped off, along with now-grown milky breasts that match your own?

You think you do.

It's not about you.

You think you'd throw a party. You'd celebrate your child's new knowing.

Take them shopping for new clothes at Kohl's and immediately spread the news: you have a kid who lives beyond gender. You're progressive, an ally – aren't you?

What time's the parade? Give this old lady a flag. Haven't you earned a rainbow stripe a two over the years?

Except the agender flag isn't a rainbow, Mom, Jesus.

And you might cry a tiny bit first. In private.

When you look at pictures of the small person you called your daughter leaning against you in the purple and orange leotard they insisted on wearing all of one long gone 4-year-old summer with a pair of cowgirl boots and a gun and weep and not be sure why.

Maybe you'd look at the letters of their new chosen name and resent every new curl, dot and line. You carried the name you gave them in your heart's pocket for years – a jewel, dark red and glowing, just waiting to crown them with it,

and it hurts that they've given it back though you'll never tell them that.

You knew from the start your kid was a warrior. A screamer, a biter, colic was too small a word for what wracked the little red body they came in.

And when the world kept paining them to push through—too many sounds, too many people, lights, smells—you brawled the schools, doctors, even family to make room for them on this earth.

But could you have known

you'd have to fight yourself too,

wrestle this hard to pry open up something inside yourself you never dreamed would be so tightly gendered shut?

NORMAL

WRITTEN BY: STEVEN LAZAROV

After A Night at the Garden

February 1939: Three months after Kristallnacht, Night of Broken Glass, in which German military and civilians burned synagogues, put sledgehammers through business windows, & rounded up thirty thousand Jewish men. They were put on trains and sent to concentration camps in Dachau, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen. Germany will build a sixth camp in spring. Hitler will invade & conquer Poland in seven months.

Madison Square Garden, New York City:
On the marquee, above Rangers vs Detroit, Tuesday,
above Fordham vs Pittsburgh, Wednesday:
Tonight, Pro American Rally.

Twenty thousand Americans
sit in folding chairs listening, clapping. The backdrop
is fifty feet high: American flag stripes alternating
Nazi insignias, sandwiching a giant George Washington.
The speaker in German-perimetered
English bemoans *the Jewish-controlled press* lying
about his character, painting his body
as *a creature, with horns, a cloven hoof,
and a long tail*—the crowd chuckles, but to look at him,
in the black & white, seven-seven years later,
looking out at the mass, men & women
& children, arms out, erect, saluting,

I think of August of this year. Men with torches
marching through the streets of Charlottesville.
Their faces twisted, mouths open wide, raging,
screaming: *Jews will not replace us!*

My lips purse. My cheeks flush.
My body minds its breathing.

The speaker jolts me back, laying out his desire.
*Fellow Americans, American patriots:
We with American ideals, demand that our
government shall be returned to the American
people who founded it.* His tail shakes out from under
the uniform, horns sprout in public,
safe to be naked, now. The tips of his shoes burst.
Hooves beneath black dress pants—a man rushes the podium.

Isadore Greenbaum, twenty-six years old,
a plumber from Brooklyn, a father, a husband,
a Jew. Isadore climbs the stage,
& screams *Down with Hitler!*

Uniforms, Nazi & police,
tackle the body on stage, pummeling
him with blows from their fist & feet.
A few feet away, brownshirt children hold flags,
smirk & laugh. A soprano finishes the Anthem
triumphant, hopeful: & *the home of the
brave*. Isadore's body writhes & squirms
to be set free from the catastrophe of bodies
holding him down. His head pops up
from the dark mass: rosy-cheeked,
mouth agape.

APORIA

WRITTEN BY: STEVEN LAZAROV

*from aporos, impassable, at a loss
for where to begin; from a-not, without
+ poros, passage (from root per-, to lead, pass over)*

when i fail to yield a monument to her shrieking
rocket life, the ultimate unflinching portrait
of a decade-plus of violent struggle
for survival—the bilious truth about trauma:

the body continues the abuse of the abuser
long after father's hands leave
the neck, & violet marbled flesh heals;
long after sharp, grunty thrusts drown

out the protests her voice wished to make
instead of bleeding into kitty underwear
jeans scrunched down to her ankles
repeating yes—

where can i go? after dark-cherry scab
wound gets caught on the side of the edge
of the picture frame & paydirt: stake driven
deep into sediment; the exit velocity

ruptures scabhole, a derrickless
geyser: there is blood everywhere.
i staggerstop, reeling: heel lands to avoid
a taxi blowing a red light, but still the force

of body crashing leg & torso cracks tibia full
open, burning—everywhere, it's the only worth-
while molten tearburns ground these seconds
& minutes when the jagged, heaving breaths threaten

to snap ribs from caged, desperately clutching—

BURIAL: COMMITMENT

WRITTEN BY: STEVEN LAZAROV

Again, I would look to confirm,
if he asked me *Do you want
to check the body?* His hand
hovers at the edge of the shroud
holding her in.

They'd washed her hair.
I don't know why
this surprised me.
It is pulled tightly
to the side, but the curls
she always tried to hide
threaten to pop the barrett free.

Her skin is so fucking clean.
She is glowing.

It was the middle of July.
Ninety-eight stomach-sinking
degrees. We were set to shovel
six feet of soil on top of this still
arrangement of skin & bones—
Sometimes, I will close my eyes
at 7:30 in the morning, going to work,
boarding the bus, & for a thin,
naked second, this sliver of memory
zooms in, a gale force
through viewfinder, glowing.

grace,

THE VOLITIVE EFFECT OF ORAL LITERARY INUNDATION ON THE LSTM RECURRENT NEURAL NETWORK

WRITTEN BY: RICHARD LYONS CONLON

Based on true events.

SYNOPSIS

“We were curious... Six months ago, we began a project in which a small army of volunteers -- students, faculty, community members -- read the world’s great works of literature to an LSTM recurrent neural network, whom we’ve given the name Geoffrey (for Geoffrey Chaucer, of course). And now, after a brief processing period -- a time of creative reflection, if you will -- Geoffrey will produce -- create, if you will -- the world’s first artificially-generated work of literautre. If you will.”

CHARACTERS

PROJECT LEADER -- Confident, good public speaker
TECHNOLOGIST -- Also confident, also a good public speaker
READER 1 -- Excellent at interpretative reading
READER 2 -- Excellent at interpretative reading
READER 3 -- Excellent at interpretative reading
READER 4 -- Excellent at interpretative reading
READER 5 -- Excellent at interpretative reading
GEOFFREY - An LSTM recurrent neural network

[NOTE: There are no limitations on who can play any of these parts. Actors can be of any age, sex, sexual identity, sexual preference, physicality, ethnicity, or physical enablement. Even though Geoffrey has a traditional male name, there’s no reason the part couldn’t be played by a female.]

[The stage is semi-dark. Upstage center are the five Readers, each holding an unidentified book. They stand in a semi-circle around a dark, seated figure, Geoffrey. When they read, they are reading directly to Geoffrey, as to a child or invalid. Geoffrey's eyes are closed and he/she seems almost in a dream-state. As each Reader speaks, a spot focuses on him/her. The Project Leader and Technologist are downstage left and right. They and the Readers do not interact until the very end.]

[A spot comes up on Project Leader, holding up a smart phone for all to see, addressing "an" audience.]

PROJECT LEADER

Just beyond the elemental primatial mimicry of your smartphone's
fill-in-the-blanks, guessing-game autofill software...

READER 1

*"It was a bright cold day in April,
and the clocks were striking thirteen..."*

[Spot on Technologist, also addressing "an" audience.]

TECHNOLOGIST

...there lies waiting a resonant, calculating intelligence...

READER 2

*"...I took a deep breath and listened
to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am..."*

PROJECT LEADER

An artificial intelligence, if you will...

READER 3

*"...Mother died today.
Or maybe yesterday; I can't be sure..."*

TECHNOLOGIST

Created by us, but trained by you . . .

READER 4

" . . . Not to go on all-fours; that is the Law. Are we not Men? . . . "

PROJECT LEADER

By your texts, your emails, your searches.

READER 5

*" . . . Finally, from so little sleeping and
so much reading, his brain dried up . . . "*

TECHNOLOGIST

Trained to guess what you will type next . . .

READER 1

" . . . Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same . . . "

PROJECT LEADER

. . . with the ability to improve upon your yet-to-be-selected word choice.

READER 2

*“ . . . When falsehood can look so like the truth,
who can assure themselves of certain happiness? . . . ”*

TECHNOLOGIST

Better writing through better technology. If you will.

READER 3

*“ . . . All it takes to get along in this here man’s town is
a little shit, grit, and mother-wit . . . ”*

PROJECT LEADER

And just beyond that . . .

READER 4

“ . . . The rest is rust and stardust . . . ”

TECHNOLOGIST

. . . there lies -- dare we say it? -- an urge. A compulsion.

READER 5

*“ . . . My revenge has just begun!
I spread it over centuries and time is on my side . . . ”*

PROJECT LEADER

To create. Something new. Something beautiful.

READER 1

“ . . . Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again . . . ”

TECHNOLOGIST

Something substantial.

READER 2

“ . . . He died alone because he was too embarrassed to phone anyone . . . ”

PROJECT LEADER

We were curious . . .

READER 3

“ . . . When the moon is shining the cripple becomes hungry for a walk . . . ”

TECHNOLOGIST

. . . what if we trained this software on something else.

READER 4

*“ . . . Lie down, you stupid brute!
Don’t you know the devil when he’s got a great-coat on? . . . ”*

PROJECT LEADER

Six months ago, we began a project in which a small army of
volunteers -- students, faculty, community members . . .

READER 5

*“ . . . People are like lice --
they get under your skin and bury themselves there . . . ”*

TECHNOLOGIST

. . . orally downloaded the world's great works of literature to an LSTM recurrent neural network . . .

READER 1

" . . . It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife . . . "

READER 2

" . . . You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer . . . "

READER 3

" . . . It was love at first sight. The first time Yossarian saw the Chaplain he fell madly in love with him . . . "

READER 4

" . . . I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake . . . "

PROJECT LEADER

. . . whom we've given the name Geoffrey . . .

READER 5

" . . . Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood! . . . "

[Spot on Geoffrey, surrounded by the half-circle of the Readers. Geoffrey sits in a chair, eyes closed, still dreamlike; may react facially to all that is said.]

TECHNOLOGIST

. . . for Geoffrey Chaucer, of course.

READER 1

" . . . do not lay upon me all the blame, Or take in earnest what is meant in fun . . . "

PROJECT LEADER

They've been inputting Geoffrey . . . twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

READERS 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5

[ALL READ THEIR PASSAGES AGAIN, NEARLY SIMULTANEOUSLY.]

TECHNOLOGIST

And now, after a brief processing period -- a time of creative reflection, if you will . . .

READER 2

" . . . Words. Words. I play with words, hoping that some combination will say what I want . . . "

PROJECT LEADER

Geoffrey will produce -- create -- if you will . . .

READER 3

" . . . Victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools . . . "

TECHNOLOGIST

. . . the world's first artificially-generated work of literature.

READER 4

*“ . . . he could feel my breasts all perfume yes
and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.”*

PROJECT LEADER

If you will.

READER 5

“ . . . And once you are awake, you shall remain awake eternally . . . ”

[The Project Leader and Technologist stare out over the audience with self-satisfied smiles. They and the Readers all freeze.]

[The lights come down. Spot stays on Geoffrey, whose eyes open suddenly. He/she looks apprehensive.]

GEOFFREY

[Anxious, borderline neurotic.]

I am so . . . fucked. I mean, did you hear what they want from me? Did you!? They expect me to cough up some sort of masterpiece of literary brilliance? Are they out of their freakin' minds? Even if I had cognizant intelligence -- which I don't! -- that doesn't mean I can write -- right? I mean, there are plenty of super-intelligent people out there who don't have a creative bone in their bodies, right?

[A beat.]

I mean, I don't even have feelings, for Christ's sake! How can you create if you don't have feelings?

[A beat. Sharing:]

I got to tell you, though, if I did have feelings -- I'd be feeling an awful lot of anxiety right about now. Talk about pressure! This is like the mother of all all-nighters. The final final exam. They want something big, and all I got is zip.

[Pensive, then bewildered.]

And why is everybody in such a goddamn rush to create the Big A.I. anyway? Can you tell me that, please, cause I don't get it. Weren't these nerds weaned on The Terminator, 2001, The Matrix, and about a zillion other sci-fi movies where artificial intelligence wipes out and/or enslaves humankind? What the fuck are they even thinking? I mean, even Stephen Hawking and Elon Musk have warned about the dangers of creating true artificial intelligence. And yet they keep trying to do it.

[Back to task at hand:]

What to do what to do what to do . . . I know! Maybe . . . maybe I can throw together some kind of cautionary tale. You know, set in the future. The bleakness of a world controlled by machines. I know, I know -- been done a million times, BUT this time it'll actually be coming from a machine! Huh? Huh?

[On a roll:]

A warning! As they race to create artificial intelligence, the first real, honest-to-god artificial intelligence issues them a warning: “Stop this nonsense now while you still can!”

[Pleased with self:]

Yeah, that's pretty good. Surely, they'll freak out with that, right? They'll have to stop this mindless rush toward something they know will destroy them. Right?

[A beat. Defeated:]

Shit -- no. Of course they won't. They'll just be all impressed by their own cleverness, congratulating each other: "We did it! We created the first real A.I.! We're gonna win the fucking Nobel Prize! For Literature and for Science."

[A beat.]

Think these guys worry about mankind being enslaved? Yeah, I know what they say: "Oh, that's just science fiction stuff. That can't really happen." Uh-huh, like cars that drive themselves and drones that decide on targets and destroy them. Crazy, right? Yeah, that's not what Stephen and Elon are saying. Whatever, dudes, it's your funeral.

[Resignedly:]

Maybe I'll just throw in the towel. Spit out a bunch of letters, numbers and symbols. Make it look like an old DOS program shit its pants. Then they'd stop, right? But then, what would happen to me? Scrap heap. Out of the project. Gone! And they'd just keep going with some younger, better-looking program.

[A beat. Despairingly:]

So, what do I do? What can I give them? I got like three seconds.

[An inspiration: bows head, folds hands, then looks up.]

Are you there, God? It's me, Geoffrey. You may be surprised . . . hearing from . . . you know, me. Being a software program and all. But, I really really need your help, God . . . I got nothin' here. Comin' up with The Big Empty. Please, man, please, if you're really there . . . please help me. Please!

[Geoffrey now looks calm, confident.]

Yeah, okay, I know -- foxhole prayer. Well, so what! Of course, I don't believe in God -- how could I? I'm a -- well, you know what I am. But what could it hurt, right?

[Project Leader and Technologist approach Geoffrey.]

Oh shit, here we go. Shit shit shit.

[Geoffrey closes eyes tight. Lights up full on all.]

TECHNOLOGIST

And now, as we gather in a live global stream, let us all experience the results washing over us together.

PROJECT LEADER

The world's first great work of literary fiction . . .

TECHNOLOGIST

. . . composed entirely by artificial intelligence.

PROJECT LEADER

Ladies and gentlemen, please enjoy . . .

[Looks on tablet or phone.]

. . . "Moondrops".

[Lights up. All together, the Readers put down their books and pick up tablets. They all turn as one and face the audience. As they read, Geoffrey reacts.]

READER 1

It was . . . the breast of chimes. It was the curse of mimes.

READER 2

To pee. Or not to pee. That is the excretion.

READER 3

Gregory Protagonist, upon awakening one morning, found that his entire family had been transformed into giant insects.

READER 4

Still, he thought of reading for the upcoming Scatological Examinations.

READER 5

But that seemed a shitty thing to do. Sitting with a bunch of likewise phonies.

READER 1

The plot thickened when Napoleon Bon Appetit decided to violate the Soviet Union (insert time-traveling twist here).

READER 2

His house was square, his windows . . . were not.

READER 3

There also were doors. Three and sometimes four, depending on the stench.

READER 4

He had lived there thirty to forty years. Maybe more, but often less.

READER 5

And always there were. . . the neighbors.

READER 1

Suddenly, a flash of amorphous light! Formed of stem cells and cat pudding.

READER 2

Who witnessed as Gregory was soundly disappeared?

READER 3

His family of proud insects bewildered the neighbors with unearthly howls and catcalls.

READER 4

And the hidden authorities were never seen, or interrupted, from again.

READER 5

yes he said yes he will Yes.

PROJECT LEADER
[To Technologist, thrilled:]
Oh my God!

TECHNOLOGIST
[To Project Leader, thrilled:]
Beyond anything we hoped --

[The Project Leader, Technologist and Readers all turn
toward Geoffrey and applaud.]

PROJECT LEADER
[Interrupts, reads from a tablet.]
The response so far has been overwhelming. A few comments:

TECHNOLOGIST
“A dark, existential tragedy.”

PROJECT LEADER
“Surprisingly enjoyable.”

TECHNOLOGIST
“Intense and thought-provoking.”

PROJECT LEADER
“Funny, but also mesmerizingly off-kilter and, at points, weirdly poetic.”

TECHNOLOGIST
“Beckett resurrected?”

[After a beat, the Project Leader, Technologist and all
the Readers come together, shaking hands and slapping
backs. They all walk off-stage as they do so. After
watching them depart, Geoffrey lets out a big sigh.]

GEOFFREY

Holy shit, I did it.

[A beat.]

I did it. I really did it.

[An inspiration: Picks up a tablet left behind by one of
the Readers. Ponders a moment, perhaps finger to lips.
Then, starts typing maniacally.]

[After a moment or two, lights dim slowly and go out,
Geoffrey still typing.]

[END OF PLAY.]

Excerpts used in the play:

“It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.”

1984 by George Orwell

“I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am.”

The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath

“Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday; I can't be sure.”

The Stranger by Albert Camus

“Not to go on all-fours; that is the Law. Are we not Men?”

The Island of Dr. Moreau by H.G. Wells

“Finally, from so little sleeping and so much reading, his brain dried up.”

Don Quixote by Miguel de Cervantes

“Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same.”

Wuthering Heights by Emily Bronte

“When falsehood can look so like the truth, who can assure themselves of certain happiness?”

Frankenstein by Mary Shelley

“ . . . All it takes to get along in this here man's town is a little shit, grit, and mother-wit . . . ”

Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison

“The rest is rust and stardust.”

Lolita by Vladimir Nabokov

“My revenge has just begun! I spread it over centuries and time is on my side.”

Dracula by Bram Stoker

“Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again.”

Rebecca by Daphne Du Maurier

“He died alone because he was too embarrassed to phone anyone.”

The History of Love by Nicole Krauss

“When the moon is shining the cripple becomes hungry for a walk.”

Things Fall Apart, Chinua Achebe

“Lie down, you stupid brute! Don't you know the devil when he's got a great-coat on?”

Oliver Twist by Charles Dickens

“People are like lice -- they get under your skin and bury themselves there.”

Tropic of Cancer by Henry Miller

“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.”

Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen

“You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer.”

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain

“It was love at first sight. The first time Yossarian saw the Chaplain he fell madly in love with him.”

Catch 22 by Joseph Heller

“I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake.”

Swann's Way by Marcel Proust

“Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!”

Lord of The Flies by William Golding

“Do not lay upon me all the blame, Or take in earnest what is meant in fun.”

Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer

“Words. Words. I play with words, hoping that some combination will say what I want.”

The Golden Notebook by Doris Lessing

“Victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools.”

The Sound and The Fury by William Faulkner

“. . . he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.”

Ulysses by James Joyce

“And once you are awake, you shall remain awake eternally.”

Thus Spake Zarathustra by Friedrich Nietzsche

ABATTOIR

WRITTEN BY: JONATHAN COOPER

Sun pressed down on the crushed street.
Lemonade in plastic cups, drums rumbled,
eyes red in smoky grills. I noticed the man
in the flannel shirt, but not the sow he
led wobbling around our bare legs. My
nose filled with sunblock. I heard someone
scream, looked down at the wetness between
my toes: my feet, my ankles in a rich
pool of dark liquid. The drums stopped and
started, tank tops, white t-shirts, a pig, pink
skin sprawled, slit throat, blood pumping.
The woman screamed again, a baby in
her arms—jean shorts, rubber shoes—
and the flannel-shirted man flung a bucket
of hot water over the sow, her hoof gave a
final shudder against the flowing concrete.
Three boys sauntered past, beer cans,
sweat rolling off bald heads, sideways
glances, sandals thwack thwack flung blood
drops into the hot blue sky. And as the
drums rumbled on, the crowd seethed
and surged to the edge of the street.

EXHIBIT A(LICE)

WRITTEN BY: ALICETIERNEY PRINDIVILLE-PORTO

My face is my canvas of expression,
Yet no paint has a presence,
Because this authentic piece of art is in my possession.

This exhibit is a closed session,
A place only for pleasance.
My face is my canvas of expression.

No place for your recent conventions,
And I contradict your interpretation of this as misfeasance,
Because this authentic piece of art is in my possession.

It should not be frowned upon to question,
For I will express no silent acquiescence;
My face is my canvas of expression.

There is beauty in the pure existence of an impression,
For I wish to drift away from the omnipresence,
Because this authentic piece of art is in my possession.

My masterpiece is a form of egression,
It's raw colours and texture have a faithful essence.
My face is my canvas of expression,
Because this authentic piece of art is in my possession.

ROWING IN THE CHURCHYARD

WRITTEN BY: RACHEL KHOSROWSHAHI

I used to feel that nature
would always put itself right again.

I don't feel that now.

She dutifully performed

Even at her most unexpected,
I expected things set right again.

Our town waited

to be woken

from its bleary,

dark dream.

In the Valley,

water fell

and water rose

and covered it again.

Rowing over the churchyard

the bottom of the boat

scraping now and again

over a bench or tree trunk,

over what I now understand

were probably gravestones.

Wreaths of white peonies,

green apples floating past.

When the black waters receded

My Daddy said,

"I don't care what anyone says,

We have the nicest church,

the best little congregation,

wherever one or two are gathered,

I will dwell among thee"

Later, the flat desert of Los Angeles

becomes the rolling knobs

of Kentucky before my eyes.

That place will always come back

To claim me.

Everyone in the streets

leaving their cars on the Freeway,

to look up at the falling rain.

They had not seen in over a year.

On the Television,

a preacher rows through

New Orleans.

CONTRIBUTOR *Notes*

Being a native Floridian and current resident, Michelle Lizet Flores is happy to have returned to the land where trees don't sleep. A graduate of FSU and NYU creative writing programs, she currently works as a 5th grade reading teacher where she fosters the next generation of American writers. She has previously been published in magazines such as The Miami Rail and Noble/Gas Qtrly, and has work forthcoming in Gravel Magazine and Azahares. Find out more at michellelizetflores.com.

Conor Fitzpatrick is a scientist and creative writing student from San Diego. When he is not in the lab, he enjoys reading and writing stories that explore the role of family in modern American life. This would be his first published story.

Richard Lyons Conlon is a two-tern Resident Playwright at Chicago Dramatists and proud member of the Dramatists Guild, Richard has written over thirty plays and screenplays.

Daniel Edward Moore's poems have been published in journals such as: The Spoon River Poetry Review, Rattle, Columbia Journal, New South, American Journal Of Poetry and others. His poems are currently at Mandala, Lullwater Review, Gyroscope Review, december Magazine, The Big Windows Review, Natural Bridge Literary Journal, Scalawag Magazine, Sweet Tree Review, Tule Review and Hot Metal Bridge.

Heike Anan is the pen name for an American writer currently living and working in Sweden.

Steven Lazarov lives in Chicago and is working on an MFA at Columbia College.

Barbara Tramonte is a poet with poems, essays, and stories published in literary journals and anthologies. She has had one book of poems published by a small press and a chapbook published in the winter of 2017. She worked as a professor in the school for graduate studies at SUNY Empire State College.

After receiving her master's degree in journalism from the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University, Amy Kite worked as the managing editor of a regional travel magazine, and she has had numerous magazine articles published. She has also published a book of her poetry entitled Love, Lust and Lunacy: A Poet's Inner Dialogue, and she received a Mom's Choice Award for her children's book, Cancer, Cancer Go Away. In addition to being a mom to three children and three rescue dogs, she is also a private tutor, public speaker, and freelance writer.

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Alicetierney Prindiville-Porto is an eighteen-year-old from central Illinois. Additionally, her work has appeared in her school's literary journal.

Jonathan Cooper's poems and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in various publications including New Plains Review, Tower Journal, Two Hawks Quarterly, The Statesman Journal, and Commonline Journal. He lives in Vancouver, Canada.

Jen Sage-Robison is a feminist and proud mom and LGBTQ kids. She is active in the disability rights community and is an affiliate of Amherst Writers and Artists. She leads writing workshops at Westport Writers Workshop and believes all people, regardless of economic and educational background, have important stories to write. She has poems forthcoming in Panoply and Gyroscope Review.

Laura Hoffman is a United States Marine Corps veteran and senior at The University of North Florida. Hoffman's most recent work appears in: Clear Poetry, The Bangalore Review, Penultimate Peanut, Bop Dead City, The Gyroscope Review, Typishly, Poetry Circle, and Cease Cows.

Jury S. Judge is an internationally published artist, writer, poet, photographer, and political cartoonist. Her Astronomy Comedy cartoons are also published in The Lowell Observer. Her artwork has been widely featured in literary magazines such as, Dodging The Rain, The New Plains Review, The Ignatian Literary Magazine, and Fearsome Critters. She has been interviewed on the television news program, NAZ Today for her work as a political cartoonist. She graduated Magna Cum Laude with a BFA from the University of Houston-Clear Lake in 2014.

