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WRITER'S BLOCK

*Students' magazine for  
writing, film & literature*

#31

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# WRITER'S BLOCK: A NEW HOPE

ROOS GRAVEMAKER AND PAUL HOFMA

The dark January evenings might reflect your mood over what happened the year before. But we of Writer's Block urge you to not fall in the pit of pessimism, fear, and hopelessness. Humans tend to focus on the bad things because biologically that is how our brains are wired. This makes it easier to become blind to the good things that also happened in 2016. Know that through the Ice Bucket challenge, enough money was raised for scientists to discover the gene responsible for ALS, meaning that they're close to finding a cure. Also, the global economy has grown, and global poverty and child mortality have both decreased. Portugal managed to run its entire country with renewable energy alone for 4.5 days. Finally, tiger numbers show increase for the first time in a century. This is just a small sample of the positive things that happened in 2016, so know that the future is not always as bleak as it might seem.

The positivity may be closer than you think, and so in this issue we hope to bring you our usual content with an optimistic silver lining. We start with Sil Dirks's "Between Green and Violet" which is about feeling blue, but at the same time encourages us to remember that colors change like the seasons, followed by Emily Reed who wrote a heart-warming, fairytale-like short story. A good cry over a lost love is good every once in a while so Alyssa Huisman brought us a wonderfully passionate poem called "The Last Day". For Gilmore Girls fans 2016 was a year of nostalgic revival. Julia Neugarten is one of those people and she wrote an article in which she reviewed the cultural relevance of Gilmore Girls in this day and age. Lance Gloss brings in some energy in this issue by playing with rhythm and sound in his onomatopoeic poems "Ball" and "Light". Following up on this, Amy Huffman will with "The Peacock Masquerades" and "Oenophile" likewise captivate you with her entrancing poetic style. In her short stories, Marcelle Bartels explores her childhood and a lost time like a Proustian memory adventurer. Closer to home, the UvA has accepted a group of refugee students this academic year, so that they can continue their studies while being in asylum here. Sophie and Roos interviewed Majd, one of these refugee students, who is currently in a preparatory year and intends to do an education Master next year. We close this issue with a rediscovery of a forgotten poet. In honor of Thomas Gray's 300 year anniversary on December 26th, Victor Vasconsella wrote an essay on the British poet who was sadly only known for his famous "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" and not for his remarkable life. Your reading experience is completed with beautiful pictures from Bob Felix, Lamprini Nakos, and Darlin Quiroz.

So sit back, relax, and revel in this moment of reading bliss. Even though we lost a great number of prominent cultural figures this year, remember that their words and ideas live on, so we would like to end with a line from Leonard Cohen's *Anthem*; "There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." **WB**

# BETWEEN GREEN AND VIOLET

SIL DIRKS

I feel blue.

I feel all of its shades. The *turquoise* and the *aquamarine*.

The *baby blues*, and the *dark teal*.

The *azure* and the *lapis*.

It feels like superficial serenity.

The *indigo* seeps under my skin as I exhale the *cerulean*. *Sapphire* grains under my fingernails. The color of *aegean* stains the bags under my eyes. There's residue of *cobalt* in my hair. I feel the heaviness of *midnight's* presence embedded in my being, and *maya's* presence embedded in my spirit.

It's all identical, but not quite. Not at all.

Just like the *sky*, just like the *arctic*.

It's similar but never the same.

There's a shade that separates *navy* to *berry*,

*stone* to *slate*

and *denim* to *spruce*.

My intentions feel like *alice*, but impact as *prussian*.

Even though I am as brute as *oxford*, I'd prefer to think I'm more of a *periwinkle*. My breath tastes as if *Ultramarine* took her precious time to infiltrate my tongue, but smells as if *Phthalo* had his share on my palate instead. *Iris* plays with the hairs on my arms, *Celeste* plays with my eyelashes. *Majorelle* caresses my right cheek, *Zaffre* cleans the scrapes and wounds on my knees.

Having my *Bondi* sing me to sleep, having my *Brandeis* to weep with me in my time of distraught and need. Having my *Viridian* tell me what I want to hear, having my *Duke's* ears and my *Carolina's* kisses. It all feels so good. It feels good having all of my blues in each of my senses.

Intertwined with the confusion and pleasure of knowing that I don't know, wherever they come from, I will allow them to consume me anyway, with no second thought.

*Palatinate* lacks comprehension but makes up with her caress, with her touch, with her expression. She does not question anything I say or do. She is the experience. She is what I become in my time of melancholy. Experiencing, existing, seeing and being. Her presence is enough. She exists but in the moment, as so do I. These are all my blues. Even though my blues are but temporary serenity, they're still all mine to have.

But colors change like the seasons, soon I'll be feeling red.

# PAPER LANTERNS

EMILY REED

She noticed them when she went to close her curtains for the night. It had been a tough day at work, and she was stressed and anxious. But here, hundreds of lights were rising into the sky over the sea, casting a golden glow over the waves. She was filled with a sense of hope and promise. She hurried out of the house and down through the maze of dark, twisting streets and alleys that led to the beach.

He noticed the lights as he stood in the kitchen, waiting for the kettle to boil so he could make another mug of tea. He had a long night of work ahead of him; an article that needed to be written with the deadline on the following day. But upon noticing the lights, he was struck by a strange curiosity that inspired him to leave the tea, leave his work, quickly slip on a pair of shoes and a jacket, and rush to the seashore.

By the time she reached the sand, the lights had risen way into the night sky, becoming only slightly bigger and brighter than the stars above. She stopped, enjoying the magical atmosphere and leaning against the railing of the promenade, watching them climb higher and higher, the light they left behind fading quickly.

He arrived out of breath. Bent double he paused, straining to fill his lungs with air. When he looked up, the lights were almost out of sight. He glanced around in an effort to discover the source of such a beautiful display, but there was no one about. Except for a woman, leaning against the railing of the promenade with her face tilted heavenwards as she admired the quickly disappearing array of lanterns.

He approached cautiously, enquiring as to

whether she knew where the lights had come from. She shook her head, puzzled, wondering the same thing. The beach was deserted, with no sign of any recent activity. And yet the lights had certainly seemed to originate from this point.

She looked upwards again, but the lights were gone, the only trace being in the memory she shared with this stranger. The glow of the moon illuminated his features but cast shadows across his eyes, making him look mysterious and somehow sinister. She shivered, both from the cold and the eerie atmosphere. He immediately removed his jacket, slinging it around her shoulders. She tried to protest but he insisted, refusing to take it back. Smiling graciously, she thanked him.

Were they real? He asked. Were the lights real? She shrugged, contemplating whether this had been the workings of fate, or if they had just arrived too late and whoever had released the paper lanterns had vanished into the night like a ship disappearing over the horizon, silently, the cold water closing over behind it as if it had never been there.

He smiled, knowing that this would be a memory neither would forget.

And he was right.

Exactly seventy years later, a young woman sees paper lanterns rising into the sky over the sea. Several streets away, a man also bears witness to the spectacle. Both make their separate ways down to the beach, where they discover that the source of the lanterns, an old couple who had met on that same day many years before, has already left without a trace. The young man's eyes meet the woman's across the promenade, and she smiles, the lanterns in the sky lighting up her face. She shivers suddenly in the cold. **WB**

# THE LAST DAY

ALYSSA HUISMAN

on the last day i will ask you,

what would it be like to forget? forget your hands and how to hold them;  
forget your glassware skin, the crinkled sheets. by the end i'll be running to the fire escape,  
frightened, weakened - trying to disappear in what i knew of you. these hands, i'll say, i loved them once. i loved it when  
you held them. the centuries that passed in the time that we touched will not repeat until we count them; let's keep it that  
way. i was born wrapped in risks on a summer day, in a dark room, my heartbeat galloping, cells blinded by the First Light.

by nightfall, i was gone.

i've been waiting since then, to be able to feel that light again. i let myself fall: from the mountains, from my bed. to a  
somewhere ocean, through fire-edged skies beneath the phantom rain. i have seen the thirstiest dragons and sirens in love  
with sailor men. i have seen waternymphs unable to swim, with unknown desires for some earth beneath their feet, for the  
height of the trees and the smell of hydrangeas. *please*. in their melodies, loud as wind chimes i found that

maybe we're not as lost as we wish to be.

i am experiencing, lately, what it feels like to be searching. for some kingdom made of flames, of fractures. some empire  
we can crack open and let ourselves sleep in for once. this is my torch song. these are the souvenirs from my endless quest  
through this labyrinth, my landscape of nouns and rhythms.

so take me to your fingers, where i can feel the only home i'll ever need. somewhere between these bodies, these hands,  
all of the ghosts waiting to bloom. the untold silence of your heartbeat, our words collected, and me, sleeping beneath  
your floors.

on the last day i will ask you to keep all of this safe. because i have breathed these words over and over and you are the  
first that's ever heard. this is my torch song. this is all i have to offer you; paralyzed veins, aching fingers holding on to  
your skin, scared of forgetting the way it feels against my own. i have a thousand words still caught in my throat, and a  
million centuries of other places weighing me down. but i will love you until you know nothing else. until the droughts  
come, always, and always.

there's a fire going out; it would break your heart. *please*. nightfall, glowing, and so many passing words.

i'll tell you, i could sleep inside a mind like yours. maybe there's a home there. i don't know what the last day will look  
like, what ghosts we'll have hidden under our skin. there's a storm across the lake. so many things are breaking. but my  
song is ending and you are the only thing i used to run to. i don't know how long we have.

all i'm asking you is, *please*. *don't forget*.

# THE GILMORE GIRLS REVIVAL: MODERNITY COMES TO STARS HOLLOW

JULIA NEUGARTEN

*This is a review of Gilmore Girls: A Year In The Life. It therefore contains some minor spoilers. I've made an effort to leave out the most surprising plot twists so that you can still have a wonderful experience watching the revival. I will say nothing of the infamous last three words, other than that they were truly astounding.*

It felt good to be back in Stars Hollow. I had been looking forward to it for quite some time. On Friday the 25th of November, when all four episodes of the *Gilmore Girls* revival dropped on Netflix, I was ecstatic, but my excitement was soon replaced by fear. I was afraid that, like so many other long-awaited television revivals, the new season would disappoint. Fortunately, through an innovative combination of nostalgia and modernization, it didn't.

Ten years have gone by since the final episode of *Gilmore Girls* aired. Since then, the economy has crashed, unemployment has gone up, and America's elected a fascist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic orange potato for president. With all of this uncertainty in our surroundings we need the fairytale atmosphere of small-town Connecticut more than ever. What producer and screenwriter Amy Sherman-Palladino has given us instead is a show that stays true to its legacy while still adapting to modern times.

The world has aged, and the *Gilmore Girls* have aged with it. In the revival, Sherman-Palladino shows us an uncannily accurate depiction of modern life, complete with successful, educated thirty-somethings moving back in with their mothers because the world has grown increasingly indifferent towards them.

Of course there is nostalgia galore. Some of the scenes commemorating Richard Herman made me cry like a baby. Despite the way that technology and social media rules modern life, Luke's Diner still does not allow cellphones or other types of electronics. Lastly, Dean Forester returns, albeit briefly, and receives the closure and recognition I always wanted for him. The development of his storyline alleviated my worries about character assassination.

Just as it always did, *Gilmore Girls* offers its viewers the perfect combination of sugary sweet romance and real-life problems. Yet the narrative has somewhat distanced itself from the all-American ideals of family life it used to draw from. Whereas Rory used to be the model sweet, smart, and innocent teenage girl, in the revival she deviates from this ideal, having fully embraced her adulthood and sexuality. She demonstrates this new-found sexual freedom by engaging in casual sex with a number of men.



This shows that the revival did its best to be more mature than its original. The characters have grown and so has the audience, so the revival gives us a deeper and more multi-dimensional view of the inner lives of its most beloved characters. The troubled relationship between Lorelai and her mother Emily, which was an arena of drama and comedy in the previous seasons, is now under serious psychological scrutiny in their weekly therapy sessions. The fact that Lorelai, in an uncharacteristic show of maturity, is willing to cooperate, shows that she has grown as a person. Even when Emily abandons her daughter on the therapist's couch, Lorelai stays in therapy, eventually acknowledging that she's got some deep-seated issues to address.

*Gilmore Girls* did not only look at its matured audience for its revival. Following up on the recent trends in American television that aim to offer a more diverse set of narratives and characters from different genders, ethnicities, sexual preferences, and other minority identities, *Gilmore Girls* has done its best to adapt to this modern trend. The diversity in *Stars Hollow* has notably increased—people of all ethnicities and sexualities now wander around the famous gazebo. Most crucially, in line with real-world developments, *Stars Hollow*'s gay best friend Michel is now married to a man named Frederic, and is no

longer half-way in the closet.

In terms of gender representation, *Gilmore Girls* has been subject to many feminist debates and the show continues to be ambivalent in its portrayal of women. In her tumultuous career as a journalist, Rory is now working on a book about the life of Naomi Shropshire, a fictional British woman who describes herself as a “hellion, a feminist and an environmentalist.” Yet, as the episodes progress, Shropshire becomes increasingly volatile, picking fights with Rory and even suing her for theft of intellectual property. Eventually, she distances herself from Rory and demands everything Rory's ever written about her to be returned to her possession. At first, I was charmed by Naomi Shropshire, brilliantly portrayed by Alex Kingston who is also known for her role in *Doctor Who*. Then, quite suddenly, her character became completely irrational for no clear reason, and I was more than a little disappointed to see the stereotype of a radical feminist turning into a lunatic.

In spite of the disappointing characterization of a feminist who could have been an interesting addition to the show, I have always admired the ways in which different women on *Gilmore Girls* exemplify different interpretations of feminism. Rory's feminism is intellectual: she's always reading about

women, she speaks out in class on issues that interest her and she doesn't let any man tell her what to do. Lorelai's feminism is much more assertive. Armed with her relentless wit and comfortable in her single motherhood, she aims to completely overthrow societal stigmas on single teenage mothers. Lorelai is always kicking ass, even when she's got a toddler to care for. Her mother's feminism, on the other hand, has always been conservative. I can't say that I've ever related to it or found it inspiring, but the Emily of the revival has also clearly entered the modern era. Out of all the women on the show, Sookie's feminism is perhaps the most traditional, putting family life front and center. Then again, Sookie is a lady who follows her heart, and I have nothing but respect for that.

All in all, *Gilmore Girls* used its old and trusted combination of witty dialogue and lovable characters, only slightly updated it for a 2016 audience. Through focusing on diversity and character maturity, *Gilmore Girls* hasn't become a kitsch product belonging to the 00s. Instead, it has showcased its ability to grow with its time and its audience. Most notably, this revival is the product of people who enjoy what they do, and their enjoyment is visible in every aspect of the result. I think that is the only way to revive a much-beloved show like *Gilmore Girls*. **WB**



Art by Ana Flores

# BALL

LANCE GLOSS

Scatter them bones, as at  
the end-of-days dance, then  
on its last legs, that jumbo  
jig jackrabbit hop, hip-  
swaying its way through  
the pistons and pendula of  
this post-last supper period as  
we pulse heel and toe to  
polish the floorboards into  
mattress and in the gutless  
din of the exit

sleep softly.

# THE PEACOCK MASQUERADES

AMY HUFFMAN

as a canary, stuffs itself into gilded  
cage, two times too small. A sacrifice  
of tail feathers is current mandated price  
for a dream that sounds  
a lot more like a game of capture  
and release.

# LAND BRIDGE

MARCELLE BARTELS

I do not think about you that often. When I am in the shower and my mind wanders over the shower curtain, with the carelessly drawn map of the world, I do not think about you.

I do not think about the places we, while the running water made us old and wrinkly, pointed at to travel to someday. I do not think about how later, when lying in bed, we used to look up photos of these places, while your brown curls tickled in my neck. I really do not. But this changes when that land bridge in Russia catches my eye, the one near St. Petersburg, where it seems the land is made up of ice and rocks. The place where just one road leads from the Russian city to Finland, which suddenly, without warning, stops being a road. Then I do. Just for a minute.



Photo by Lamprini Nakos

# ON TERRORISM & HUMANITIES: AN INTERVIEW WITH A SYRIAN REFUGEE STUDENT

ROOS GRAVEMAKER AND SOPHIE VAN HELLENBERG HUBAR

**Majd left Syria for Europe and is studying at the University of Amsterdam. He is one of a group of humanities students who follow a program that is especially set-up for refugees so that they can study or to continue their studies while being in asylum here. With the wish of going back to Syria, Majd came to the Netherlands not just because of the violence but also because he wants to help rebuilding his war-struck homeland. "Usually it is not the one who carries a pen that speaks louder, but the one carrying a gun, and that needs to be changed."**

We meet Majd at the P.C. Hoofthuis but he invites us to have coffee at a café close by. He states that he has been in love with the Netherlands ever since he was a child, especially because of football. He says that he loved to watch the typical 80s Dutch footballers on TV – Frank Rijkaard, Marco van Basten, and Patrick Kluivert. He remembers how fascinated he was with Ruud Gullit's impressive dreadlocks and that he felt sad when Edwin van der Sar, his favorite goalkeeper, didn't win the World Cup in 2010. For some reason it surprises us that the golden years of Dutch football have even reached the far corners of Syria, but then Majd reminds us that Syria in fact used to be one of the most secular and most politically stable nations of the Middle-Eastern region before it descended into a destructive war.

Majd immediately dives into the core of the problem. He doesn't consider the Syrian war to be a sectarian conflict. With the involvement of

the US and Russia, Majd believes that the reason of the war actually exceeds the Syrian borders. "If you pay more attention to the media, you will discover that what is going on in Syria is basically in the interest of these two great nations. And that is why the sectarian conflicts are triggered." Even though both US and Russian operations are officially aimed at ISIS, the two superpowers have opposing ideas about the ways Syria should return to political stability. Whereas the US and Western governments insist that President Bashar Al Assad resigns, Russia strongly supports the Syrian Government. The Syrian conflict is therefore not just a matter of fighting terrorism but also of determining whether the West or Russia will eventually have influence over the region.



In the end, it is the Syrian people who fall victim. Majd himself lost his 68-year-old father and two brothers in a terrorist attack from the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a group trained and supported by Western governments. The FSA invaded their home and shot four of Majd's brothers, the youngest being only sixteen years old. Two of them died and the other two survived miraculously. They were not in the military, nor



supporters of the Assad regime, but they were murdered for the fact that they were not Muslims. So Majd purposely calls the FSA attacks terrorist because “any person who decides to take a weapon to solve a conflict is a terrorist.”

He is aware that this image of the FSA doesn't match with the stereotypical terrorist the west may have in mind, but he wants people to be aware of how western media often view the Syrian conflict from a biased perspective. “There is no model terrorist. Western governments make a great mistake in supporting those groups (FSA). I understand that they have an interest in Syria and that Assad's communication with the west is far from good but in the end we are all victims.”

This is one of his goals during his stay here. Majd wants to change the western stereotypes of Syria and to study terrorism from a theological viewpoint. “I have something to say about terrorism which has not been said yet.”



Despite the fact that Syria used to be the most secular country in the region and that, as of yet, it identifies itself as secular, being critical about religion is still prohibited by law. The country consists of a Muslim majority and other religious sects which prevents safe open discussions and dialogues about religion. “Talking about this topic is a taboo, it can even lead to your death. Talking critically about religion or beliefs can be dangerous even if you are not insulting any religious

figure.” Majd identifies himself as secular and a free thinker “because rather than religion, I believe in science and rational reasoning, and such a person is not welcome in the Arab world.”

Majd hopes that after the war Syrians will realize that religions divide the nation and that a secular Syria can bring everybody together. He does not want to banish religion completely but he stresses the importance of the state being secular. According to him, if the country continues to have a sectarian divide between religions, it will never be stable. In a country with hundreds of different religions, sects, and ethnicities, “politicians always find religion as the easiest way to control their people. But the incestuous marriage between politics and religions will always lead to disasters and easily provokes conflicts. We have to live under a human and civil umbrella, not under a religious one.”

He is probably not the only Syrian who has these ideas. Majd points out that even when people don't agree with the government or religious authorities, they are not willing to criticize them because talking openly about these issues is in the current religious and political system a grave risk that not only affects you but also your friends and family. “That is why the truth is always hidden. In any way, the truth has an ugly face and when you put make-up on it to make it prettier, you will just be hiding it with a mask. The truth is ugly and you have to accept it the way it is.”

Majd's other goal is to get proper education and bring his knowledge back to Syria to help rebuilding his country. In a country at war, with children that have spent most of their childhood in fear and violence, teachers can play a crucial role when dealing with war traumas. “The children of Syria not only need people who can

educate them. Teachers must also fulfill the role of a psychiatrist, or at least someone who can heal the wounds from the war. At the moment, the Syrian teachers are not qualified to do such a thing.”

Back in Damascus Majd was a student advisor at an international school and a qualified teacher who taught English and Arabic for non-Arabic speakers. Despite his credentials, Majd’s teaching qualifications are not recognized by the European Union to teach or to study for a Master’s degree. Nonetheless, Majd has been very active in reaching his goals. As a refugee it would normally take about three years to get into university education, but Majd managed to get into the UvA within a year. “When I arrived here, I got to it immediately. I don’t want to sit home and receive money from the government. I want to work and contribute to this country.”



With his university background and his ambition to study terrorism from a religious perspective, Majd approached two professors from the theology department at the UvA who referred him to admission office. Together with the administration and the English department, they managed to set up a preparatory year for refugee students. Majd himself plans to do the Language and Education or the Literature and Education Master, so that after graduating he can find a job as a teacher and at the same time do his research on terrorism.

The prospect of being able to teach again and to pursue his academic ambitions was a great relief for Majd. He is very grateful to the UvA and the staff members of the humanities faculty. “The happiest days of my life were when I was teaching, and if I had not been able to be a teacher here, that would have disappointed me greatly. The UvA didn’t refuse students like me but gave us the tools to continue our education. I don’t really have the words that can express my gratitude to them. They have been very special in my life and I will never forget them.”

At the moment, four refugee students have been accepted at the humanities department. With the possibility of more refugee students being admitted to the UvA, we ask what students can do to help their fellow students in their studies. Majd said that some students are already very active in helping refugees. He says that the most important thing students can do is raising social awareness and erasing the bigotry and stigmas around refugees that they may come across in their daily lives. “I really wish that refugees are not looked at just as refugees, but as normal people.”

At the same time, integrating into Dutch society is very crucial to refugees. Majd has noticed how in the Netherlands a significant part of the Turkish and Moroccan community are isolated from the Dutch society and he doesn’t wish that to happen to the Syrians as well. “I don’t want to see Syrians having nothing to do with the Dutch culture. Of course they can keep their heritage, but it is important for them to accept the fact that they live in Europe now and not in Syria.”

Majd shows us some of the pictures he has made during his stay here. Most of them are pictures of “typically Dutch” images - windmills, polder sceneries, Amsterdam canal houses. The fact that these touristy pictures are not the result of

voluntary visit but of an unwanted forced escape from his homeland gives them a layer of cruel irony. We ask him if he feels the same way. “Yes it is painful. I do consider myself very lucky but I really didn’t want to come here as a refugee but as a tourist.”

It is almost 17.00. We have been talking for over an hour. “That is the thing with teachers,” he says laughingly. “We talk a lot.” Even though we repeatedly tell him that it is our treat, he insists on paying for our coffees. He has to hurry because his class starts in 10 minutes. We ask if there is

anything else he would like to say. “I would say that the UvA’s contribution to the refugee crisis should not go unnoticed. If all universities in Europe would do the same, more refugees would be able to continue their studies and be more able to contribute to the society that has taken them in, as well as to their own. Education is the best way to make the world a better place, and I am glad that the UvA was the pioneer in putting the principle of humanity in action and not only as a title on its building.” **WB**





# OENOPHILE

**AMY HUFFMAN**

I find its creation myth . . . charming.  
The thought of toe tentatively tipped  
into vat of grapes, growing  
brazen, stomping mad

ly. I imagine

I am Dionysus, warped god, wrapped  
in sin-stained toga, sacrificing globes  
of fruit, pummeled to pulp, draining  
last dribble of deified juice from core.  
Epic celebration on the Mount when  
[human] lifetime later, cork or keg is  
popped. I am returned to my own  
reality by the rich bouquet of 1942  
Barolo Luigi Bosca's better-  
than-average pour. I take a moment  
to lift hue to light, watch the electric fight,  
attempt to filter through blooded chalice.  
I tease myself with swirl of wrist, motion  
rippling echo, broken as lips touch liquid,  
lava erupting over tongue, flowing  
down throat. Eyes closed in ecstasy.  
I am comfort

ed by every last swallow.

# FLOATIES

MARCELLE BARTELS

When I was a child and we used to go swimming, I would walk into the sea directly behind my father. By doing so, my feet only found what his already had. Once we were in too deep, and my feet could no longer reach his tracks, I used to cling to his shoulders. He then pretended to succumb to the weight of his child and drown. Soon, when he reached the surface again, he would throw me far out into the dark ocean. From a little distance, he seemed like four little dots between the waves; his feet (size 45), his belly (round) and his head (black-haired). My father was a most skilled floater.

The unknown water felt frightening without him. Something would be lurking around my feet or slither against my leg; I swam towards him in hysteria and clutched his neck. I held on tightly as he slowly walked out of the water, like a crab with a starfish latched to its back. He would then lay me down on my towel and my mother wrapped me in hers.

My father would now sink. With me on his shoulders he is destined to drown. The crab has turned grey, his claws are now blunt. I plan to buy him floaties.

# LIGHT

LANCE GLOSS

Anyhow,  
ain't no water  
we can swim from—

Sit, sugar.  
Sit, love.  
Let's not outrun  
the floor.



# THOMAS GRAY REDISCOVERED

VICTOR VASCONELLA

Thomas Gray, whose 300th anniversary was on December 26th of 2016, is a singular phenomenon: a literary ‘one-hit wonder’ whose fame rests almost entirely on a short lyrical poem of 32 stanzas, scarcely more than a 1000 words in length. This poem, the “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”, was for a long time the most commonly known and read poem in the English language, and its reputation continues to be estimable. “The Elegy has so worked itself into the popular imagination,” noted literary critic Leslie Stephen, “that it includes more familiar phrases than any poem of equal length in the language.” The 1992 edition of the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations includes no less than 13 of the stanzas in full. The poem became famous as soon as it got into the hands of a few of Gray’s acquaintances, skyrocketed in fame when it was published, and never really wavered in popular esteem. The first world war saw a massive increase in its readership, when it was used to eulogize the youth lost in the trenches; indeed, Wilfred Owen, the soldier-poet, wrote his famous “Anthem for Doomed Youth” in the shadow of Gray, whom he much admired. The churchyard elegy is still taught in colleges worldwide, sometimes even high schools, as it has been for over a century.

Yet a single poem is hardly all that is notable about Gray, so why is it that it alone receives all the glory? It has become so entrenched in literary culture, far more so than Gray’s other output and his own life, that Gray is often passed over as “the author of the churchyard elegy”, and other such dismissive summarizations. The

major reasons for this are the scantiness of Gray’s output, the relative tameness of his life, and Gray’s own refusal to document much about himself. Biographies of Gray include so much “may”, “perhaps”, “surely” and “possibly” that it becomes rather tiresome. Gray did not make literary fame easy for himself. Had Coleridge lived in seclusion and never written more than a small volume of poetry, we might now be referring to him merely as “the author of Khubla Khan”.

Relevant criticism of Gray in the centuries following his death was not kind to him. The most famous literary episode involving Gray was Wordsworth’s takedown of his poetic diction, which Wordsworth found to “differ from that of prose” in “no respect” except “the rhyme”. Wordsworth’s object of criticism here was Gray’s elegy for his friend Richard West, possibly the man Gray had felt most close to in all his life. To Wordsworth, nothing was more vile than clothing genuine grieving in strict poetic diction, so he found no “value” in lines such as “In vain to me the smiling mornings shine, / And reddening Phœbus lifts his golden fire”. This judgment of Gray has remained in the public consciousness, and often Gray’s strict diction is coupled with a supposedly strict (and dull) life. Recent scholarship has, however, endeavored to save Gray from obscurity. It turns out that what is possible to reconstruct of Gray’s life is a lot more interesting than originally imagined.

One major point seems so obvious to us nowadays that it is almost unbelievable biographers missed it prior to the last few decades. We

see Lord David Cecil happily recording Gray and his childhood friend Richard West “wandering way to the roam the countryside together”, “hand in hand”, or Gray writing the following in a letter to a young man he had known for only 8 weeks:

“My life now is but a perpetual conversation with your shadow--the known sound of your voice still rings in my ears--there on the corner of the fender you are standing or tinkling on the pianoforte or stretched at length on the sofa.”

How biographers so eagerly found this information yet did not for one minute question Gray’s sexuality is often wondered. Modern scholars are often fairly straightforward about the issue, as when G.S. Rousseau wrote lightly “about Gray’s homosexuality there never seemed any doubt to me.” Ketton-Cremer, who wrote an influential biography of Gray that was the only modern, large and scholarly resource on Gray’s life available until 2008, hinted at Gray’s homosexuality, but in a hilariously roundabout way: Gray “knew the existence of temptations which could not for one moment be contemplated, by one who had been, all his life long, a strict observer of the laws of God and the laws of men.” Robert L. Mack, his most recent biographer, treats his homosexuality as a plain matter of fact.

There are more than enough reasons to think this, and it would certainly not have been uncommon in Gray’s environment. Growing up in fashionable England of the late eighteenth century entailed being near men, and almost exclusively near men, all of a boy’s school life and most of his university life. Those men found unique ways to pass the time and exert their desires. A diarist at Oxford would mention, matter-of-factly, that “Among

the chief men in some of the colleges, sodomy is very usual”. Gray’s own friend Henry Tuthill was driven out of Cambridge, for, as a friend put it, being “guilty of great enormities”; enormities which resulted in no apparent damage to anything, but which everyone who knew him were eager to suppress. Most likely, they were what the college would term “homosexual offences”.

That was not the only time Gray was to witness boy’s pranking and playing that went a little too far. His first year at Eton, then already the foremost secondary school of England and extremely elite, students caused a literal riot, resulting in over a hundred students being expelled and the amount of students allowed in the school being radically decreased. Yet that the most riotous students were removed from the school did not mean everything was smooth sailing from then on: a churchyard inscription of one of Gray’s Eton classmates actually says he was “accidentally” stabbed to death, and a famous Eton pastime was ritually beating a lamb to death, right next to the school (this practice was finally banned in 1730). Gray, however, was a frail, delicate boy, and did not take to this life.

The aversion to violence and almost preternatural shyness Gray grew into may have been influenced by the domestic violence he was likely the victim of in his youth. The legal counselor of Gray’s mother was most clear about her being the victim of “beating, kicking, punching” and “the most vile and abusive language”. The divorce she sought, in part for her son, in addition to Gray being sent away to an uncle, seem to point towards similar violence being inflicted on Gray. That 11 siblings of Gray died in infancy is such a statistical anomaly that Robert L. Mack wonders whether the father was not somehow involved in this—in

any case, killing unwanted infants or leaving them on the street was far from uncommon at the time.

Eventually Gray settled for a calm, steady life at Cambridge, which at the time was not exactly the great place for higher learning it was to become; David Cecil noted that “young men in the eighteenth century took their University career very lightly,” while professors hardly bothered to see their students, and indeed were promoted by patronage, often in subjects they knew next to nothing about. When Gray himself later became professor of modern history at Cambridge, he was paid £400 a year for his function, which essentially involved no work whatsoever. Gray’s life was

nevertheless not a happy one: he was plagued by depression, the roots of which probably lie in his previously unexplored homosexuality and domestic abuse.

Gray fell off because he appeared to be merely a rather boring, melancholy, scholarly man who did very little in his life, and left it out of his work making it feel stoic, impersonal and detached. Now that we can understand Gray more fully, the picture becomes one of a man depressed and tormented, and the life he lived a tale both of comedy and tragedy. In this light, we may finally rediscover the Gray beyond the churchyard elegy.

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