**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Waiting Room</td>
<td>Blaize Gervais</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Wedding</td>
<td>Alex Jung</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The Ghosts Behind Me</td>
<td>Sarah Robinson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Blue Fall, Red Winter</td>
<td>Jenzo Fernando Duque</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>Blaize Gervais</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Here I Sit All Brokenhearted</td>
<td>Evan W. Stoner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 19   | Oysters | Jake Kaufman  
|      |        | Untitled, Bryan Graybill |
| 20   | By Canal St. Martin | Alex Jung |
| 22   | Housefly | Kristin Lin  
|      |        | Untitled, Christina Xiao |
Memoryhouse is a creative nonfiction arts organization that encourages undergraduates, graduates, faculty, and staff to share their first-person narratives with one another through writing, the visual arts, and performance. We run a quarterly print issue, writing and performance workshops, and the celebrated Memoryhouse Performance Ensemble. To learn about joining Memoryhouse, or submitting work, please visit:

chicagomemoryhouse.wordpress.com

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alida Miranda-Wolff</td>
<td>Founding Editor-in-Chief Emeritus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blaize Gervais</td>
<td>Editor-in-Chief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katina Vradelis</td>
<td>Print Editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mari Cohen</td>
<td>Print Editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathleen Cole</td>
<td>Print Editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane Jun</td>
<td>Design Editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric Shoemaker</td>
<td>Performance Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica Covil</td>
<td>Associate Performance Editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya Landau</td>
<td>Co-Programming Editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joyce Huang</td>
<td>Co-Programming Editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer Chukwu</td>
<td>Blog Editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neal Jochmann</td>
<td>Web Developer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryan Graybill</td>
<td>Photographer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Wedding(s), Alex Jung
The trees are coming into leaf  
Like something almost being said;  
The recent buds relax and spread,  
Their greenness is a kind of grief.

Is it that they are born again  
And we grow old? No, they die too.  
Their yearly trick of looking new  
Is written down in rings of grain.

Yet still the unreasting castles thresh  
In fullgrown thickness every May.  
Last year is dead, they seem to say,  
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.

- The Trees by Philip Larkin

1. Singapore in the month of March is stickiness on skin, moist rivulets down the smalls of backs, a growing dampness occasionally punctured by entry into an air-conditioned mall. Its equatorial location obscures the possibility of springtime and awakening. Instead, there is ceaseless, slumbering summer. I was working on a paper in the school cafeteria, sweat pooling between my thighs and the plastic chair I sat on. After fifteen minutes I received a text message from my cousin. Out of love, out of luck, he had recently gone through a break-up and still had a year to go in the army. Depression, they say, camouflages itself and lingers surreptitiously. A week of sadness becomes two weeks, then three, then a perpetual shade of unceasing grey. It transfigures itself into Facebook statuses that are just barely too long and too personal – words not beautiful enough to warrant attention. It camouflages itself in ridiculous disguises, makes a fool of itself. It warrants laughter or pity from others most times, not concern.

He had told my sister and me about the break-up. His ex-girlfriend was his high school sweetheart. Once, he had brought her to a Chinese New Year gathering. Her presence at the table, seated among relatives, seemed to signal an unsaid future. Chopsticks poised, he brought small servings of vegetables and meat to her plate, each gesture made as if towards the building of a phantom family. He had built a future in his mind anchored in an assured togetherness. My grandmother approved. ‘She’s my everything,’ he had said, leaning back with an arm draped over her shoulder. Her head fit snugly against his chest. She went to university and he enlisted in the army. Within months the barracks and classroom would cleave them apart. They had grown towards different words and worlds, speaking over each other or not at all. They ran out of things to talk about, settled into silence, used their bodies to speak, and then found that skin-to-skin, they were no longer a part of each other. She called it off in a public park, leaving him sweating in his soldier’s uniform among scentless bougainvillea.
A month after the break-up we had our annual Christmas party. As children we would sleep shoulder to shoulder on mattresses on the floor of the living room, once the festivities were over. That year we reclaimed the tradition that had faded with all of us growing into adolescence and independence. It felt right to pull together when one of us had fallen. I liked to think it harkened back to when we had learnt to ride our bicycles together, each fall a blood bond that sealed our place in each other's lives – tiny hands on handlebars, struggling to gain and regain balance.

A large duvet was spread out in the dark on a ground barely swept clean of cake crumbs and wrapping paper. Reduced to words in the dark, my cousin spoke in sentences that shortened to phrases, and then to yes and no replies.

"University is just a very different place," my sister said. "New environments change people. This will pass, trust me, I've been there."

I heard the sound of rustling sheets as he turned away and moments later, heavy chokes that spilled from his throat. We laid in silence as the sound filled the room, unsure of how or whether to hold him, this boy of a man.

2. I was writing a paper on the English metaphysical poet John Donne when I got his last text message. Sweat pooled between my thighs and the plastic chair I sat on. I read through the text message hastily and put away my phone. An essay of a message thanking me for my concern and telling me I had been a wonderful person in his life – it had been months of this melodrama by now and his words had lost their sense of urgency. I spent the next half hour analyzing the poem “A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy’s Day”, interpreting it in multiple ways, waving off friends who passed me by in the cafeteria. Around me the March heat threatened and then eventually did, swallow me whole.

Later in the day when it became clear that I had read a suicide note, I busted my phone bill for the first time sending 68 replies to a number that was already dead.

In the poem, there is a line that reads ‘The world’s whole sap is sunk’. My father picked me up from school and drove to a non-descript housing estate where a crowd had already begun to form before a police line. Asked to identify the body, I saw my cousin's cement sucker-punched face where the ground had met him head on. I hadn't known that a face could look so waxen or comical, that grief could meld itself so completely into the suffocating heat. I nodded when the police officer asked me if it was the correct body, unable to speak. His name became too much, its syllables garbled and hooked, clawing its way up my throat and getting caught there.

Approximately ten feet away from the body, I bent over an open drain and threw up bile, wordless.

3. I sent a text message to my family: “Are you visiting him today? 2nd Anniversary and all...” and waited for their reply. The thirteen-hour time difference between Chicago and Singapore meant that it was never daylight when I could talk to them. In the first three months in college, away from home, I called every week. Penciled into my diary was a reminder in red, always on Saturdays, sometimes twice a week. On occasion it would slip my mind, and I would picture the 3am quiet happening in Singapore – parents in bed, television switched off, door bolted – my phone remaining stock-still in my hand, lost in transmission for the week. I felt, acutely, the need to draw close to family, to guard more fiercely what I knew now could be lost.

In the aftermath, there had been an immediate binding of familial ties, each person drawn to the other in a web of grief. Proximity provided an inexplicable sense of comfort. Each of us pooled memories that pieced together a narrative and recreated a living presence. Some attended church, others temples, or shrines, or simply lay in bed at night with eyes open to a darkened ceiling. Months, then a year passed, and the collective thread unraveled, each person becoming whole enough again to withdraw from mourning.
'Healing' is what one distant relative termed it. I felt myself scratching open the wound again and again, not wanting to remember, but not willing to forget either.

Slowly the replies trickled in.

My sister from her workplace: “Can’t. working till’ late tonight but will try tomorrow?”

My mother: “dad n i r in HK. Mayb nxt wk dnt worry”.

I imagined how best to convey annoyance through text message but could only manage “K”. Their casualness bothered me. Irritated, I scrolled through old messages on my phone to find The Text Message. I reread it occasionally, cycling through guilt, grief and anger, some form of emotional catharsis. This time, the entire message stream had been wiped clean, possibly from an OS update. His words had I think, included some permutation of thank you (“thanx”, “tanx”, “tanks” being some possibilities), and an uneasy expression of love (“lov”, “luv”, “luff”). The thought of losing these inelegant words shook me.

Close to tears, I trawled through the Apple support forums until my phone buzzed.

My roommate: “grabbing bagels for bkfst wanna come? : )”

4. In Singapore, there is a break of nearly eight months between December after you graduate junior college and before you attend university. I spent the first two months of 2013 working
at a pancake house waiting tables, taking out trash and getting pancake batter in my hair. The job paid me $5.50 an hour and I worked for ten hours each day, Monday through Saturday. The days blurred into a condensed mass of heat and sweat, rimmed by dirty dishes and the remnants of food waste that I cleared every hour. By the day’s end I was spent, riding the bus home in a state of mental absence. Around me the office workers left the slightest of gaps between their pressed clothes and my sullied presence. The bus heaved through peak hour traffic, sometimes braking abruptly when a purposeful car cut in front of it. I fell on more than one occasion. Hurtling towards the front of the vehicle, I had simply forgotten to catch myself.

In the month of March I decided to visit my sister in New Zealand to take stock of something other than pancake ingredients. For three weeks I walked the university town of Dunedin, Otago with a notebook and pen, scrawling half-manic and fully subpar poetry on blank pages. Tired, I entered cafes and bought endless amounts of coffee, existing in a cycle of drink, write, walk, repeat. Increasingly, everything I wrote seemed to revolve around my cousin’s suicide. I interpreted and re-interpreted, imagined and re-imagined, created and re-created it each time I wrote. In my words I made him die again and again, throwing himself off the building in perpetuity, until at some point, he might have ceased to hit the ground but flown.

One of those afternoons I found myself entering a café marked by a neon backlit sign that screamed “ORGANIC”, “VEGAN”, “BUFFET”, “FREE TRADE”. An employee was un-stacking plastic chairs in time for the dinner rush hour as I entered and bought myself a drink. The place had the mark of free-spirited liberalism, which is to say that it was haphazard and filthy. It had an assortment of chairs strewn in corners and lamps that seemed to sprout from the edges of a rug-covered floor. Their most popular offering was a dish of vegan tikka masala, which I never ended up trying, but which was touted as both delicious and cruelty-free. Every Friday evening, they hosted an open-mic poetry reading that attracted an equal number of tormented university writers, and members of the local retirees’ nature poetry club. Subject matter had never been more jarringly opposed.

That Friday, I returned to the café to experience verse that ranged from an intensive study of the pre-flight movements of robins, to those that involved “God”, “naked longing” and other equally provocative words. A half hour later, I put my name down on the list of performers, stood before the crowd and killed my cousin once again. This time, he came in the disguise of a bird, in a poem that substituted earth for concrete, air for blood, and flying for falling. I had invented so many different deaths for him that they seemed to negate each other, allowing him to exist in my mind as a levitating body (somewhere between the 32nd floor where he had jumped, and the 1st). Having been transfigured so thoroughly in verse, he seemed to linger everywhere, ready to superimpose his memory on unrelated thoughts. I grew impervious to this shock, each re-death inoculating me against the next. In the neon-signed café I finished my poem and felt profoundly bored with myself. His memory now a cheap source of poetry – is that what grief had come to?

Immediately after me, a lady stepped before the crowd to read. Quivering, she described the spring migration of the bar-tailed godwit. They leave,’ she paused, ‘and do not linger.’ Leaving in early March, these birds make for the Northern hemisphere, escaping the accumulating cold, but also bypassing the equatorial heat. With certainty, each year nature renews itself, she reminded us, and does not pause for anyone.

At the end of the night, two college students talked to me about my poem. Its shattered nature was what they could relate to. I nodded, looking around for the lady who had written about migratory birds. I wondered if I would ever be capable of writing something as delicate and beautiful as that, something not marred by tired grief, something that didn’t cheapen.
5. My first winter in Chicago the weather dipped into the negative 40s. A “polar vortex” was what they called it, and it spread throughout the Midwest, forcing people indoors. A vortex, I imagined, was a circular whirl of fluidity, constantly giving and receiving, discarding and renewing. At the center of it – a point of absolute stillness.

After months of adjusting to college, I walked out to Lake Michigan and was greeted with a great expanse of white. As far as the eye could see, the water’s edge surged in a petrified silence, meeting the sky in blankness. Waves caught in mid-roar preserved in their motions. There was a light I was unaccustomed to. Soft, almost imperceptible, gradations of white to grey to palest blue ran from where the waves once lapped onto shore to a horizon that was folding into familiarity.

I was taking part in a college tradition – Kuvia. A weeklong affair of early morning calisthenics and synchronized yoga, it started as an attempt to pacify winter with mock offerings. The final morning culminated in a series of sun salutations by the lake, a pseudo-spiritual exercise that now, produced more Facebook updates than actual improvements to spiritual wellbeing.

“Fuck it’s cold,” I heard a girl say as she pushed past me to get to her group of friends. Around me were dispersed groups of students, some in enthusiastic mid-salutation, but most with smart phones extended, capturing evidence of their attendance. As I worked through the motions I felt a laughable sense of release growing within me. The concept of a “downward dog”-induced wellbeing was ridiculous. “Like cruelty-free tikka masala,” I thought to myself. This was a perfect example of the new-age nonsense that I was so prone to sneering at. “And yet?”, the loosening knot in my chest seemed to whisper.

An upperclassman led us, a company of scarf-wrapped disciples, in the salutation cycle. Backward bend came first, and then forward bend, and then lunge, and then plank, and then my chest was in the snow, the ground brushing my eyelashes with a paint of frost. Through all of this, I breathed in time with the voice in the air, a steady count of 5-6-7-8. After it all as I lay on the ground, I realized that it had been weeks since I’d last thought of my cousin, and months since I’d written anything about him. Beneath the snow, I thought I felt the soil churn.

That winter, I bustled from building to building in the thickest coat I had ever owned. Still the cold leached through my skin and settled in my bones. I attended classes on biology, humanities, and social science, and felt the rolling motion of my mind shift. No longer did it fixate on countlessly killing my cousin. The cold lapsed into my veins and drove out the cyclic anxiety of writing and remembering. Lodged in the particular winter-March that Chicago possessed was a deep rest – a point of absolute silence.

I kept my head down that winter. I worked, read, ate, slept.

6. In two months, most of the white had given way to adamant greenery. The stirring of earth had sprung and filled barren branches. As it melted, the snow left dirty puddles that I sidestepped on my way to class. The tropical humidity of Singapore now only existed as a distant memory, as the faint scent of rain clinging to a forgotten packed sweater. Replaced by the stillness of winter, it now gave way again to the coming of spring, a different kind of warmth. Damp as the air became, I noticed a crispness that punctured it, the way the trees ached to burst forth in bloom, and how the quiet that I had contained seemed to dissolve in drips. I quickened my pace.

One morning, like some secret covenant, the birds returned. I lay in bed and woke to their sounds filling the winter-void, wondering if it was the same song that they sung yearly. Perhaps they too were caught in cycles less concise, between large and little choices like what to remember and forget and which worms to eat.
But they move rather than remain in motion.
In spring I don’t linger, but I don’t leave,
treading carefully forward.
Supine in the light from the window, I breathe.
My phone vibrates on my desk and I check the
incoming message.
My roommate: “bagels for breakfast? :)
I make a little choice, and move.

Dreamscape, Sarah Robinson
Blue Fall, Red Winter,
a three part poetry cycle

1. Dime-Store Poetry

\textit{Jenzo Fernando Duque}

Outside the pizza joint.
Two of us.

Gasoline rainbows on the asphalt
faulted by the sidewalk.
A breeze through the red trachea of
her overcoat—poor grandma's bones are still frozen;
see how she hobbles the Charleston on the
curbside? Dime-store poet tree.
Ten-cent branches and nickeled roots
stem our crimson skin before we
go in.

All ma' needs is a squeeze of lemon
to get that kick in her step warm,
and shelter my hol(e)y
tapestries with tones. I'm seven
so a glass in hand
is the footing when we dance.
Still, twenty-one with fear
I hear her clasp in
my right ear. Legends of my genesis
shredded by doubt made me a
stranger in my house-land, in my bed.
No elbows to bend, but damn
do I love deep-dish on a winter's
midafternoon. Shakespeare would have written
some good lines about that.
Here I Sit All Brokenhearted

Evan W. Stoner

For my first month as a student at UIC, I only had three bathrooms at my disposal. People would ask me how I liked college, and I would tell them, “It’s okay, but I can’t find any of the bathrooms.” Not only was this an honest answer, but it also proved an effective strategy to deflect any mention of my intended major, which was English, where job prospects go to die. I always have and probably always will have trouble locating bathrooms, but the bathrooms at UIC seemed forever out of reach, like I needed a password or membership in a secret society. I eventually shared my trials with a fellow student, someone I vaguely knew from high school but who was nice enough to listen. She gave me the most valuable piece of information I would receive as an undergraduate: all of the lecture halls at UIC have bathrooms, but for reasons either unknown or forgotten, they are all on the second floor. A trip to the bathroom at UIC often requires an investment of a flight of stairs, but it was a price my bladder and I were more than happy to pay.

Armed with this information, I found that UIC has plenty of bathrooms. So many bathrooms that the custodial staff simply can’t keep all of them clean and in good working order. Upon walking into one of these newfound bathrooms, it was often the case that one or more of the urinals or toilets would be covered in an enormous garbage bag. There were never any signs prohibiting the use of these shrouded thrones, but the message was clear that if you took your chances on one of them, no one was coming to bail you out. In addition to this “bag it now, repair it later” philosophy, there seemed to be a tacit acceptance for all forms of bathroom graffiti. The bathroom walls at UIC are filled with this sort of artwork. There were, of course, the numerous references to “cunts,” “faggots,” and the requisite penis doodles. Sometimes, if you were lucky, an enormous graffiti tag was superimposed above the other artwork, overshadowing and enhancing it simultaneously.

I was initially disgusted by this grotesque visual assault. I had never been faced with so much vulgarity all at once, and it seemed to make defecating in peace an impossibility. It was like being forced to watch all of the grossly funny parts from the American Pie movies all at once. However, Stockholm syndrome eventually took over, and these obscene scrawls became a frequent comfort. On the rare occasions when custodians fought back against the graffiti hordes with broad splashes of fresh paint, I was overcome with a sweeping sense of nostalgia for the missing penis doodles. You could spend hours examining all of the bathroom art at UIC. If it weren’t changing so frequently, a more enterprising student could organize a tour of the campus’ graffiti highlights. I don’t mean to imply the bathroom graffiti at UIC belongs in a museum, but I’m confident UIC is one of the ugliest campuses in the nation, if not the world. Any attempt at beautification, no matter how vulgar, was a welcome sight.

In my last semester at UIC I applied to four master’s programs in creative writing. I didn’t expect to get in to Northwestern, and The University of Chicago was my Hail Mary pass. I did expect to get in to Columbia and DePaul, and before I was accepted anywhere I was planning to enroll at DePaul for their spring quarter. I received rejections from Columbia and Northwestern in the same week. In April, I was offered admission to the University of Chicago.
Given how long it’s taking DePaul to give me any sort of response, I should probably ask for a refund of my application fee.

Without any other options, I accepted the offer from UChicago immediately. I’m afraid to probe too deeply into exactly how I got into a school I’ve wanted to attend since I was seventeen. For now it’s enough to embrace how much I love it here, and to continually tell myself I’m not the dumbest person in my classes.

I first visited UChicago the summer before my senior year of high school. Having some awareness of the school’s reputation I was confident I wouldn’t be admitted, so it was mostly a tourism visit. Two of my friends and I took the Metra to 59th Street to see what all the fuss was about. My older sister also came along, despite the fact she was already happily enrolled at another four-year institution. We didn’t want to live the life of the mind, we just wanted to see where and how it lived.

Taking the tour that day felt like walking through a movie set where they were filming the perfect college movie on the perfect college campus. It was (and is) the Platonic ideal of what I think of as a university. Even though I loved every minute of that initial visit to campus, I still didn’t apply for admission. I considered it, but quickly dropped the idea when I read through the essay prompts. They were too hard, but I told everyone it was because they were too nerdy.

When I found out I got into UChicago for grad school I didn’t believe it. I thought it was some mistake or cruel joke. It wasn’t until I activated my UChicago email address that I felt reasonably confident I wasn’t getting Punk’d. Once I was the proud owner of my own @uchicago.edu, all of my naïve and idealistic memories from that initial tour rushed back with a vengeance. I moved into my graduate student housing assignment at the beginning of July, and I made my first trip to campus as an official student the same week. Despite the intense construction happening everywhere at once, the campus and buildings were just as stony, ivy covered, and Hogwarts-esque as I’d remembered. For two reasons, my initial campus exploration led me to Regenstein Library. The first was because I wanted to get my student ID as soon as possible, and they were printed in the library. I needed concrete evidence that I was a UChicago student, mostly for myself, but also to offer proof to anyone who might ask. So far, no one has asked. The second and equally important reason is because the narrow windows and beige façade of Regenstein seemed like a younger, more upbeat version of the prison architecture so prevalent at UIC. I didn’t necessarily miss UIC, but I was craving something familiar.

The morning I made this fateful journey was hot, almost steamy, and it rained off and on for most of the day. My enthusiasm for becoming a Maroon trumped any common sense about avoiding the weather, so I’m happy to report that my ID picture makes me look like someone who stumbled into the wrong university. My hair is damp and messy with both sweat and rain, and my eyes look vaguely stoned behind crooked glasses. After acquiring this precious if embarrassing piece of plastic, I proceeded to look for my first UChicago bathroom. By now it shouldn’t seem strange that my first impulse upon entering the library of a world-class university—a place where primarily only students are allowed to tread—was to use the bathroom. I was determined to find as many bathrooms as possible before I set foot in any classroom. I also had a deeper, more ulterior motive: I was looking for highbrow bathroom graffiti.

Considering the University of Chicago is known for cultivating the “Life of the Mind,” I was hopeful its bathrooms would cultivate something similarly highbrow. Maybe graffiti of the mind. I wasn’t sure what, exactly, I meant by “highbrow” bathroom graffiti, but I was confident I’d know it when I saw it. I had a vague notion it would include haikus or iambic pentameter verse about genitalia. What I found in the first floor Regenstein bathroom was incredibly
disappointing. It’s not that what I found wasn’t highbrow, I just didn’t find anything.

“They must have just repainted the bathrooms,” I reasoned. As I mentioned earlier, everything was under construction. As the construction wound down each week, and more students arrived on campus, I still failed to find any form of bathroom graffiti, highbrow or otherwise. I started worrying that the life of the mind precludes frivolities like bathroom graffiti, or that bathroom graffiti as a category excluded anything that could be called highbrow.

I found my first UChicago bathroom graffiti in Harper Memorial Library. One of the first floor men’s room in Harper has quite a bit of graffiti, but I’m unconvinced I can reasonably call it highbrow. One of the stalls bears the link for a band’s website. The last thing I want to do in any restroom is check out a band called Derek of the Ceaseless Fun. On the opposite wall there’s a lovely penis doodle and many of the necessary profanities, but strangely, the most prominent scribbles are references to Bible verses. Some are direct quotes with citations, other are simply citations directing the stall’s occupant to specific Biblical passages. I always have a Bible in the bathroom, don’t you?

In the adjacent stall is the holy grail of bathroom graffiti, and easily Kurt Vonnegut’s most-recognized and reproduced work: “Here I sit all brokenhearted / Tried to shit but only farted.” Below this someone wrote, “Yeah, no one’s ever written that on a stall before. Hack.” Just down the hall, the graffiti becomes much more interactive. Above the stall’s toilet paper dispenser someone wrote, “U of C diplomas take one,” and above that there’s the suggestion to “write good racist jokes here.” Maybe the only difference between highbrow and lowbrow bathroom graffiti is better racist jokes. A stall on the second floor is marked with a large admonishment to stop thinking of yourself as unique, and to instead admit you are nothing more than a mixture of archetypes. I guess the takeaway from all of this is that I may be the dumbest person in my classes, but I’m not the dumbest person using the men’s rooms.

For a while I hoped the female restrooms were veritable murals of graffiti, both high and lowbrow. In my wild imaginings, every line from “The Vagina Monologues” was written in various ladies’ rooms across campus, several Georgia O’Keefe flower paintings were painstakingly reproduced in Sharpie, and Ani DiFranco lyrics were scrawled on every mirror.

I mentioned I was working on this essay to some of my female friends, but without mentioning my visions of their lavatories. They gently told me that the women’s restrooms do have graffiti, in Harper as well as the Reynold’s Club, but they didn’t seem terribly impressed by it. They generously offered to take pictures of said graffiti so I could determine its high- or lowbrow status, but I politely declined. The last thing I need is people texting me pictures of ladies’ room artwork. Plus, I’m sure nothing they send me could live up to what I have in mind.

So the next time you’re in the bathroom, feeling inspired, and have a suitable writing utensil (no pencil please), go ahead and write or draw a little something. Don’t worry if it is or isn’t highbrow. I worry enough for all of us. If the University of Chicago isn’t interested in raising the bar for bathroom artwork everywhere, I can accept that. But it doesn’t mean I’ll stop hoping.
Blaize Gervais
Blue Fall, Red Winter,

a three part poetry cycle

2. Fez


Jenzo Fernando Duque

Floating on seas of burgundy and teal,
a white hull crashes through
foamed crests of saffron and mint.
All hands.

Golden bricks wrapped in leather
overboard as snakes
constrict the helm. The hisses
paint their morning call:
such shades of red invade the
hearts of faithful men
in the belly of a whale.

At midday the mosque
beckons and the people
abandon their chains
—somewhere in the turmoil
a father shimmies his
offspring’s boots and
the little neon feet light
clouds of ash
and in the corners of my
heart I am moved
but do not enter.
Every time you order oysters you are given a small fork. Some prefer to use this fork, daintily working loose the pearl that was never born before politely swallowing its goodness. These people are idiots.

I prefer to slurp my oysters. So does my family. But slurping makes for a rather non-delicate sound. Slurps are rude; they are loud, sloppy, and painfully descriptive. When you hear someone slurping, you think of their tongue covered in saliva, or of the juices running down their slightly quivering jaw. The sound stays in your mind till you slurp it out as well. And so we slurp.

It is amidst these slurps that I found the tale worth telling.

Pete and Pete, a delightful duo of one, arrived precisely at 6 o’clock. He asked if we could lend an arm or a leg, or perhaps both, in helping him move his nauseating, and cumbersome table from his garish orange truck to the porch. My Mom had always warned, “A man who arrives with a table is a man to be wary of.” I’ll never be quite sure why that is so.

Peter Creech, from whose name the lovely hat store known as Peter Beaton derived its name, is the man behind the magic of Pete and Pete’s Raw Bar. He opens his raw bar, consisting of shrimp cocktail’s, raw clams and raw oysters) to parties of twenty or more. Our party was merely eight strong, but we managed to convince him, and ourselves, that eight Kindlers equal twenty others with regards to raw fish. (Slurpers we are all, by the by.)

By the time I had extracted myself from the outdoor shower, I found a well-groomed man in his early twenties cutting lemons behind a massive table on the northeastern side of the porch. No help needed he, nor help needed I. And so I quickly floated over, introduced, and excused myself. After all, it was 6 o’clock, and I had to look like my name.

After buttoning up my far too wrinkled shirt, I turned back towards the northeastern side of the porch. Beyond the glass I heard stifled
sounds: shuffling blades, swishing salt, slurping oysters. Oyster shells scraped gently against the ice covering the table as bubbles burst softly in the freshly poured glass of Whale's Tale I felt within my slightly chilled hand. There were only two non-family members in this our party of eight, but I found I still needed the liquid courage to carry me out the door. And carry me it did.

Opening the door onto the porch I was greeted by the exchange of odd pleasantries between the shucker, my cousin, and his two friends. Matt and his friends had attended the prestigious Phillips Academy Andover, and had just realized that Peter had also attended a similar institution, whose name presently escapes me. Talks of rivalry and rumor rushed at me as I snuck in to slurp a freshly opened oyster, desperately trying to keep my rather large frame as unobtrusive as possible.

Slurp.

The glass door opens. Here now is my grandmother, affectionately known as Mommom, alongside her sole remaining daughter, Bethy. They speak in hushed tones; Mommom quickly shakes her head then offers a brief sigh. Presently she raises her face with a marked sign of cultured, if not tired, pleasure. Beth calls out to us children, greets Peter, and floats over for a freshly shucked oyster. Slurp. Ice settles softly as the oyster shell, now empty and frail, is placed back into the spot it itself had carved into the table.

The location whence these oysters came is of marked interest. Peter had bought them, as he always does, from the lovely local fish store right on Straight Wharf aptly named Straight Wharf Fish Store. The same level of no nonsense that gave rise to their incredibly imaginative name allows for utter excellence with regards to freshness, flavor and any other concern one might have in choosing a fish market. Straight Wharf sells Wellfleet oysters, caught just off the coast of our beloved beach Madaket. For some reason local proximity is of noted importance only on island. Everything seems to be of noted importance on island.

So here we are. Having retreated from the table for a moment I was able to properly survey

**Bryan Graybill**
the scene. Between myself and the raw bar stood my cousin and his two friends, Clay and Kian who were chatting amicably, if emptily with Peter. To the right of the table stood Mommom and Bethy, still whispering to one another, but occasionally reaching over for an oyster or clam (Mommom only eats raw clams). Standing directly, and awkwardly, behind them was my uncle Hugh, an amicable Australian who followed his love, my aunt, to our ‘great’ country. This, then, was us.

The keen reader will note that I have only so far mentioned 7 persons, leaving one spot notably empty. To this reader I now speak.

Presently the glass door opens again. It is my sixteen-year-old cousin Sophi, sister of Matt, daughter of Beth and Hugh. She is Sophia, but to me she has, and hopefully always will be, Sophi. Sophi is wearing a summer dress and is notably shaken. Beth and Mommom move towards her. Beth asks, “Do you want a glass of wine?” to which Sophi responds, “Yes please.”

The wine is poured.
The oysters are slurped.
And all is well.

The tension that followed Sophi’s entrance is gradually dissipating. Tales of this internship or that thread their way through the air, just as I thread my way through the family for yet another oyster. Clay overhears me mention my fraternity. He nearly leaps over the deck chairs to start talking with me. I smile and nod, listening as he speaks of his friend John who is presently recruiting him to join one of the ‘popular’ fraternities on campus. I know of John, John knows of me. Clay does not need to know of the hatred that separates us, or of the things that John has done to my friend. I quickly excuse myself to retrieve another oyster.

Slurp.

Talk of internships resumes. I need something to whet my lips, but I take one look through the glass door, to where the beers are hidden in their white grave, and seeing a shadow fall in the room, instead settle instead for another oyster, one of five sitting curiously on a plate on the edge of the raw bar. I guiltily take one and return to my chair.

An unexpected visitor makes his departure. Bethy quickly runs back inside. An awkward silence falls. Oysters are now consumed with haste, even fervor.

By this point, we are down to a meager three oysters and two clams. Our party of eight has just finished a raw bar meant for twenty; over one hundred clams and oysters in addition to an impressive shrimp cocktail which has long since disappeared. Eight of us, devouring the desires of twenty.

Though our desires rise and fall, though our pleasures are observed in full, something is missing here. This, our pleasure-dome, brings no light, no comfort. We finish the few remaining oysters in silence, slurping far louder now than before. The glass door opens once more. Bethy closes it behind her and heads immediately for the bar, where she finds no oysters to slurp.

Somewhere in this immaculate future I belong. Somewhere, here, I am expected. Internships, oysters, and family, yes that too, await me. Inside those glass doors stood the remnants of those outside the doors. As we slurped our oysters my Grandpa came, and left. In silence. And we in turn stood in our silence.

Sometimes it’s the family we can’t and don’t see that define us. Sometimes it’s the fact that we choose not to see them.

Impressed, even shocked, Peter packed up his table and coolers and left in his orange truck. We sat and talked on the porch for an hour or two after, my cousin ‘regaling’ us with tales of the Whitehouse; my uncle amusing us with his snores. Once night fell, we moved inside. Somehow we were all in the mood for steak. Oysters are slurped, glasses are raised, and we continue to float along. We float along, between, and beyond, until we are what we float upon. And there shall we slurp.

“Sometimes we just don’t know what we’re looking for.”
3. The Janitor’s Talk

Jenzo Fernando Duque

Face blacker than the mud puddles we drag.
You attacker, with gentleness you
teach how to read the meter of your speech.
In the hum of hallways you are my shadow, in gutter tiles
you are my knight.

My stumbles are frequent,
weekly I’m weak, but you catch me:

“For family looks out for each other.”
No boy should die alone.
Are we not brothers and sisters?
Is this not home?

No degree needed to impact minds, sir,
I just want to brush these teeth and keep that floor
neat. Sorry I tripped on my words and you slipped on
my vocal caresses. Thanks for cleaning my messes,
I see us both.
By Canal St. Martin, Alex Jung
It was my father’s eldest brother who took me to see my grandmother’s grave for the first time. I was in sixth grade, and my grandmother had died in the spring, six years after a stroke had left her bedridden. For most of my life, I knew her by her wheelchair and quiet mumblings, which my mother translated to me from Taiwanese. I was always one degree removed from my grandmother, never quite knowing her except through the mechanical translation of one language to another.

Every summer when we visited her in Taiwan, my parents implored us to go and “chat with your grandmother. She really enjoys your company.” I found myself reluctantly walking down the hallway clutching the cotton of my mother’s familiar shirt and into my grandmother’s dim, yellowed room. “Hello, grandmother. It’s Kristin,” I said.

“Hello grandmother. It’s Kristin,” my mother repeated in Taiwanese a little louder, in case she did not understand my broken Chinese.

She nodded quietly in response, the decades of difference among me and her leaving all of us contemplating the portrait of her younger self hanging on the wall. The years had done nothing to calm the concern in her eyes, and I found myself glancing back and forth between the grandmother bound to a bedframe and the grandmother bound in dusty frames. Eventually my mother left, and I massaged my grandmother’s obsolete legs, the hum of the mosquito zapper the only barrier from silence. Her skin was soft despite the deep, kaleidoscopic cracks that lay below the surface. Every once in awhile, an electric clap shook the room, and both of us blinked in recognition of yet another mosquito’s death.

The news of her own death did not sound of an electric clap, but rather my brother’s voice as he ran into my room and woke me up one spring morning two years later. “Grandma passed away, so Mom and Dad are going back to Taiwan for her funeral.”

My parents returned to Chiayi, Taiwan for a weeklong funeral rite. According to Buddhist custom, she was cremated, and her ashes stored in an urn, which was then placed in a marble tomb in a temple in the mountains. In front of the tombstone were an incense holder and a portrait of my grandmother. With its stark white background, it could have been a passport picture, if not for the outdated, soft glow that surrounded her skin, a result of digital touch-ups. This was how family and strangers would remember her: younger, unsmiling. The monks who maintained the temple sometimes put orchids in front of her grave on humid spring days and ignited fresh incense to remind passing visitors of her name, engraved in the tombstone and etched into the lives of the generations that follow hers. Incense is like the perfume of the deceased.

When I finally returned to Taiwan, my uncle ushered my brother and me up three flights of stairs to a plateau of tombstones that overlooked a flooding river and verdant mountains.

“Go ahead, say ‘hello’ to your grandmother,” he nudged us toward her tombstone. Rain trickled down its smooth surface like tears.

“What do we do?” My brother angled his umbrella so he could see our uncle.

He showed us how to do a half-bow, the religious way to greet someone. “Tell her that you’re here to visit her.”

I looked at the gray tombstone, void of the quiet concern my grandmother displayed as a human. And, unsure of what to do, I bowed.

I wonder if you can hear me through the stone and the ashes.

Had it not been raining, I’m sure we would have lit incense for her, the ashes of the sandalwood tapering off as time rushed on.

Instead, we went to a small noodle shop down the hill for lunch. The humid air stagnated in the room, ceiling fans spinning uselessly as the steam from the large pots of soup and baskets of
freshly cooked noodles veiled the room in fog. I fanned myself with one of the paper menus, its breeze weakening as the paper wilted in the dampness.

A housefly landed on our table. My uncle swatted it away. It flew around in a circle and landed back on our table. As the fly walked around our table, I couldn’t help but think—

That’s Grandma.

From then on, I thought of houseflies as my grandmother reincarnated, if only during the encounters that I had with my family every summer—after all, it doesn’t make sense for my grandmother to have relocated herself in the states. I treated them with respect; and when one landed on my fingers and my shoulders, polishing herself with her dainty legs, I greeted her with goodwill. As she inevitably flew away from me, I sent her off with a fond memory of my grandmother, forever clouded by our distance.

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Seven years later, a fly landed on my arm as soon as I passed my incense to my brother. I was nineteen; it was the day of my grandfather’s vigil. He had passed away after 90 years, and my father and uncles planned to send him away from this life through the Buddhist tradition, as they had for their mother. First was the vigil, during which family and friends stayed his body, chanting prayers and mantras. By the time I arrived back in my father’s hometown, my family had been with

Bryan Graybill
my grandfather for ten hours. I entered the room to find a gold canopy pitched above a makeshift bed. There he was, his mouth tilted in a slight frown and his skin the shallow yellow of my grandmother’s defunct legs before I massaged them as a child. He did not look like he was asleep. He looked like he was dead. He lay there, dead, as my cousins, uncles, aunts, brother, sister, father, repeated a rhythmic prayer and took solace in the certainty that after the first chant there would be another one and another one and another one. He lay there, quiet and dead, quiet and dead.

I chanted too. The confident voices of my uncles and aunts, laden with the faith that words in our world matter in the passing of a human from life to death, overcame the heaviness in the room. Before I sat down to chant, my uncle had pulled me aside to tell me that we needed to chant with all of our energy. The first hours of death were the most critical if we wanted him to go to xifang jile shijie. Glancing around the room, I wondered who among my cousins felt any connection between the words we uttered and the effect they had. My voice drowned in the humidity and mixed in with the incense smoke that curled itself around the room like ivy.

We all resumed our routines during the week of mourning. But since Buddhist traditions mattered especially to my aunts and uncles, my mother and father, a superstitious whisper surrounded their directions to us children: Don’t wander around outside after dark; don’t act too happy or too sad; chant or pray when you can—for the good of your grandfather’s passing. The funeral planners placed his body in a refrigerator, and its electrical hum greeted me each time I entered the house.

We rose at dawn seven days after my grandfather’s death to send his body to the crematorium. My muscles ached of bed rest as I put on my funeral clothes, which consisted of black pants and a white shirt, and tied my hair into a neat bun. We ate a breakfast of bread and water before gathering downstairs to receive instructions from the monk who would be leading the memorial service.

“The process of sending someone off is precise, and follows a certain order,” he said as he passed out a sheet of paper with instructions and chants. “After the guests arrive, the men of the family will line up on the right, and the women on the left.” The rest of the instructions were just as formulaic: chant a prayer three times, then bow three times. At the sound of a bell, we would all receive a stick of incense, which we would light and place in front of a portrait of our grandfather. Afterwards, we would chant for a final fifteen minutes and bow another three times before placing my grandfather in a coffin and sending him to the crematory. We were all instructed to put our hand on the coffin after it was shut, the wood being the final barrier between the skin of our palms and his clothes.

My father pulled me aside right before we were to begin.

“I know that this must be difficult for you to go through, but please try not to cry. We want to remain calm and peaceful during the mourning period. That is the Buddhist way.”

So there we all stood, our composed physical appearances hiding our inner monologues. The memorial service was beautiful and tearless. Rows of orchids surrounded a portrait of my grandfather, and throngs of mourners sat down to pay their respects. Here were the remnants of my grandfather: His family and friends and the people who would carry him in their own slices of the universe.

At home in Dallas, Texas, my father had hung up a portrait of my grandfather when he was but a new father. He was handsome in his youth, but I knew him by his wrinkles, which draped his face in a perpetual peace. By the time I was born, grandfather had established his routine for life: he rose at dawn and at the same breakfast every day, took the same morning stroll and afternoon nap. Every night I entered the dining room for dinner, and he would be
sitting there, the light bulb flickering and the cicadas chirping outside. He would pick up his chopsticks and scrape the last grains of rice from his bowl before setting down his utensils, wiping his mouth, and folding his arms on the table for a few moments. His hands were like canyons.

My cousin passed me the bunch of incense, which I acknowledged before handing off to my brother. It was then that my grandmother, the housefly, decided to pay me a visit. My eyes focused on her delicate wings as she cleaned herself, unaware of the events that led her to my arm at this moment and in this room. At my slight tremble, she hovered away, first landing on the photograph of my grandfather at the front of the room, and then onto my father’s head. He swatted her away, and I wished she would come back to me. The chant was over; it was time to begin closing his coffin.

“Pay attention,” my aunt whispered, tapping my shoulder to rush me forward. The bell sounded, and we began chanting again, the rhythm of a wooden drum carrying our prayers. The coffin laid in the middle, my grandfather deaf to our voices, our pleas to the heavens in honor of his death. The funeral attendant closed the coffin, and we placed our hands on top of it as we progressed out of the room. It was quiet as they rolled him away and into the car. The door closed. Our final salute resonated as I watched the car carrying his coffin shrink into the distance, a dark spot headed west. Another fly landed on my nose.

We arrived at the city crematory in the mid-afternoon to pick up the remains of my grandfather. As my family entered the building, a funeral march for another man exited, the sound of their sobs and mourning chants echoing off of the sterile, metallic walls. One woman tried to follow the calm voice of the Buddhist monk who was leading the procession, but failed as her words melted into tearful despair. The rest of her family prevailed, their voices stained with grief as they marched through the hallway into the dim sunlight. Their heavy mourns left behind unsettling ashes as we ventured deeper into the crematory. The funeral attendant brought us to a metal counter, where my grandfather’s portrait and some offerings of fruit and incense accompanied him—his urn. We prayed again, but our words sounded weak next to these ashes. My father’s second brother was instructed to carry the urn as we exited the crematory in prayer.

Our car pulled up to the temple where I had visited my grandmother’s grave for the first time seven years earlier. The place looked the same. Upon entering the shrine, we all lit fresh sticks of incense and began another round of prayers, which we were instructed to chant ceaselessly until we had put my grandfather in his final resting place. A bell rung; we all bowed, our voices muffled by the cold marble floors.

The monks had taken out my grandmother’s urn to prepare their tomb for the both of them, and on the counter two marble urns nursed an entire generation of my family. We prayed even louder as we walked toward the tomb single-file. My two uncles led the way, each of them cradling one of their parents. At the monk’s signal, my grandmother’s urn was placed into the tomb, followed by my grandfather’s. They sealed the tombstone again, and we were done, the chanting ceased.

That night we gathered one last time for a meal of rice and vegetables at a vegetarian restaurant near my grandfather’s house. My father and two uncles discussed how to maintain the house as it continued to age, and my mother smiled as my aunt told a story about her two dogs. Between bites of rice, my cousins asked my siblings and me what we would be doing for our last few days in Taiwan. My sister leaned her young head against my shoulder, and I felt the click of her jaw as she chewed her food. Its rhythm was my new prayer was we began to ease—to think about life after my grandfather’s death, and to live it either drained of meaning or imbued in it, its every wrinkle and every canyon.

A housefly hovered over our quiet chatter.