



Hilltopics



Letter from the Editor: Choose Quality

DESTINY ROSE MURPHY

Hello from the 2018 Summer Edition of Hilltopics! For those of you who are new readers (I'm looking at you, slightly-terrified new SMU Honors student reading this at orientation) I'd like to provide a brief explanation. Hilltopics is SMU's Honors magazine: an independently funded, student-run publication dedicated to printing high-quality material that students, alumni, faculty, and staff alike actually want to read. The yearly summer edition is a conglomerate of previous years' top hits curated by the upcoming year's new Editors in Chief. For this edition, the 2018-2019 Editors in Chief, Alex McNamara and Drew Sneed, have written abstracts for each featured piece outlining what made them choose that piece over others. These abstracts are for you, new readers, so that you can get a feel for the quality of work Hilltopics wants from you. As you'll soon discover, that level of quality is high; we're not looking for basketball game write-ups here. This is a place for something more.

You don't need to be a current student to know that quality and college aren't usually synonymous. Popular media represents the college student as a creature of cheap ramen noodles and dirty laundry, procrastination and bottom shelf liquor. Having been a student for three years now at the prestigious and, let's be honest, incredibly expensive Southern Methodist University, I can confirm these stereotypes to be true regardless of socioeconomic class. Somehow, even here, Pabst Blue Ribbon beer still appears in party coolers, and oversized, free t-shirts atop Walmart sweatpants dominate as the class uniform for any courses starting before noon.

For the most part, I think we should be forgiven for these stereotypical forays into the low-quality world of stolen Chipotle napkins and essays started and finished between the hours of 2:30am and 7:52am.

After all, in college everything is a first, which means mundane choices can be absolutely terrifying. Consider the process of buying a tube of toothpaste for the first time on your own: first find a store (will you walk to it? Can you drive to it?), then figure out where the toothpaste is (why isn't it in the pharmacy section? It was always there at the Kroger at home!), then pick a brand (you've gotten Colgate in the past, but Crest is cheaper, and you're broke, and do you really know if you should get fluoride or not?), then check out (do you try self-checkout or risk interacting with another human being in a lane?), then leave and find your way back without having a panic attack. That's a dozen choices that you've very possibly never had to make before, so of course you're going to be nervous, and it's not your fault for buying the first toothpaste you see just so you can get out of there faster.

Unfortunately, the choices that we make at the beginning of our adult lives have a tendency to stick with us forever. The groceries we buy, the way we manage our calendars, and the way we dress ourselves during our time at SMU become habits that will subconsciously cement themselves for years to come, which, if we're not careful, will turn us into 40-year-old adults that still buy one-ply toilet paper. The solution? When the terror of infinite choice dies down (and it will after a semester or two, I promise) start researching things from the ground up. Want to procrastinate on a chore or an essay? Research that toothpaste. Learn what fluoride does. Decide if minimizing plastic waste is important to your toothpaste decision and choose once and for all whether or not you want whitening power. Put all the thought you can into that one tiny choice, so that the next time you

go grocery shopping it's super easy to make the best possible decision with little to no thought. You'll be amazed with the results. Even the smallest of changes in body soap or trash can liner can vastly improve your life and set you on a path to becoming a much happier real-adult.

More importantly, focusing on improving the quality of each part of your life will make you a more questioning adult. If you've ever been frustrated at a parent or coworker for using an outdated, objectively less effective tool (I don't know, like Bing), then you know what it's like to wish someone was paying more attention to improving the quality of their life. By getting into the habit of constant improvement now, you're less likely to end up an old dog with no new tricks. In this way, the habit-setting period that we go through in college can be incredibly useful to us, as can every drastic change that we face later in life. Each time we move, start a new job, or end a relationship, we have the opportunity to rethink all the choices we are currently making and to optimize for what we wish we were doing better. Choose high quality in every instance that you can, and you will find yourself more confident in your decisions and your life than you ever knew you wanted.

That means if you want to write for Hilltopics, don't do it because you think it'll look good on a resume (it will) or in an interview (oh boy it will) or because your family would like it (good God they'll love it; they'll share everything you write on Facebook and your grandma will bring it up at Thanksgiving). Write for Hilltopics because you want to put quality work out into the world. Write for Hilltopics because you have

something important to say and you're upset no one else is saying it. Submit comics, poems, and art to Alex and Drew that capture a feeling you've never seen captured before. Sit at your desk in that tiny dorm room and write and draw to the very best of your ability and be proud

of what comes out of your pen. When you're done, email what you've made to mcnamaraa@smu.edu and arsneed@smu.edu and maybe it'll be printed in an issue published during the semester, or even next year for the incoming first-years to read and be inspired by.

That is, if it's quality.

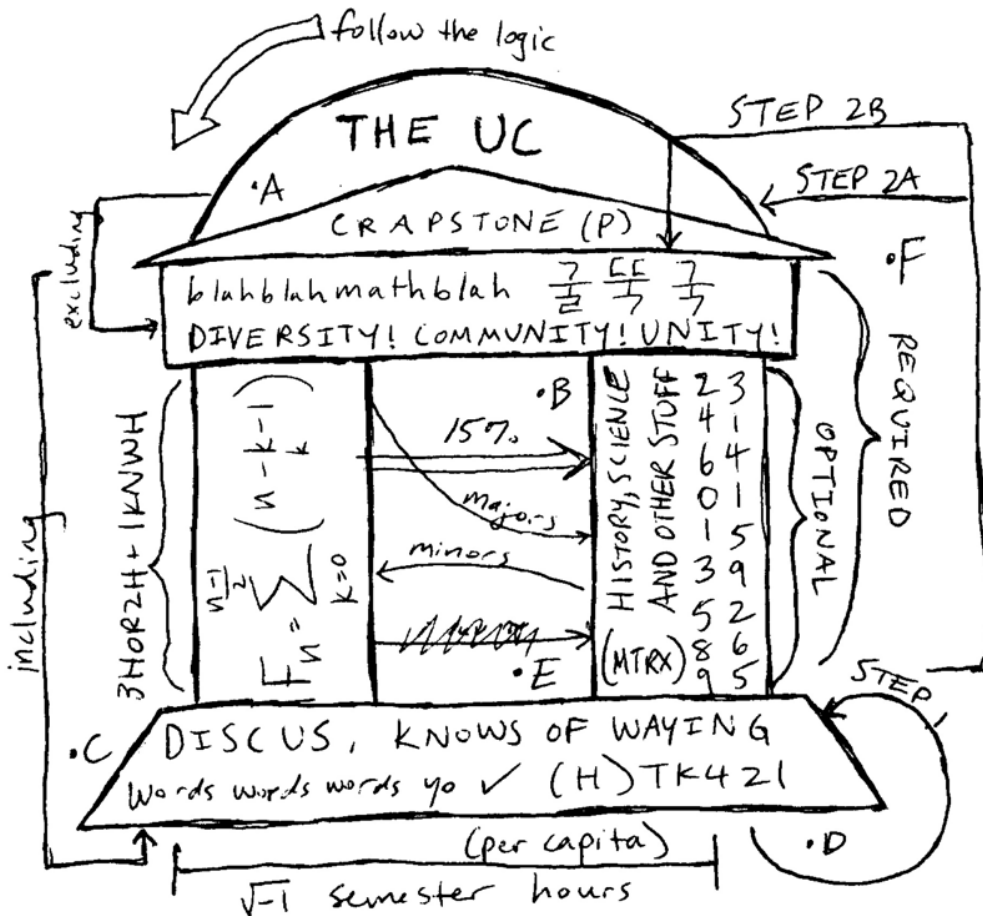
How Freshmen See the University Curriculum

ANDREW OH

Self-Explanatory.

-Alex

HOW FRESHMEN SEE THE UNIVERSITY CURRICULUM



10

Drugs and the Arts: A Perfect Match?

KENNY MARTIN

In this article, Kenny makes the intriguing argument that drugs are best kept away from artists, and not because of any moral or ethical problem with drug use.

-Drew

As an artist, I must admit to feeling a certain amount of ambivalence toward drugs. I'm speaking broadly here, not just about marijuana, the subject of this issue of Hilltopics, but also about alcohol, LSD, cocaine, and all other substances that Homo sapiens sapiens commonly uses for recreational, mind-altering purposes. For it seems to me that art and artists have a complicated, problematic, and probably overblown relationship with drugs, one that's fascinating but troubling at the same time. There's the stereotype of the genius, eccentric, mad artist (à la Allen Ginsberg and the Beats) who heavily experiments with drugs as a means of extended or heightened creative expression. The Beatles did it; recent discoveries suggest that Shakespeare might have done it. Drugs play a fundamental role in hip-hop and rap music (if not as a player in the creative process, then at least as subject matter), and taking drugs has long been a part of the audience experience for jazz and rock-and-roll concerts in particular. Even the copywriters and artists of *Mad Men* have been known to indulge in a joint on occasion, a supposed route to increased productivity that more often leads to strange and totally unproductive episodes of high-induced, faux-poetic folly. Nonetheless, the mythical association of drugs with the arts is there, and it remains strong today.

Drugs, we're told, are a way to connect more intimately (or, perhaps, to connect in the first place) with your "creative side," to see the world in fresh, unprecedented ways. For the poet, or the musician, or the painter—for anyone interested in artistic representation and interpretation of the world, whether physical, imagined, or psychological—this sounds like Heaven.

Why not? All artists struggle to perform or produce up to their own expectations; perhaps drugs hold the key to a more relaxed, creative, focused, and clear way of living, to a more powerful artistic personality.

But, of course, not all artists agree. The late Mark Strand, one of the great poets of the recent age, was once asked about artists using drugs to enhance their work. I suspect many people will identify with his response: "They interfere. I mean, if I've had a couple of drinks, I don't feel like writing. I feel like having another drink." Moreover, for every artist who has successfully used drugs as an artistic tool, there's at least one who has fallen, tragically, to the very real dangers of drug use. Bill Evans and John Coltrane, two of the most important musical geniuses ever, both died partially as a result of drug use (cocaine and heroin, respectively). Amy Winehouse, Heath Ledger...the list of artists who have died in drug-related circumstances is astounding, and it speaks volumes about the costs of the marriage of drugs and the arts.

For my part, I don't put much stock in the need for drugs as a part of the creative process. Good art, I believe, is produced through a particular way of looking at the world, a sensibility that opens itself up to nuance, to gesture, to possibilities that most people are not aware of. The artist perceives the world uniquely, and then works hard to convey that particular, individual experience in a way everyone can understand. And while drug use may produce interesting results, it will not turn a non-artist into an artist—nor will it make an unperceptive or

passive experiencer of art (whether an audience member in a concert hall or theatre, or an observer in a gallery, or a reader of poetry) more keen or interested. There's simply no getting around the hard work of art, no magic pill with the power to make a miracle out of mediocrity.

The key to art is the, as Keats says, "teeming brain" of the artist, along with an audience willing to engage with that brain via the artistic product it produces. If drugs are involved, great; I suspect, however, that it will prove, in the long run, even better if they are not. For chemical-induced highs will always fade ... on the other hand, the elation, understanding, and transcendence produced by sound art are, like diamonds of the mind, forever. Ours is a world of several pleasures, and none is less valid for being more fleeting—I'll be the first to say that I embrace them all. But if I had to take just one, I know my choice, and that gives me more pleasure than all the rest ever could.



Stuck Between a Rock and a Hard Place

MARGARET FEGAN

Here Margaret shows the entertaining dichotomy that arises when you combine seriously good writing with absurdity.

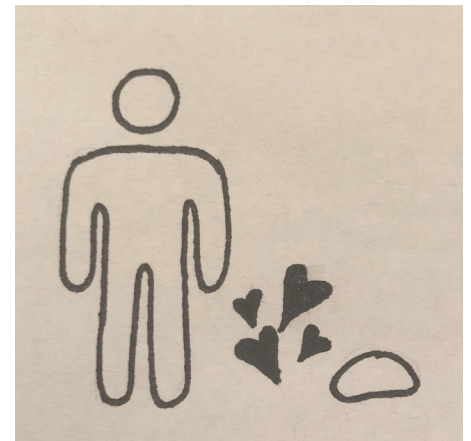
-Drew

It's that time of year when the green of chlorophyll is replaced everywhere by carotenoids and anthocyanins... everywhere except Dallas. And with finals in the not-so-distant future, we can take advantage of the unpredictable weather and rainy gray homeliness of the city. Here's a nugget of wisdom from someone in her golden years of undergrad: find an attractive rock, take it to dinner, exchange witty banter, and make it your new best more-than-friend. It's important to find one you really like since you'll be living under it for a good portion of the days to come. But make your claim early, since good rocks are hard to find. Put a ring on it, if you like... If you're an intolerable drama-queen who needs an irrational tragedy to distract yourself from school, think about how you'll be away from your beloved rock-friend for all of winter break. Pick the rock, not the new flavor of boy/girl of the month, as your distraction. Take a break and let go of the toxic relationships that will surely do a number on your GPA. Just as overextending metaphors can kill, beating a moot

subject will not increase the likelihood that your rock will change its mind about you. During finals time, the rock is a better bet.

Also important is a good friend who will drag your lifeless self out from under the rock at least once a week. As cozy and study-conducive as it is, your study rock can get a little stuffy, and before you know it, you'll be suffocating from your own nihilistic exhalations. When you and said friend take your red paint to the town, you might stop by one of the Deep Ellum live performances that features juggling. A crucial ball is about to come into play: creating your spring schedule. It's time-consuming and important and potentially threatening to your ability to graduate in four years. Regardless, take the time now, not in your senior year, to take classes you think sound interesting but "don't have time for." You do. Fight against the urge to finish your prematurely determined major in three years or

be the president of everything. It is perfectly acceptable to not be the best of the best. Don't take learning or life so seriously – you're sucking the joy out of it. Have a laugh and go do something different, like throwing your study rock out the window and reconstructing the glass in mosaic form. Or finding a new hole-in-the-wall Froyo parlor. Or making that hole in the wall by throwing your study rock into it.



The Briefalist Papers¹:

Concerning the Woeful State of Affairs and Its Solution

ALEX McNAMARA

An enjoyable exploration of style. Just wait until the end, you'll get it. An enjoyable exploration of style. Just wait until the end, you'll get it. Read it again and you'll get a lot more.

-Drew

It is not unlike the nature of man to seek liberty in whichever form, whether it be civil for the animation of those limbs, political for an extension to all those members, or religious for all components of that great apparatus, in order that he may be so pleased and easily disposed to find the comfort which all such forms must afford. It must be admitted that man in his zeal has sought liberty in ever various and surprising areas, and has so often prided himself on his ability to liberate all things at all times. However, experience with his iron rod has beaten down that fatal expectation once so common and dearly held that liberty can be pursued for its own sake, and pursued in the absence of other ends. Such a pursuit has unfortunately brought about man's great discomfort, for unchecked freedom exposes him to the dangers of his peers and the elements themselves.

If there ever were another end which man has pursued with equal passion, it is the end of order. Just as man has long sought the alluring pleasure of freedom, he has equally longed for a sense of security which only the ideal of order can provide. Here too, has experience truncated man's expectations. Our predecessors rightly fled the oppressive and rigid order of previous generations, who had distorted the ideal so that all of man's capacity was restricted, muted, and in a woeful state of perpetual discomfort.

It can therefore be said that the state of affairs in this subject thus far has been most dreadful. The history of man has been a tragic vacillation between

extremes. On the one hand, man has in his honorable pursuit of liberty contorted that noble ideal into shameful licentiousness; his pursuit of space in which to find comfort has led him into a void. On the other, his no less noble pursuit of order has distorted into a desire for a security so absolute that it creates an oppressive bind which affords no room to move.

To remedy these effects, I and my peers propose the great and blessed UNION of these two ideals, those of liberty and order, so long thought to be antagonistic in their natures. This is the only way to ensure both the protection and comfort of man's most sacred condition. Though I am sure that the chief subject of this inquiry has become obvious, and that my astute readers have discerned the subject of these papers, I shall render the matter explicit so that any resemblance of

confusion may be dispelled.

You have no doubt guessed correctly, dear brothers, for we must indeed adorn boxer briefs! That is the only means by which we can escape the wanton liberty of boxers and the oppressive restriction of briefs. By so combining the spacious compartments of the former with the elastic structure of the latter, we can avoid the ills of time past and at last realize that elusive comfort which man has sought for so long. Since this ingenious solution will inevitably spark controversy, even amongst the most benevolent and enlightened of minds, subsequent papers will redress all grievances and resolutely defend the formation of such a UNION.

-Boxerius Briefalis

1. Based, in no small part, on the style and structure of Federalist Papers No. 1, 9, and 10.



Bon Iver: 22, A Million

DREW SNEED

Readers both familiar and unfamiliar with Bon Iver's discography are treated to a deep dive into the context and production of his work, and into the psychology of the man himself.

-Alex

It has been ten years since Justin Vernon isolated himself in a Wisconsin cabin after his band and girlfriend abandoned him. It has been nine years since Vernon gave his friends cardboard-bound copies of the raw musical heartache he recorded during his Kaczynski-esque winter in that cabin. It has been eight years since a record label discovered and re-released Vernon's album, titled *For Emma, Forever Ago*, thrusting his band Bon Iver into the limelight. It has been five years since Vernon debuted his ethereal and polished follow-up album *Bon Iver*, *Bon Iver*, garnering critical acclaim and a Grammy. And it has been four years since Vernon shocked fans with the announcement that he was "turning off the faucet" of *Bon Iver*.

However, on September 30, Vernon turned "the faucet" back on with the release of Bon Iver's third album: *22, A Million*. It would be preposterous to say that the Justin Vernon who found inspiration in isolation ten years ago is the same Justin Vernon who wrote *22, A Million*. In fact, Vernon recorded the first line of his new album in the middle of a nervous breakdown during a failed attempt to replicate the creative method of his cabin retreat. After a harrowingly lonely venture to Greece, Vernon returned home distraught and unable to speak, not with an album, but with an eleven-second recording of his voice musing, "it might be over soon."

Vernon crafted an album around this thought with a focus on the fragility of human life and each person's relative insignificance in the world. Throughout *22, A Million*, Vernon utilizes numbers

and other symbols to communicate these themes, including in the album's title. His close friend Trever Hagen said, "22 stands for Justin. The number's recurrence in his life has become a meaningful pattern through encounter and recognition. A million is the rest of the world: the millions of people who we will never know, the infinite and endless, everything outside one's self that makes you who you are."

In addition to his new ideology, Vernon took a different approach to music. "I don't find inspiration by just sitting down with a guitar anymore. I lost that," he said in an interview with *Pitchfork Magazine*. Earlier this year, Vernon's friend Francis Starlite invented an instrument called the Prismizer; an auto-tune/vocoder which, unlike its predecessors, preserves an unbelievably organic sound and works well with both vocals and instruments. In its short life, the Prismizer has seen use by Chance the Rapper, Frank Ocean, and Kanye West. Justin Vernon utilized this technology throughout *22, A Million*, and most creatively on the track "____45____," in which he bends a saxophone underneath his vocals into an un-orientable Möbius strip of sound.

Vernon's extreme shift in both ideology and artistry produced an album that challenges its listener. With sparse ties to Bon Iver's previous works, the album tests even the band's fan base.

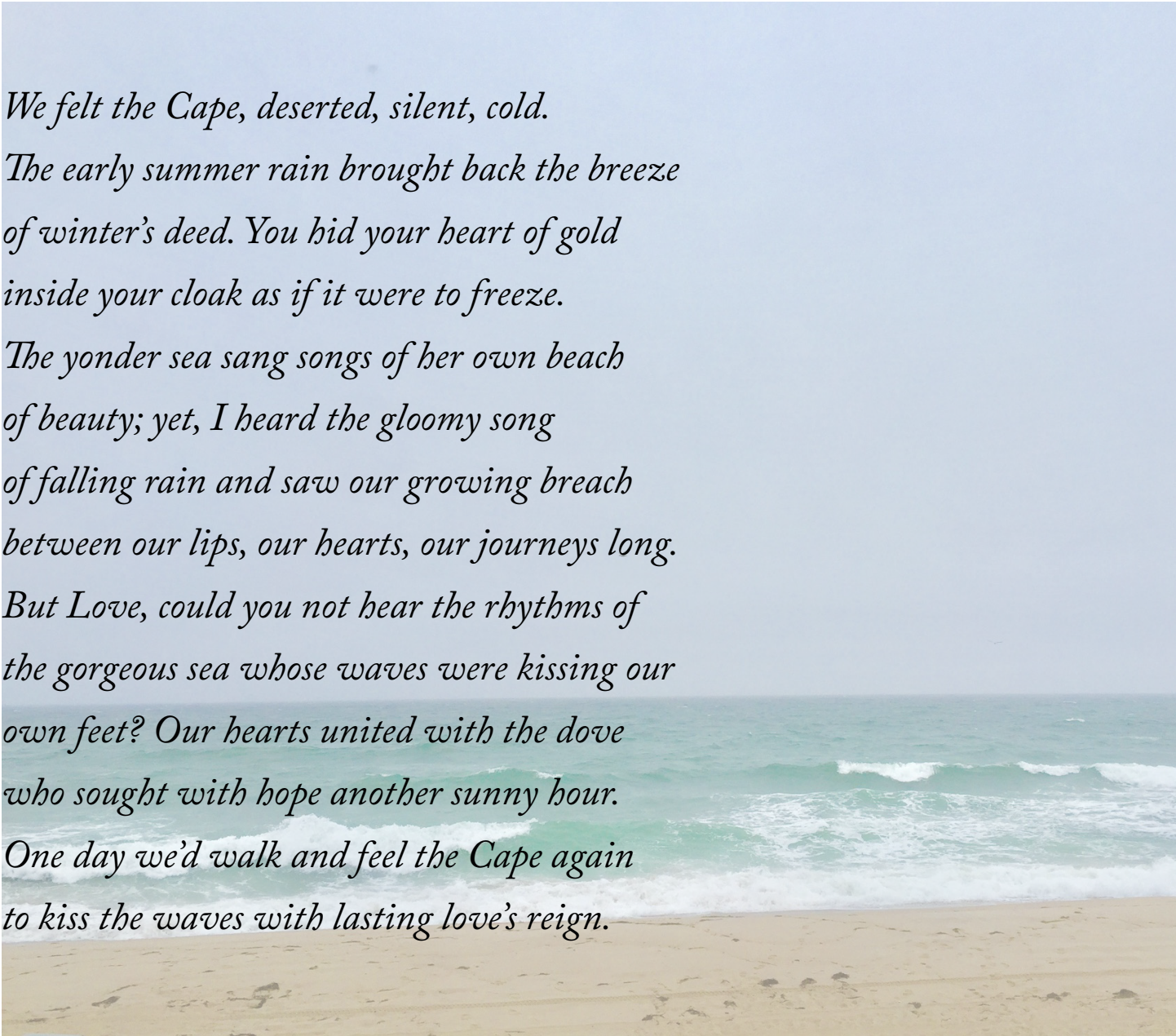
For every conventional characteristic of *22, A Million*, Vernon intermixes a left-field sound such as the distorted drums on "10 d E A T h b R E a s T _____," the wailing vocals that comprise "715 - CRΣΣKS," or the backtracked voice that commences "21 M◇◇N WATER." Nevertheless, *22, A Million* gives its audience an unforgettable peek into its creator's vision of a delicate life, a world of symbols, and the soundscapes that tie them together. The title of the album's first track begins with the number "22" and the title of the last ends with the word "Million," making for a work that truly guides its listener on a journey from "22" to "A Million," from introspection of self to the vast world beyond.

The Cape

KEVIN WANG

Kevin submitted this poem his first year at SMU. Although English is not his first language, Kevin displays a mastery of the language that many native speakers never achieve. This poem has both a simple beauty that is evident the first time you read it, and many clever, hidden beauties that reveal themselves each time you re-read it.

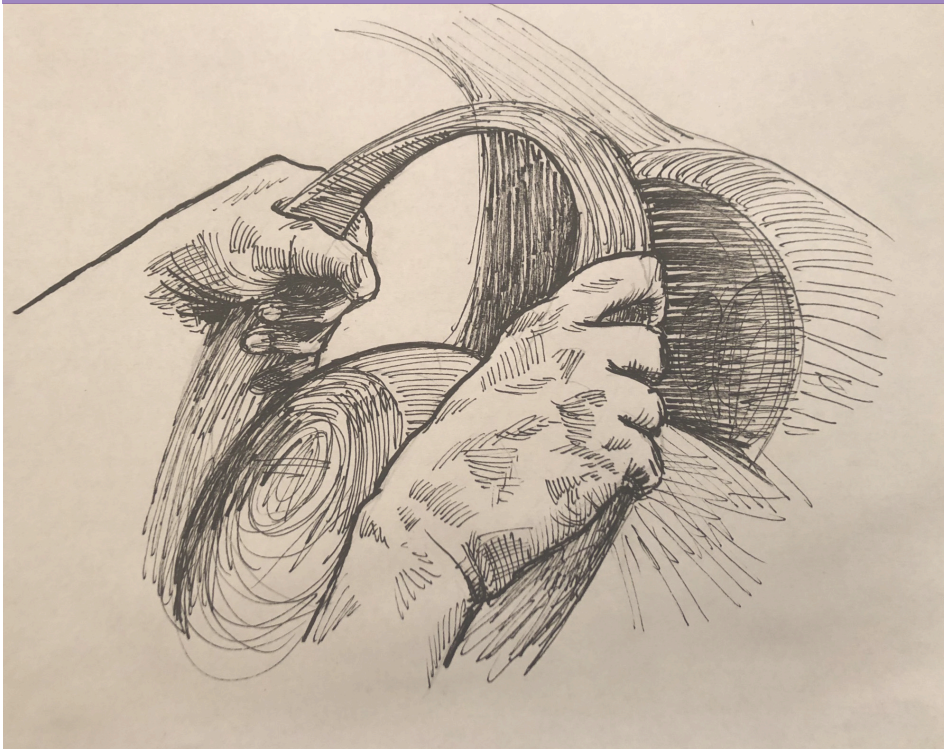
-Drew



*We felt the Cape, deserted, silent, cold.
The early summer rain brought back the breeze
of winter's deed. You hid your heart of gold
inside your cloak as if it were to freeze.
The yonder sea sang songs of her own beach
of beauty; yet, I heard the gloomy song
of falling rain and saw our growing breach
between our lips, our hearts, our journeys long.
But Love, could you not hear the rhythms of
the gorgeous sea whose waves were kissing our
own feet? Our hearts united with the dove
who sought with hope another sunny hour.
One day we'd walk and feel the Cape again
to kiss the waves with lasting love's reign.*

Miles

MADELEINE CASE



Madeleine combines a unique format with concise, direct prose to rapidly build suspense. The effect is substantial and the story worth revisiting.

-Alex

77,433: I start the car after closing the trunk and climb into the driver's seat. Glancing at the odometer, I notice the car has 77,433 miles on it.

77,450: Getting used to the car is difficult. Compared to a broken-down Chevy, the car drives smoothly, like glass. I think for a moment that maybe I should have chosen something less ostentatious, but time placed restraints on my actions that I could not accommodate. My shoulders relax slightly into the leather of the Maserati.

77,452: I pass a stoplight and notice two police cars on the right. I look forward and stay below the speed-limit. I don't look down at my hands. I don't look at what is lying in the passenger seat. 77,458: Turn right. Left. Right again. Two more lefts.

77,480: Have been driving for a while now and I think that an odor is emanating from the trunk in the back. I inhale deeply. Soft leather. The remnants of a strong cologne. And something else...I return my attention to the road.

77,483: A police car has been following me.

77,485: Still following me. His lights aren't on.

77,486: He begins to advance. He's right behind me. A layer of cold sweat breaks out on my forehead and my

palms slip on the steering wheel. My eyes dart from the mirror to the windshield and back again. I take gulps of air, and on the last one, hold it.

77,487: He passes on my right and turns down a street. I roll down my window. The breath from my deep exhalation whisks outside and is left alone on a country road.

77,500: Had to stop for gas. I can definitely smell something now. It is pitch dark outside. 77,573: Dawn is at the edge of the horizon. My hands are dried but they reflect the red light from outside. I still have not looked at the passenger seat. My mind is strikingly empty. I continue to stare at the road. Softly, the knife next to me slides in and out of view.

77,580: Almost there. A few miles left to go. I can't stand the stench coming from the trunk. I can't look forward anymore. I have to do something. The emptiness in my mind is starting to fill with things I do not want to think about. The smell. I can't stand the smell.

77,697: Here. I pull up to the abandoned warehouse by the wharf and get out of the car. I walk around to the trunk, open it, and begin to pull out the body.

Safe Spaces Stifle Intellectual Development

ELIZABETH RIDGWAY

This is a prime example of serious political writing. It presents a defensible but not uncontroversial thesis in thoughtful and combative fashion.

-Alex

Growing up with overprotective helicopter parents and surrounding ourselves with trigger warnings, current college students—and more broadly, Millennials—are labeled as hypersensitive by older generations. In contrast to the Free Speech Movement of 1964, when college students fought to have their voices heard on current events like the Vietnam War, college campuses today tend to police speech to protect those who might be offended. In light of the recent events at the University of Missouri, is there a place for what has been termed the “safe space” in the twenty-first century?

Perhaps safe spaces have a place somewhere—but college campuses are not that place. While racism, sexism, and all other forms of discrimination are never appropriate in any forum, safe spaces do not prevent marginalization; rather, they inhibit dialogue on campus, breeding misunderstandings by shaming some out of clarifying their confusion and discouraging others from participating in a rational debate in which to contemplate controversial issues. Safe spaces, instead of stimulating a clash of ideas, serve to encourage clashes of identity.

Together, we are SMU—a group of individuals coming together from different cultural, socio-economic, and geographic backgrounds. Your background should neither validate nor invalidate your ideas. Only a dangerous space, where ideas are exposed, challenged, and questioned, will enable us to develop our thoughts, explore other perspectives, and critically examine our conclusions. Adam Shapiro, a student at Columbia University featured in a controversial

New York Times article by Judith Shulevitz regarding safe spaces earlier this year, protested firmly against them, asserting that he would make his dorm room a “dangerous space.” As he argues, “I don’t see how you can have a therapeutic space that’s also an intellectual space.” Are we willing to hazard the chance that others have potentially valid ideas, even if those ideas contradict our most deeply held, personal philosophies? When we dehumanize those who disagree with us and fail to seek to understand other paradigms, we divide ourselves; we begin to see others not as individuals but as adversaries and opponents. If we can remove our focus from ideology or identity and rise above cultural stratification, we will expand our horizons and become more informed citizens.

There is no place for maltreatment of any individual on the basis of identity, and some may attempt to misconstrue this opinion piece as an excuse for hostile, belligerent, or disrespectful behavior toward minority groups, or as a jibe against political correctness. Political correctness is often used as a pejorative term, but it is a concept that deals directly with respect for those who differ from us. Every space on campus should be a place of courtesy, consideration, and civility, but it’s important to distinguish between those characteristics and the censorship in the name of sensitivity that dominates safe spaces.

We are all at SMU, and while we all have different experiences here, the mere ability to attend an institution

of this caliber is a privilege we all share. There is also no place for narrowing our perspectives to exclude and mute those who either have differing opinions or look to clarify and question an issue. College is about intellectual growth, both inside and outside of the classroom. The social atmosphere of a university should reflect the intellectual rigor that is present in directly academic settings. In any volley of ideas, coherent and respectful discourse is of paramount importance. Conversations require questions—when those questions can’t be asked, the conversation closes.

If we are cognizant that others have valid ideas, take the time to consider the significance and merit of them, and then perhaps rethink or adjust our own perspectives as a result, we can be assured that our ideas account for all facets of an issue to form well-constructed, thoroughly developed arguments based purely on reason, not emotion. As Judith Shulevitz wrote in a New York Times oped earlier this year, “While keeping college-level discussions “safe” may feel good to the hypersensitive, it’s bad for them and for everyone else. People ought to go to college to sharpen their wits and broaden their field of vision. Shield them from unfamiliar ideas, and they’ll never learn the discipline of seeing the world as other people see it.” The concept of safe spaces as we currently know them is incompatible with the objective of a college campus. As SMU students, let’s unite to foster an environment of respect and regard as well as open-mindedness instead of

cocooning ourselves—and, by extension, our ideas—in a facade of safety. To create an optimal learning environment, college campuses need to develop a compromise between mutual respect and willingness to engage intellectually.

Give Me a Ceiling

COLE THOMAS

This satire was selected for its treatment of an ever-hot political issue. It is as silly as it is clever.

-Drew

I often ask myself: Where is my ceiling?

All the time, women are praised for breaking through a glass ceiling. That leaves me feeling left out as a man because women will always be able to do something I can't. Look, you don't even have to make my ceiling glass. Honestly, I'd be happy settling for a brick ceiling. Sure, there won't be glass shattering when I break through my ceiling like Tom Cruise in *Mission Impossible*, but at least I'll be able to claim, as a man, that I did something reserved only for women.

I also feel left out when it comes to the wage gap. People are always talking about the struggle women have as they make about seventy-seven cents to every dollar a man makes. Well, forget that "struggle" for a second and remember there are people out there, men included, who don't even have a job. As a male, I'm currently making zero cents to every dollar every working man makes! Why worry about the struggle of women, when not all men are making one hundred cents to every dollar a man supposedly makes!

Then there's the "tragedy" women face with a lack of healthcare. That's great

and all, and important too, but I can't even get my healthcare taken care of on an ordinary basis. To be blunt about it: my sex life is lacking compared to a lot of my male peers, which leaves me feeling left out. I understand the need to get women healthcare so they can take care of their body. But when I'm denied the opportunity to visit my own general practitioner to complain about some painful green discharge, why should I feel pity for the woman who is denied healthcare that will prevent a little nuisance called pregnancy? Really, before I can start to value women's health, I have got to be taken care of myself in that department.

Finally, there is the lack of protection from violence women face. Or rather, the lack of it for me. I got beat up and mugged and left on the side of the road because I was walking alone to a gas station at one in the morning. Sure enough, people started blaming me for my condition, just like people blame women when they're raped for being in the wrong place at the wrong time or being too nice to the wrong guy,

or staying in an abusive relationship. Blame them all you want, but don't blame me for needing a Snickers at one in the morning to satisfy my raging appetite. A raging appetite almost as strong as my desire for a ceiling.

So, what I'm trying to say is: Just give me a ceiling.



Nihilistmas: An Excerpt

ALEC PETSCHÉ

It's no easy thing to write a good play. Harder still to convey the complexity and subtlety of the medium in brief fashion, but the excerpt below succeeds on both fronts.

-Alex

An excerpt from Nihilistmas, by Alec Petsche, a play about Christmas, family, hatred, and all the horrible problems that mixing them can cause.

MARY:

So, Thomas, how's Matt?

MOM:

Mary! I forgot that we still need to hang up stockings!

THOMAS:

He's fine. He's doing Christmas with his family in Mexico. He says hi.

MOM reaches into a stray box and pulls out several oversized stockings with names stitched on them.

MOM:

Come on everybody! Time to hang up our stockings!

UNCLE CLOVIS:

Who's Matt?

MOM:

Really, it's no trouble.

THOMAS:

My boyfriend.

UNCLE CLOVIS:

Right, I forgot all that drama when you told us you were a fruit-cake.

THOMAS:

A what?

UNCLE CLOVIS:

Relax kid, you know I don't give a shit.

THOMAS:

I'd really prefer it if you used a different word.

UNCLE CLOVIS:

Hey, be cool fruity, it's funny, I'm just kidding.

THOMAS:

Then stop kidding.

UNCLE CLOVIS:

I was just fooling, it's not a big deal.

THOMAS:

You don't get to decide that.

MOM:

Let's not talk about politics on Christmas.

THOMAS:

Politics?

MOM:

You know what I mean.

THOMAS:

Yes, I do.

MOM tensely begins hanging up the stockings.

UNCLE CLOVIS:

Come on Tommy; you know I don't mean anything by it.

THOMAS:

Well if you don't mean anything by it, then you won't mind using a different word.

UNCLE CLOVIS:

Come on, don't make a whole thing out of this. It's not a big deal, and we're all friends here.

THOMAS:

Are we though?

MOM:

Clovis, why don't you help me with... why don't we go to the kitchen?

UNCLE CLOVIS:

I don't see what the big deal is-

MOM:

Clovis, come on.

UNCLE CLOVIS stands and follows her to the kitchen. POP-POP turns to THOMAS.

POP-POP:

You know, a queer saved my life in the war.

In the kitchen, MOM slaps UNCLE CLOVIS as the lights go down in the living room.

UNCLE CLOVIS:

Shit! It's not like I called him a faggot or anything. Anyway he's not even really a queer, he still likes girls.

MOM:

Shut up Clovis.

UNCLE CLOVIS:

What did I even do? I was having a reasonable debate about language.

MOM:

I don't know and I don't care; you made him uncomfortable and you're going to apologize to him.

UNCLE CLOVIS:

For "fruit cake?" You sobbed when he came out of the closet. You even called me! That's a sign of desperation.

MOM:

I didn't say I approved. I said you're going to apologize. Do you know how many times I've seen him in the last two years? Three. I've seen my son three times in the twenty-four months since he came out.

UNCLE CLOVIS:

Are you trying to tell me you visited Mom and Dad more than that at his age?

MOM:

Are you trying to claim that we had a good relationship with our parents?

UNCLE CLOVIS:

Ummm...no?

MOM:

Exactly! I invited you here to prove that I could make it work. That I could do the one thing Mom never could. A real family Christmas with all of us here, even you.

UNCLE CLOVIS:

That's messed up Margie.

MOM:

Of course it's messed up! We're messed up! We were raised by an idiot and a lunatic! But I did a slightly better job with my kids, and you're ruining that by bringing up all of this bullshit with his little experiment with other boys into the light.

UNCLE CLOVIS:

You really need to learn to let this shit go, Margie.

MOM slaps UNCLE CLOVIS again and yanks him close to her face by his collar.

MOM:

Shut! Up! I need my kids in my life. And I don't approve of his lifestyle, but I keep that to my god damn self, and I'm not going to let your need to be a disruptive jackass ruin my Christmas. I don't know why saying "fruit-cake" hurt his feelings so much, but I don't give a shit if he says you have to talk in the third person. If he does, then you'll go out there and say "Clovis is very sorry." Got it?

UNCLE CLOVIS nods, turns around, and grabs a liquor bottle as he enters the living room. CAROL listens intently

to POP-POP; THOMAS and MARY are trying not to listen to him out of discomfort.

POP-POP:

-so all I'm saying is, I know that the bonds between two men can be-

UNCLE CLOVIS clears his throat. THOMAS, MARY, CAROL, and POP-POP all look at him.

UNCLE CLOVIS:

I'm sorry. I was out of line. It's been a rough year, and it's been hard for me to think straight.

No one is impressed.

THOMAS:

Hey, it's fine. After all, I never think straight.

It's not fine, but UNCLE CLOVIS laughs and sits down.

UNCLE CLOVIS:

Oh, so it's okay for you to make jokes but not me?

THOMAS:

Yes.

UNCLE CLOVIS:

There we go man; just when I was starting to think I was the only one in this family with any wit.

Evicted: The SMU Version

LORIEN MELNICK

In this interview, Lorien proves that SMU's Common Reading always impacts the campus.

-Alex

In honor of the SMU Common Reading book, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* by Matthew Desmond, SMU students were interviewed about their experiences with homelessness.

What was your experience with being homeless?

Student 1: When I was little, my parents couldn't afford housing, so we were forced into my mom's parents' house. Usually in Hispanic families, no one lives on the streets; they're taken in by family. The experience helped me to appreciate family more and made me very reliant on my family, even now that we're not homeless anymore. I'll always remember how, when I was little, I always really wanted candy bars, but even [the] candy that was twenty-five cents, they said was too expensive. One day, after we moved out of my grandparents' house, I asked for a candy bar, and my parents said yes. That's always stuck with me.

Student 2: When you're homeless, you always feel like you don't really have an anchor or belong anywhere, like you're floating. Home is a place where you can be yourself, and when you don't have a home, you have to find that familiarity in somewhere else. Because we didn't have a place to relax, my mom and I became each other's home. We're really close now, and I see that as one of the highlights of our experience.

While you were homeless, did other people in your life (classmates, teachers, parents' coworkers) know about it?

Student 1: Not really. It only came up when my friends wanted to go do things, and I had to say no because we didn't have

any money and no way to get there. I missed out on a lot of things—I felt trapped.

Student 2: No. The only people we told were very close family friends. We never wanted to tell people because being homeless makes you an outsider. It also causes a shift in the power dynamic in a relationship, and some of our friendships never recovered from that. When people help you, you're all of a sudden beneath them.

Did you get any help from the government while you were homeless?

Student 1: No.

Student 2: No.

How do you feel being at SMU now, where most people can't relate to your experiences?

Student 1: Alienated. Lots of people here grew up knowing [that] they could ask for anything, and I always feared that I would ask for too much. I still feel that way, like we don't have enough, whereas people around me always seem to have too much.

Student 2: To be honest, it wasn't until I got to SMU that I admitted to myself that I was ever homeless at all. I always thought that the word "homeless" was for people who lived under a bridge. I thought that, since we had friends and places to stay, we weren't homeless. Once, though, we were over at a family friend's. Their son was a little older than me, and he asked, "Mom, why are these hoboes here?" For a while, I tried not to acknowledge that that ever happened.

Why do you think it's important that students at SMU learn about homelessness?

Student 1: Because it's a very real issue, and it's swept under the rug a lot. A lot of people think that the only ones who are homeless are the ones who live on the street, begging for money. But there [are] a lot of people who don't have a real home, but who live in some kind of housing or shelter, and they often can't get government help. We need to continue talking about it, so that people understand these issues are more diverse than you might think.

Student 2: Most people here have had no contact with this issue and have no idea what it's like. Going through this experience taught me about how much worse it could have been. In the moment, there was always something off about the situation, but I was never absolutely miserable. It's such a big part of who I became, and most people here have never gone through that experience. Everyone has problems, but having something disturb your home is on such a different level that it's impossible to understand. *Evicted* was such a good book because it put faces to the issue. Some people tell me, "But I couldn't keep the characters straight," and I think that reflects the general view of the issue. To lots of people, homelessness is just a general mass of people who don't have personalities and lives. *Evicted* is important because it gives identities to homeless people so that readers can sympathize with them.

Poetic Reflection on the Common Reading

CECILIA WEIGMAN

This poem was inspired by the 2016 Common Reading, Bryan Stevenson's Just Mercy. Every student had a lot to say about this book, but perhaps none so unique as Ceci's contribution.

-Drew

Each one of us is like a piece of broken glass,

Delicate shards resting in nooks and crannies all over the world.

Shining, twinkling where we lay, bright spots in dark places.

Some hidden away in the rough.

Others out for all to see.

We each have sharp edges that protrude.

Some sharper than others.

A foot lands on one of them and bleeds.

The blood covers all of us.

We are now like rubies—red and glowing,

Grotesquely captivating.

But we still sparkle.

It is a beautiful mess, all of our pieces

All over the floor.

We are beautifully broken apart;

We are broken together.

But we can also be whole together.

Your piece and mine, we make a new whole.

Their pieces and ours, we create something greater.

More and more broken pieces.

Together forming something better.

It's like a puzzle.

Each piece is unique and different on its own.

Each piece necessary for the puzzle.

Each piece more beautiful together than apart.

Will you bring your brokenness and add it to mine?

Will you join me and together we can be whole?

Can you do it?

But in joining us, you must first embrace your own brokenness

Because it is our brokenness that makes coming together meaningful in the first place.

And we can't stop here,

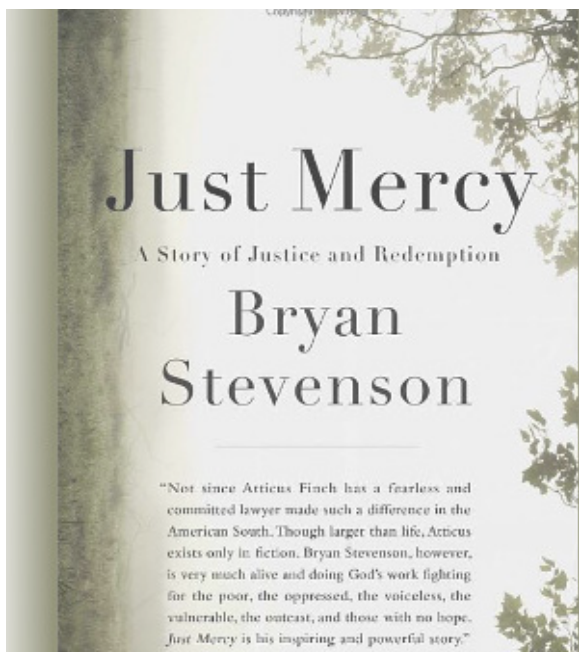
For we need all the pieces of the puzzle.

We need everyone, every person, every piece,

Even the tiniest shards,

To make us whole.

But first, I just need you.



Decolonizing Africa Through Literature

CECILIA WEIGMAN

Event commentary is very much an art. There are many ways to bore, and very few to entertain and enrich. Cecilia places her readers in the room next to her, and teaches them as she herself is taught by the speaker.

-Alex

While many of the students present in Room 100 of Hyer Hall on October 2nd merely came to the "Globalization, Translation, and African Literature" lecture for extra credit, they exited with much more than a few bonus points. Listening to the words of Fiston Mwanza Mujila, everyone quickly realized that his gift for writing has the power to influence peoples and cultures far beyond the individual readers of his novels and poems, and it made for a truly exhilarating experience.

Hailing from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mujila at first did not find an encouraging society in which to share his literary works. In order to perform readings of his pieces, he resorted to standing in hair salons, web cafes, and bars. Unfortunately, these places (especially the bars) offered competing attractions: some people came to listen to Mujila speak and others came for music and drinks, so Mujila learned quickly to shout his works into the din so that he would be heard. Interestingly, the bars in which he performed would oftentimes play the famous Congolese Rumba, and Mujila began using the music in his performances, later embedding it directly into his works.

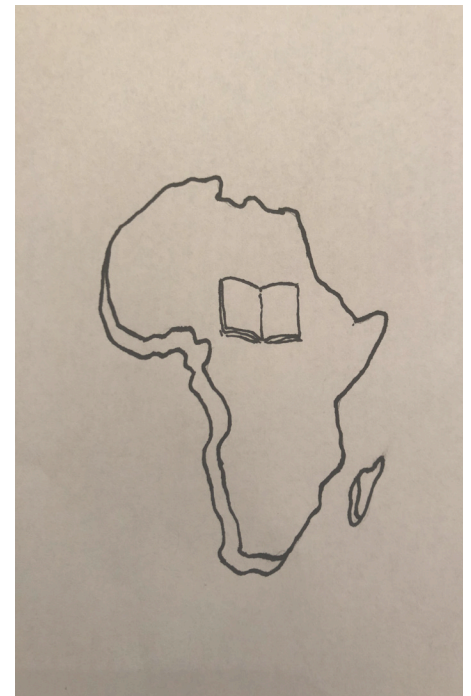
Mujila compares his pieces to jazz concerts, each part of the story contributing, like each instrument, to the whole song. He has collaborated with jazz musicians and performed his readings set to music, and his writing has a musical quality rarely seen in contemporary literature. Mujila's unique fusion of music and language was certainly on display during his reading of a selection from his new novel *Tram 83*, translated from the French and published

by Dallas's own Deep Vellum.

Bellowing loudly, he began with a few bars of singing (to exercise his voice, he claimed). Then he began in earnest, French words pouring quickly from his mouth. His facial expressions at times carried even more meaning than the words, which his translator faithfully echoed. At one point, he began repeating one single word, over and over, and he began laughing. Lugubre went on for about two full minutes, the laughing continuing sporadically. Those of us who could not understand French waited in anticipation as to what this passage and the laughing meant. When the French translator began speaking, we heard him say, "Mournful," then again, "Mournful," and again, "Mournful." Soon, Mujila joined in, "Mournful," he would laugh, "Mournful." And, standing there minutes after his performance, Mujila said one last time, "Mournful," while still laughing. At the end of his lecture, I realized that his performance gives just as much meaning to the story as the words on the page; the laughing wasn't just part of the show but also an extension of the text itself. For Mujila, writing does not end with a published, bound book, but continues to evolve and move people with each word spoken at each reading.

As a new voice in the young generation of African writers, Mujila holds an interesting position. As he told us in his lecture, African literature consists of both oral and written tradition. The written works fit into two categories: those written in native African languages and those written in a

language of Africa's colonizers (French, German, English, etc.). Written in French and German, Mujila's works belong to the colonial written tradition, yet his spoken-word performances with strong musical elements speak to an influence of African oral tradition. In this way, Mujila blends the original African literary tradition with the newer colonial influence, creating works that reflect and comment on the larger situation in Africa today and the conflict between the area's rich cultural traditions and the destructive effects of colonization. Through his writing, Mujila tries to come to terms with this conflict by utilizing his African culture to redefine colonial influences. He truly represents an important and dynamic movement which the literary world will be watching closely in the coming years.



GOP Debate Nicknames: The Best of the Bad

MADELEINE CASE

Amidst the political swirl of an election year, Madeleine managed to inject a little bit of humour into an environment which too often turns conversation sour. Readers don't know which side of the aisle she's on, and they certainly don't need to in order to laugh alongside her.

-Alex

Almost a month after the second Republican presidential primary debate, people still talk about what went down at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. Hint: on never attacking Rand Paul's looks, Donald Trump said "I never attacked him on his looks, and believe me, there's a lot of subject matter there." Hey, I can't exactly say I disagree. People like to talk about Jeb Bush admitting he smoked marijuana, or Carly Fiorina smoking the competition in general, but my personal favorite question from that debate was "If you were president, what would your Secret Service code name be?" As great as that question was, the responses were even better. I've ranked them from worst to best.

11. Scott Walker: "Harley" It's a clean choice—one word, two syllables—reminiscent of high power and plenty of style. There's just one problem. Walker is no longer in the running. Since Harley's dreams will never become a reality, Walker's name takes last place.

10. Ted Cruz: "Cohiba" Because, get it, he's from Cuba. Also, if I smoke a bunch of Cohibas in one sitting, can I get my voice to sound like his? WHAT IS YOUR SECRET TED? Even better, what he would select as his wife's Secret Service name: "Angel"...because...you guessed it. She's his

9. Rand Paul: "Justice Never Sleeps" Paul gets points here for trying to be inspiring with this name, but I can't help but imagine a scenario involving a tired president on Airforce One: "ksshhh. Justice Never Sleeps is...sleeping. Over. Ksshhh."

8. Mike Huckabee: "Duck Hunter" Not quite as inspiring as Rand Paul, but true to Huckabee's passions nonetheless. Am I the only one, though, who foresees this name as the butt of many Elmer Fudd jokes?

7. Jeb Bush: "Eveready" Following in the tradition of his older brother whose designated Secret Service code name was "Trailblazer," Jeb chose a two-word-smashed-into-one name which he hopes will relay his "high energy." Donald Trump high-fived him for it. It also might be a subtle allusion to his drink of choice in college, Everclear. After all, he's already admitted to smoking marijuana. FEEL THE BURN, JEBBY!

6. John Kasich: "Unit One" I commend Kasich for this name because it flows so well with "Unit One is on the move." It gets 6th place because he threw in a cheesy wife reference too: "My wife would probably say I'm Unit Two."

5. Chris Christie: "True Heart" "Heart" isn't exactly the first word I would associate with Chris Christie. He strikes me as more passionate (about policy) than compassionate. I'm sure the residents of Fort Lee would agree.

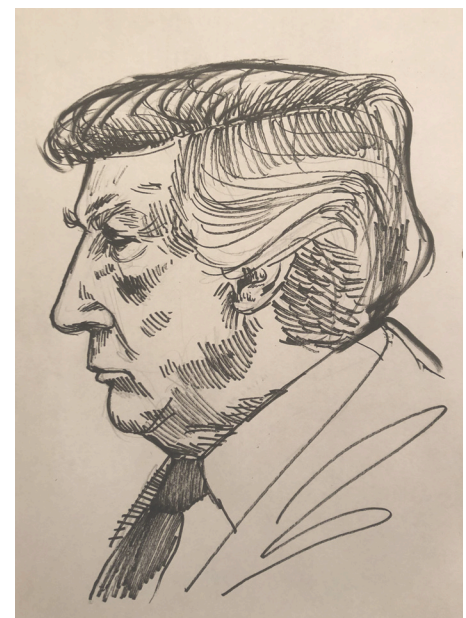
4. Ben Carson: "One Nation" "There is no freedom without bravery." A quote from one of Ben Carson's many published works. The title of the book where you can find this quote is, incidentally, One Nation. Coincidence? I think not.

3. Marco Rubio: "Gator" One word, fierce image, personally connected.

What more can you ask for?

2. Carly Fiorina: "Secretariat" A quick review: Secretariat was the racehorse who, against all odds, won the Triple Crown in 1973 and inspired the movie you're probably envisioning in your head right now. I'm not sure Secretariat would have approved of his name being used by Fiorina for the benefit of her campaign...perhaps he'll join Steven Tyler (or, well, his ghost or something will, seeing as he's dead) ((RIP, kind horse)) as the latest celeb to sue a GOP candidate for unauthorized use of intellectual property.

1. Donald Trump: "Humble" I mean, come on. This name had to be either first or last. For the sake of comic relief, I stuck "Humble" at the top. Maybe someday Trump will actually live up to his name.



An (Employed) Engineer Reflects on the Honors Program

NICHOLAS SAULNIER, SMU CLASS OF 2015, 2016

Current students often forget the vast community of alumni that they will soon join. This piece offers the 20/20 hindsight of an alumnus regarding the benefit of the Honors Program to his career.

-Alex

There are many reasons students decide to avoid or to drop out of the University Honors Program (UHP): It is too hard. It might lower my GPA. I think poems are dumb. As an engineering student, I participated in the UHP to explore diverse topics inaccessible in the engineering curriculum (studies on gender, race, and psychology are curiously lacking from circuits class) and to strengthen my communication and interpersonal skills. At the time, I considered the UHP nothing but a fun addition to a strong technical degree.

Now that I work as an engineer at Texas Instruments, I have discovered that my Honors experience was perhaps the most important part of my technical education. Yes, my work involves programming code and creating circuits; however, the complexity of real-life engineering systems renders nearly all technical information learned in school obsolete. My only usable tools from college are the

communication, interpersonal, and problem solving skills that were honed over the course of four years. While all three were built up in the UHP, I will focus on the first two as the skills that were almost exclusively developed in Honors rather than in my engineering curriculum.

Communication, both verbal and written, is the single most important skill an engineer possesses. The sheer complexity of the real world means you can only become an expert in a tiny slice of any one problem. In order to develop and test the entire solution, you need to collaborate with many other subject experts. With technical expertise I may personally solve 1/6 of the issue; succinct emails, carefully crafted meetings and presentations, and probing questions unlock the other 5/6 of the solution.

The curious and open mindset that is required when taking honors classes

is a powerful interpersonal tool for the workplace. The Honors Program throws you into subjects far out of your depth so that you may learn from SMU's subject experts (i.e., faculty) and other students. Be conscious, not just of your search for knowledge, but of the process you take when searching. Observe the mindset you assume, the questions you ask, the role you take in a group discussion, your facial expression and word choice and follow-up to clear and unclear answers. Consciously modify your internal mindset and how you externally broadcast your mindset to others. Make sure you broadcast a respectful, curious, and positive mindset. At work, your communication skills will allow people to understand you and provide the resources you need; however, your interpersonal skills will make them want to set aside the time to respond and to teach.

Nick graduated with his Bachelor's of Science in Electrical Engineering from SMU in 2015 and Master's of Science in Electrical Engineering from SMU in 2016. His Master's thesis involved researching smart phone applications for screening for cervical cancer. He took part in many UHP activities, including a travel course to New York and many Honors courses and events.

Here Kenny reminds us of the ancient wisdom that there is a time to be silent and a time to speak. Fittingly, it ends this issue with a reflection on what Hilltopics is and ought to be.

—Alex and Drew

Silence is a powerful thing. I'm thinking of a striking image that has recently been making the rounds on social media and the web; it shows a small boy standing with his arms spread in front of a protest march of thousands of people (the photo recalls the famous image of "Tank Man" in Tiananmen Square). The march, which took place in Celaya, Guanajuato, in Mexico, was organized by the Frente Nacional por la Familia in order to protest recent same-sex marriage proposals in the country.

What the child (who is only 12) did is astounding: astoundingly brave, astoundingly precocious, astoundingly human. What is perhaps more astounding is the way his action has emotionally impacted millions of people around the world. Indeed, that such a brief moment of courage can be taken up as a point of unity by so many diverse people is surely one of the greatest testaments to the power of photography, and of social media, of recent times. But it is also a testament to the power of silence. The kid didn't have to say a word to bring all of this about; he didn't write an article or a philosophical treatise or a personal anecdote about why he thinks same-sex marriage should be legal. He simply stood up in the face of something he didn't like; he simply made it be known that he was entering the ideological arena, and not on the side of the Frente Nacional. There is also much pleasure to be had in silence. I recently spent a weekend at SMU's campus in Taos, New Mexico, and was moved, as always, by the immensity of the stars, the milky way opening up like a brilliant scar above, so wet with possibility you can almost reach out and touch, even taste, the other planets that might be, that the scientists

Letter from an Old Editor

KENNY MARTIN

keep telling us might be. I remember sitting under the night sky with my friends, not talking—after a certain point, with very good friends, there is simply no need to talk in a place like that—and all of a sudden hearing a pack of coyotes howling close by. The silence of the night that had enveloped us was broken, but we really didn't mind. The coyotes and the nocturnal stillness were part and parcel of the same organic whole; one without the other would be strange and unnatural. So, we took what we were dealt, and relished in it all.

I also spent much of the summer in Spain; I remember sitting on a gentle park hill in the city of Santiago de Compostela, overlooking the Cathedral to which pilgrims have been coming for well over 1,000 years to make the final leg of St. James's Way. This is a silence of a different sort, one heavy (though not overburdened) with the weight of history, of countless people long since gone who, just maybe, were in many ways like me, like us. I remember, too, the cloisters of the monasteries; even in the busiest of cities, those four walls create an interior tranquility that puts even the least religious among us in some sort of spiritual way. It is no surprise that we often connect most intimately with ourselves through silence; paradoxically, it is also through silence that we find connections to others, to the human community as it has expressed itself since the beginning through art, religion, history, poetry, beauty.

Silence cannot do everything, however. I'm thinking here of the great Simon & Garfunkel lyrics: "People talking without speaking / People hearing without listening / No one dared / Disturb the sound of silence." This seems to pretty well describe our

current state of affairs, political and cultural and otherwise. A great divide has seized us all, and we are more likely to lamely quip about how "we don't like talking politics" when what we really mean is "we don't like talking politics with people we don't agree with." This has to change. Such change does not mean hedging on radicalism, or whatever positions one chooses to take. It does mean refusing to give into the temptation to ignore or spurn others and cease discourse simply to avoid vulnerability and discomfort. That's not the silence I've come to love; it is at most its bastard child, its maimed and forced and barely recognizable form.

This, then, is an appropriate mission statement for Hilltopics: to be vulnerable so that we might learn. To make ourselves and others uncomfortable for the sake of enlivening the discourse of every sort that occurs on this campus. To relish in words, those mysterious and miraculous things that, for us, constitute the world, and make our minds interesting places in which to live. To do things that please us, however strange or quirky or controversial. To be inspired by people like the boy from Celaya and declare ourselves openly in support of movements we find important, and against those we find abhorrent. More than anything, to use our words smartly, strongly, and sparingly, so that our silences might be more fruitful, powerful, and full of the wondrous delight of looking at the stars and feeling that they are looking back at us. We hope you will join us for the ride.



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