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senior seminar in comparative literature

APRIL 2025





## TO THE READER

For many of us, this is our final semester at UGA. We are reaching a pitchfork in our lives, choosing our next steps. All of us are about to embark on incredible journeys that take us back to our roots, to new states and countries, or into the transition from students to townies. The paths are far and wide, but are daunting and adventurous nonetheless, as we step out into adulthood. This magazine is emblematic of time—past, future, and present—reflecting upon the minute details that have made our time as college students enjoyable. It brings together yearning and love, reflection and dreaming, and, lastly, hope. As a class, to the reader, we are happy that you decided to sit down and read our little project. Maybe it can help you reflect on your own relationship with time.

Reminisce a little bit with us.

Enjoy.

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# FRAGMENTS OF TIME

*By Moena Ino*

Time marches on without regard  
for people who cannot keep up  
for those who choose to wallow  
for the memories left behind  
And yet I slow my pace  
to pick up the lost fragments  
I embrace them wishing to remember  
the eyes of those I lost  
the lingering scents of places I miss  
the sights I yearned to see once more  
the person I once was

In those moments  
I wish to recall in perfect detail  
I find myself  
drowning  
as the fragments I crushed under my foot  
hoping to forget  
resurface  
and grasp at what I've become  
stopping me in my tracks  
Gasping for air  
I finally remember  
my guilt  
my shame

Defeated, I resign myself  
relinquishing my autonomy  
to those times I desired to erase  
that refused to acknowledge who I could become  
Wading in regrets  
forgetting the dreams I once had  
Abandoning my ego to these bitter fragments  
I despise this hollow nature of mine

who is unable to put up a fight  
Another lost soul among the river of eternity  
I let myself sink into reminiscence  
as time marches on without regard



# A CURATION OF A LIFETIME

*By Sarah Bell*

*Would you visit a museum of your own life?  
If so, what would be in it?*

These questions come to me as I pass through the halls of the Georgia Museum of Art on a field trip for my senior seminar in comparative literature class. I admire all the beautiful paintings and sculptures and wish I had the talent to create something so beautiful to leave behind.

Like any college senior, my life these days has been filled with anxiety for my future. Along with this anxiety comes reflection. Reflection of not only my college years but those that came before it. In a recent conversation with my friend, we agreed that somehow our high school years feel more recent than our freshman year of college. Time and memory work in that funny way where they distort certain memories yet leave others untouched.

For a long time, I referred to my first three semesters of college as a “write-off.” I began my college career in the fall of 2020. As you can imagine, it was not the exciting start to college I had dreamt of through my high school years. I couldn’t wait to follow in the footsteps of every cliched angsty teen before me and move to a big city to ‘find myself’. But when I arrived, the COVID-ridden reality smacked me in the face: my roommate ghosted me, social distancing protocols meant complete isolation, classes on Zoom, and feeling homesick for the first time in my life were just a few of the things that caused me to deem this first half of college unmemorable.

If I had to put this time of my life in a museum, the exhibit might include a tiny coffee maker, a copy of the book *The Goldfinch*, a mask, and a replica of the horrendous dining hall food I suffered through eating for dinner four nights a week. And a gazebo. The gazebos on campus were pretty nice.

Since this freshman year period feels more elusive, its display might come before the high school wing, which would be filled with band t-shirts, golf clubs, Queen records (I had a huge Queen phase), and a copy of *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut. What better way to show what kind of teenager I was than to fill this wing with my pretentious reading choices and questionable outfits?

Next, my last three years of college at UGA. This display would feature some lovely abstract artwork of my loneliness fading into contentment being by myself. A movie ticket for one. Sneakers for my “mental health walks” that became a staple of my routine. It would also feature a month in France, where I made some of the best memories of my life and came back with friends that inspire me and make me laugh. A metro ticket. Gallons of coffee. A last-minute flight to Amsterdam.

Somewhere, tucked away in the corner of the museum, are the middle school years. Braces. Softball practices. “Your body is changing” talks. This wing is small and rarely visited due to embarrassment. However, they are vital years, as learning to humiliate yourself is a crucial skill.

All twenty-two years of my life can be sectioned off into exhibits, segmented by whatever house I was living in, or whatever school I went to at the time. But the most daunting wing is yet to be constructed: my future. What might go into this section of my museum keeps me up at night.

*What part of the country will I be in?*

*Will I have a good job?*



*Will I have kids?*

*Will I have a nice time at my 32nd birthday party?*

*How many more exhibits do I have left in me?*

*Am I happy?*

We are all walking museums, living exhibits. Sometimes, when you walk through your memory museum, you might stumble upon your first kiss, then your third-grade classroom, and then college graduation. The beautiful thing about museums, your museum, is that you can choose the way you walk through them. You can choose to spend your twenties hanging out in the childhood wing, feeling bitter about the way your parents raised you, ashamed of your choices, guilty about your mistakes; or you can wander back to the small section in the corner with footage of your fifth birthday and think of how proud your little self would be of everything that you've accomplished.

As I walk through the museum of my mind, I realize that it doesn't take talent to create the beautiful things we leave behind, but rather the courage to recognize they are flawed — and display them proudly anyway.

I'll end with the words of the ever-relevant Kurt Vonnegut:

"If I am going to spend eternity visiting this moment and that, I'm grateful that so many of those moments are nice."

## IF SAIGON NEVER FELL: WOULD OUR PATHS HAVE ALIGNED?

*By Sydney Nguyen*

Growing up as a first-generation Vietnamese-American, I have always been aware of how history shapes identity nationally and within families and individuals. My parents' lives were deeply affected by the Vietnam War, even though they were too young to fight in it. The war determined where they would live, the struggles they would face, and, ultimately, how they would meet. If history had unfolded differently, their paths—and, by extension, mine—might never have crossed. That thought has always lingered in my mind: What if?

This story is a response to that question. In this alternate world, the Vietnam War ends with a U.S. victory, reshaping the country into something more akin to modern South Korea—capitalist, highly developed, deeply influenced by American culture, yet distinctly Vietnamese. My father, who once dreamed of being a soldier but was too old to enlist when he arrived in the U.S., finally fulfilled that ambition. My mother, whose education ended too soon due to financial struggles, gets to pursue her artistic passion. They meet in this different Vietnam under entirely different circumstances. But would they still fall in love? Would they still find each other in a world where migration, exile, and the refugee experience, the defining aspects of many Vietnamese-American lives, never happened?

This story is as much about time as it is about history. It's about how war alters destinies, how alternate realities can make us reconsider the present, and how forces beyond our control shape personal narratives. More than anything, it's a way for me to explore the intersection of love, identity, and fate and to ask whether certain connections transcend time, no matter how history unfolds.

## *I- A Different Beginning*

Time is not a straight line. It bends, folds, and loops back on itself like silk in the wind. Some moments fray, and others linger.

I often wonder if things would have changed if the war had ended differently. Maybe my parents would have met under a gentler sky if it had. Would my mother still have reached for her brushes each morning, chasing silence in color? Would my father still wake before the sun, brew his French roast coffee or 103 King's Oolong tea with the discipline of a soldier and the reverence of a priest?

In another version of Vietnam that never fell, the streets of New Saigon shimmer beneath neon signs and typhoon rain. American slogans hang beside red silk lanterns. McDonald's, Apple stores, and Buddhist temples share the same block. The air smells like roasted pork and cigarette smoke, and somewhere in between, two people who do not yet know each other walk the same city, separated only by chance.

Sergeant Hữu Văn Nguyễn lights his first cigarette of the day, the match hissing like a whispered command. His uniform is pressed so sharply it could cut. On his wall hangs a red-and-yellow photograph of the old flag, faded from sun and memory.

Across the city, An Lê Thị Nguyễn adjusts the angle of her easel. The brush moves like breath in her hand. She paints in layers—one for what is seen, another for what must be hidden. Her father's voice echoes from the kitchen, calling her to breakfast. She has not replied yet. Some mornings, it takes time to return from the places she paints.

They have not met—not in this world. But time has a way of circling back to the stories it forgot to finish.

## *II - Tea Time*

It started with tea. Not jasmine, not oolong. Chrysanthemum. Perhaps two rock sugars, too sweet.

Hữu Văn didn't like sweet tea. But he was tired. And for once, he let himself stop walking.

The stall was tucked under the rusted edge of an awning, a few plastic chairs arranged like they had been forgotten there for years. New Saigon moved around him—motorbikes, chatter, the distant echo of a pop song blaring from a rooftop speaker. He sat anyway, letting the steam rise between his fingers.

"You're sitting in my spot."

He turned. She was tiny, petite—almost childlike in stature—but her voice was clear, and her eyes unreadable. She wasn't angry. Just stating a fact.

"Am I?" he said.

"Mm. Every Sunday, same time. The chair with the crack in the seat. See?" She pointed to the small fissure under his thigh. "Fits just right. Like a puzzle piece."

He shifted slightly, then looked up at her again.

"You want it back?"

"No. You've already warmed it up."

She sat across from him without waiting for permission. Her presence was calm but firm, like water filling a glass. She wore an oversized linen shirt stained at the wrist with what looked like dried ochre. Her fingernails were chipped and colorful—an artist's hands.

"You're not from around here," she said.

"What makes you think that?"

"You look like you're carrying too much."

He gave her a look. The kind that didn't say much but asked *everything*.

"Your shoulders," she clarified. "They're too stiff for a Sunday."

"Old habit."

"From what?"

"The Air Force."

She nodded slowly as if that explained something.

"And you?" he asked.

"I paint," she said simply.

"For work?"

"For breath."

He let that settle.

A gust of wind swept through the alleyway, tugging at her scarf. Somewhere in the market behind them, a child sang off-key. In another life, he may have said something clever. Something to make her laugh. But here, in this world of sharp uniforms and soft rebellions, he only watched.

She watched him over the rim of her glass. Neither of them spoke for a moment. The city pulsed quietly around them—

distant car horns, a child laughing somewhere beyond the market stalls.

Then she leaned forward. "Do you ever feel like you were meant for a different version of your life?"

"All the time," he said.

And for a moment, the city faded. There were no sides, no winners of war. Just a quiet table beneath a rusted awning, the hiss of steam rising from cups, and two people who—by fate, or by accident—had arrived at the same crack in time.

### III - Sleepless Nights

The city never really slept, but An Lê preferred the hours when it pretended to. When the motorbikes thinned, the neon signs softened to a hum, and the rain clicked gently against her window like fingers tapping a forgotten rhythm.

She stood barefoot on the paint-stained floor of her studio, brushing strokes of pale gold across a canvas that refused to finish itself. The painting had begun weeks ago—just after Tết. It was meant to be a portrait of the city but kept pulling in other directions: a skyline melting into water, a soldier outlined in shadow, a woman's silhouette sitting across from him, with nothing but silence between them.

She hadn't meant to paint him.

But there he was now—sketched in charcoal, half-formed at the edge of the frame. The stiffness in his posture. The quiet weight in his eyes. He answered her question like it had already lived inside him for years.

All the time, he'd said.

She dipped her brush in water, watching the ripples scatter her reflection.

Her father used to tell her that time was a river with no bridges. Once something passed, you couldn't go back. But she'd never believed that. Not really.

"Some rivers," she whispered to no one, "just bend in long, strange circles."

On her desk, her journal lay open. A tea ring bloomed in the corner of the page, half-obscuring the words she'd written hours earlier:

*Saw him again. Not in real life—just in thought. He sits like someone trying not to be seen but needing to be known. The uniform is too sharp. His voice was too calm. Something in him is knotted up with history.*

She paused, chewing the end of her brush. Then she added: Or maybe I'm just imagining things again. Maybe I've painted this before.

She returned to the canvas and added a thin line of smoke from the soldier's hand. It looked like a question was rising.

Somewhere in the city, maybe he was still awake. Drinking tea. Watching the sky and wondering, like she was, why the moment had felt so familiar.

As if the world had offered them this scene once before. And it had forgotten to finish it.

# UNTITLED

*By Grey Cohen*

Waking up soaked in sweat;  
I have been banished to the Rock of Death,  
I have violated the taboo,  
And only the ostracized may speak to me.

This is nothing tangible.  
It will slip through my fingers,  
As I desperately cling onto the grains;  
Billions of years in the making  
With only a few moments left.  
If she is lucky,  
She will turn into glass  
That no one can look through.

She will erode into the sea,  
Embracing the currents like a lost lover;  
Touch the living no longer.

You have heard the cicadas shriek  
I promise those are the cries of The Damned,  
Have you heard silence on a summer's night?

This Being has no absolute;  
I am in a holographic universe.



## SAYING GOODBYE IS HARD, SO INSTEAD EAT SOME SWEET TREATS

*By Melanie Kim*

College is hard. It's a new chapter in a young adult's life. Getting through these past few years haven't been the easiest, but with the help of taking it day by day, support systems, and some sweet treats, it's been a memorable time. While I can't share every special memory from my college career, I decided to share some sweet treat recipes that encompass each year.

### **First Year: Fresh, Fun, Fear (Fudge Brownie Cookies)**

During my first year at UGA, I lived in the dorms, specifically Myers, and had the unlimited dining hall pass. My dorm symbolized the warmth that freshman year had; it was where all my friends would take naps, laugh, and watch TV shows. The dining hall was also a special place: my friend and I would have debrief sessions, study when we were sick of the libraries, and eat until our pants felt like they would pop off. Every time we walked out of the dining halls, we would drop off our stacks of plates and head to the dessert section. Our mission was clear: like the stacks of our empty plates, our goal was to grab stacks and stacks of the fudge brownie cookies. Getting consensus amongst hundreds of college students is difficult; still, it is a well-known principle to claim that the fudge brownie cookies were superior among all the dining hall desserts.

*1/4 cup of water because that's all I drank ever  
4 teaspoons of going to the dining hall to get just a single cookie  
2 cups of embarrassment because I got locked out of my room  
1 cup of huffing and puffing up the UGA hills  
1 teaspoon of fearing for my life as I get up on my lofted bed  
1 cup spontaneous adventures with my friends  
1/4 teaspoon of rotting away in the science library*

*3 tablespoons of going to my first-ever football game  
1/8 teaspoon of struggling to find my people*

I choose fudge brownies cookies because of the memories they represent: the warm memories of my friends, the ease of life- and lack of responsibility, and the vibrancy of my perspective.

### **Second Year: Easy Peasy Adulthood (Brownies)**

During my second year, I lived off-campus. I had a year of being a college student under my belt and thus began my superiority complex. I suppose every second-year student feels this, starting from high school. The minute we weren't first years, they became our enemies, walking the streets complaining about how freshmen were walking slowly, taking forever in the dining hall lines, and acting rambunctious. In hindsight, I was a freshman only 3 months prior and most likely acted in the same manner. However, to give credit to myself and other sophomores, this is the year of the biggest change. We live off-campus, take harder classes, and are cementing who we are as well as our habits.

*1/2 cup of learning to cook, bake, and figuring out how to live in an apartment  
1 cup of figuring out how to take time for myself  
2 large of making purposeful plans with friends  
1 teaspoon of taking leadership positions in extracurriculars  
1/3 cup of exploring restaurants and cafes downtown and outside of campus  
1/2 cup of locking in at Tate instead of libraries  
1/4 teaspoon of a superiority complex  
1/4 teaspoon of finding my passions*

I chose brownies for two reasons: they are easy and customizable. Sophomore year was the biggest year of adjustment, as classes were getting harder, and living in apartments (as opposed to a dorm where you could always see your friends) made it a bit lonely at times. Brownies can be made either quickly without much thought with a box mix, or they can take an hour to make from scratch. The difference in effort and thought was what sophomores represented: the need to find a balance between a student and a young adult.

### Senior Year: One Last Slice for the Road (Cake)

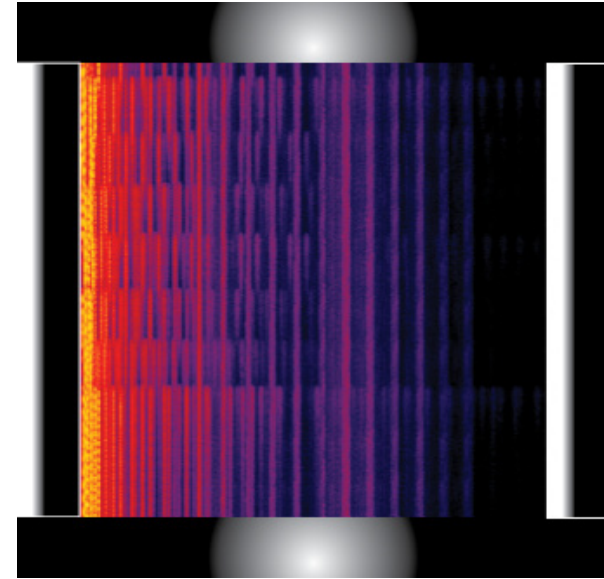
My senior year was also my third year at UGA. Because I decided to graduate early, life seemed to speed up yet also slow down. I was finally an upperclassman and academically was only sharing classes with people I had studied with for the past few years. The anxiety of leaving undergrad behind set in and set me on a course of remembrance and nostalgia. I stopped rushing to class with my head down and looked around. Sometimes, I realized UGA was beautiful. I started to cherish the ease of being in college and the community I had formed over the past 3 years.

*1 cup of applying to jobs  
1 1/2 cups, plus 2 tbsp for sprinkling the top of spending time  
with friends  
2 tsp of going on hikes  
1/2 cup of senioritis  
1 tsp of graduation anxiety  
1/2 tsp of constantly being reminded I was "old"  
1/2 tsp of going to the farmer's market  
2 cups glued in cafes downtown  
1 cup of rotting on my floor*

I chose cake as it symbolizes a new beginning, a celebration of leaving this chapter of my life.

# FLOATING AWAY

*By Isa Davis*



I composed a song as my contribution to the online magazine. Using a layered synth, I aimed to create a calm, futuristic tone—reflecting how the future can feel overwhelming at times. Through the music, I wanted to reassure listeners that everything will be okay, even as we drift away from the safety and comfort of college life. Above is the album art, featuring a zoomed-in image of the song's spectrogram.



## ON BEGINNINGS & ENDINGS:

### A (Senior) Photo Essay

*By Aizhia Poblete*

As a student freelance photographer for friends at the University of Georgia, I have been able to capture one of life's special achievements - collegiate senior photos.

Especially at such a renowned University, UGA students are surrounded by years-old traditions, landmarks, and legacies; such senior photos are celebrations of 4-5 years of cramming for exams, over-caffeinating, and pulling all-nighters. This milestone is only achieved through hard work and dedication.

Being a senior myself (who graduates in May!), the thought of leaving UGA certainly brings a tear to my eye, but I am more than ready for what is beyond the doors of undergraduate studies. Taking these beautiful, nostalgic photos for others as a tangible keepsake of their dedication to UGA has been a wonderful and reflective experience - I understand how special these final moments are, and I am thankful to have the opportunity to capture them.

I have asked 4 of my senior photo "clients" to answer the following: How has your life changed since these photos were taken? Who were you then, who are you now? In addition, they have provided their high school senior photos so they can compare them with their collegiate photos. Senior Pictures can tell thousands of words - these words perfectly capture Beginnings and Endings in a bit-sweet manner.

## EMMA McCOUGHLIN

UGA Spring  
'24 Graduate



My life has changed immensely since these photos were taken! Looking at these photos really brought me back to that time of my life and the emotions that come with leaving home and graduating high school. I remember feeling very confused and anxious for what was to come and being pulled in many different directions by the people in my life. It took five years and three different universities for me to find where I felt I truly belonged, but I wouldn't change it for the world.

When I look at these photos, I see a baby-faced 17-year-old who, despite the big smile, was feeling lost and unsure about what to do with her life. I was becoming restless with my day to day life that comes with being a high schooler but terrified to leave my friends, family, and coworkers behind. I am now a happy and healthy 23 year old, working as a flight attendant for a major US airline in Charlotte, which has been my dream career since I was a little girl. Throughout the years, and especially during college, I have come to realize that it is ok to take the road less traveled- your story is yours alone, and no one else can write it for you.

## LAUREN McCLARY

UGA Fall  
'24 Graduate



While I am exactly where I expected to be in life, I have changed so much since my high school graduation. I have grown in my confidence and how I value relationships in my life. While it was never a doubt that I wanted to be a Music Therapist, high school Lauren would have never had the courage to move halfway across the country to make her dreams come true. On top of that, falling even more in love with violin, putting on a recital, AND holding some form of leadership role in organizations she loves dearly. I remember the thought of moving to Georgia for college terrifying me, yet it was the best decision of my life. I have met amazing friends, had amazing opportunities, and grown so much as a person in the last 4 years. Never in my wildest dreams would I have expected to challenge myself the way I have in the past year, but I hope my past self knows that everything has worked out and that I'm continuing to push myself more everyday.



## BELLA PECK

UGA Spring  
'25 Graduate



Looking back at the beginning of college, I was stepping into a world of new possibilities, unsure of what was ahead but excited for the journey. Growing up in the same house in Marietta, GA, everything about UGA felt big and full of potential. Over the years, through my sorority, SGA, and the unforgettable experience of two national championships, I've grown into a more confident, independent, and well-rounded person. I've learned to embrace change, chase opportunities, and appreciate the moments that make this time so special. Who I was then—a hopeful freshman—is still a part of me, but now I leave with a clearer sense of who I am and where I'm headed.

## ELISE LARSON

UGA Spring  
'25 Graduate



Young adulthood has been a strange in-between. When I reflect on these pictures, I can viscerally identify with exactly what my life felt like at the time, but at the same time, that person is, in many ways, completely unrecognizable. Throughout these past few years, I am still that same senior in high school as I pose for my college senior photos, but I realize that I have grown and expanded so much around who that person was.

New people, perspectives, heartbreaks, and friendships have added so much color and dimension to my life since my senior year. Overall, my world has opened up to be so much larger than this younger version of myself could understand. She's still there though, and I still identify with her all the time. I still love the same things, have the same friends, and even act in total accordance with how that girl would've to the situations in my life today. I feel very lucky that I can still hold on to this person I've been, while growing so much around this person who stands in the long line of nesting dolls that make the sum of who I am.

Taking senior photos for some of my dearest friends is truly a labor of love; however, the time I get to spend adjusting dress straps, tassels on caps, and straightening out graduation robes makes it all worth it.

Pictures can hold thousands of words, and comparing old senior photos to new ones can truly be a bittersweet, reflective experience. The people we grow into after 4 to 5 years can be captured tangibly through photography—however, the people we become emotionally and mentally can be found through introspection.

Even in my reflection, too, have I realized that I am an entirely different person than who I was during my high school senior photos; making memories and new friends, experiencing greater hardships, and simply just living more life allows us all to become transformed.

How beautiful it is to compare these photos and see the crinkles form in the corner of our eyes, hair getting longer (or even changing color), and our smiles infinitely brighter.

In a way, these collegiate senior photos are merely parting love letters—love letters that tangibly capture the beauty, personality, and ties that we have to our own respective schools. Such letters are bittersweet ways to pay homage to the institutions that have built us.

# A MOTHER'S SACRIFICE

By Natalee Bavani

She was courageous  
And strong  
And confident

She traveled  
And studied  
And loved

And in this world  
Where she truly lived  
I did not.



## A Conversation with Charles Johnson

Interview by Julianna Duennes Russ

***This interview was conducted on March 27, 2025,  
at Joe Brown Hall in Athens, Georgia.***

////////////////////////////////////  
**JR:** *Middle Passage* is set in 1830. You wrote it in the 80s and it was published in 1990. How did you capture the texture of that time so well? What was your approach?

**CJ:** The more I think about it, I realize how much writing I've done set in the 19th century. I never expected that to be the case. I did study the 19th century as much as I could for the novel before *Middle Passage*, called *Ox-herding Tale*, because I needed to know that world and the props and the costuming. And then after that, I had an opportunity to write about the oldest living American. His name was Charlie Smith—137 supposedly—in 1977 for a PBS drama. That's set in the past.

So I found myself writing a lot of stories, not in my own time, but also, you know, in the past. The whole purpose was to make it convincing enough to the reader that you were in 1830. It's not, you know, 1990. However, I do not see myself as a historical fiction writer. There are people who do that for a living, and they're much better than me.

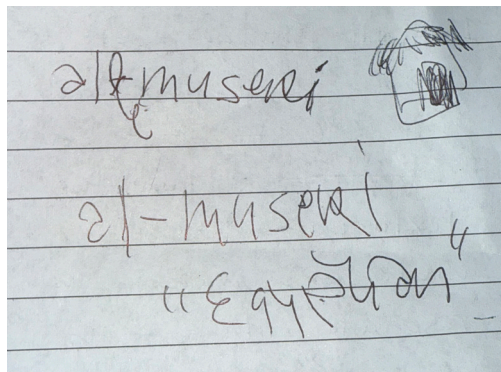
I see myself as basically writing for a contemporary audience. The book, the story, should not feel like a transcript from the 19th century, like a Frederick Douglass slave narrative. It's for modern readers, and it should have the texture, as best I could do it, of the period. But I'm not a historical fiction writer.

*JR: To follow up on that, obviously you explored a lot of Buddhist themes through the Allmuseri in the novel. I'm interested in how you stayed true to the historical elements of the novel, while also incorporating those more philosophical themes that were personal to you. How did you go about blending those?*

**CJ:** The Allmuseri... I could tell you how I got that name. It was really by accident. When I thought, "How am I going to construct this tribe?" I wanted to show the tribe in all of its dimensions. Religious dimensions, you know, their rituals, just everything—I was creating a people.

I drew upon African and Indian and Buddhist sources. I went to Paris, and there was a poet there who took me around named Ted Jones. He took me to a museum and he showed me an African exhibit that he really liked. He told me a story about the exhibit and the people. As an example, if you were not of a tribe and you came to it, they would spit at your feet. And if you were a Westerner, you might think, Oh, I'm being insulted. But that's not true. They felt they were saying, "Your feet must be hot, hot and tired. We want to give you moisture, right?" I said, okay, that's cool. I like that tribe. I use that, I think, in *Middle Passage*. And then there's stuff from India, what people are doing in Kerala, India, and then a lot of Buddhism. So they're an amalgamation of different spiritual sources, because I wanted them to seem like the most spiritual tribe on earth, and the original tribe of humankind.

The name itself... I'll tell you how it happened. You got a pen or pencil? I'll show you what I'm talking about.



**CJ:** One of my really short stories, my first novel *Faith and the Good Thing*, was a folk tale that has lots of magic. So I read 80 books on magic. I came across this word, and what it meant was, I thought, like a hut, you know, in a village where magic was taking place. So, you know, Al-museri. So I wrote a short story called *The Education of Mingo*. He had to be from somewhere. So I just said, okay, he was from the Al-museri tribe. But what I did was, I took out the hyphen and put an L, so it's like Allmuseri. So that's how that happened. But then I did another novel, *Oxherding Tale*, and again, I said, okay, I gotta have an African character. Where's he from? I could have made him Ethiopian, but I wanted my own creation, so I made him an Allmuseri.

By the time I got to *Middle Passage*, the whole point was, now I gotta really open this up. What's their religion? What's their language like? So you get all that. But I was on the road talking to people about the novel, and you know what this means? Al-museri. It's Egyptian. It means "the Egyptian," and the airline in Egypt is called Almasria, and people joke about it because it's not a good airline. They say it's really "all misery." That's what they call it. Just by accident, I took that word, added an L, dropped the hyphen to get Allmuseri, but it really means "the Egyptian." It's how the creative mind works, sometimes by accident, by association, and it just falls together.

*JR: I know you've spoken in other interviews about your understanding of dependent origination, and I'm interested in how that understanding might have influenced your writing when you were conceptualizing the Allmuseri and the way that the past, present and future intersect in their perspective, as compared to the Western-oriented linear progression of time.*

**CJ:** I don't really think I made a distinction on the basis of time with the Allmuseri. I do know they believe in interconnectedness between people, which is a very Buddhist idea. And theirs is a very different vision than Captain Falcon. But they tragically have to break from their own vision of life to be free, because they have to kill their captors. I think it's a line that says, "Falcon won, because they had to be as bloodthirsty as he has been." Ngonyama, their leader, grieves over that after the mutiny in which they've had to kill most of the crew. So it's karma, you know, and he knows that's going to come back and they'll suffer for it.



*JR: It seems in the novel that history isn't something that just happens. The narrative structure of having Rutherford write these passages makes it so much more of an intimate experience for the reader, because you're there as these things are happening, you're hearing it from his perspective. How do you think fiction lets us experience history in a different way than textbooks do? And how did you use that to help the legacy of the Middle Passage resonate now?*

**CJ:** For some reason, I got inducted into the Society of American Historians. I don't know why that happened, because I've written all these stories set in history. So why did they induct me in this? You know, I'm just a writer who reads a lot of history and tries to incorporate it, right? But I do know there's an important difference. Stephen Oates, I believe is his name, is a historian at Amherst.

I wrote a novel after Middle Passage called *Dreamer*, about Martin Luther King, Jr. I was on a book tour, and [Oates] came to the bookstore where I was signing copies of *Dreamer*, and he said it was the best book he'd seen on King. And he wrote a wonderful book on King called *Let the Trumpet Sound*. Here's the trick. He tells Martin Luther King's story as a story—beginning, middle and end, building so it's suspenseful. He uses novelistic techniques. And then after I talked to him, I saw the next move he made as a historian in his writing. He uses more creative writing techniques in terms of viewpoint and things like that.

There's an intimate connection between what somebody does, who's a historical novelist, and the historian. You want to dramatize, as a novelist, the historical record. You want to hear people talking to each other. Dialogue. You want to see a scene. You may have to imagine what that is on the basis of historical research, and it's not going to be exactly the way it was, probably, but maybe close enough so that the reader emotionally feels the history and the characters. And in a strict history, they may not feel that. They may not have dramatic scenes, they may not have vivid dialogue. Stephen Oates is very sensitive to that, because history is stories.

*JR: Thank you for your time, Professor Johnson.*

# SOOT

*By Mann Sy Tha*

On my way home from my shift at the local pizza place, I found myself walking in pace with a man. I didn't know who it was at first, having caught up to him from behind. I only saw that the man was covered in soot, as if he had emerged from the heart of Appalachia, or from cleaning at another pizza joint with an even worse oven.

I'd just gotten off my shift, filling in for someone who called out sick. The other person we had that shift dropped out last minute over something else that was probably bullshit. Everything was bullshit to my manager though, he was the type who couldn't stick to just one grievance when he got going. First, it was the no-shows, then it was me, because it was my first closing shift and it showed. That was whatever though. I was actually pretty proud that I didn't lose it. Up ahead, I spotted the folded hourglass of a Diet Coke can. My foot brushed past. Didn't even kick it. If there has been some ember flickering in my core it was easily snuffed out.

I didn't know why I felt such an immediate kinship with the man before me. He wasn't in uniform. I also wasn't aware of any other pizza spots around. I caught up because he walked slowly. He glanced back at me as I was about to pass, and I made sure my hands were languid and visible when a white smile greeted me.

"Reid!" he shouted. Despite the streaks of black against his skin, the coating that flattened his curls, I recognized my childhood friend Anthony. He was beaming at me, and in a rush I was smiling back at him.

"Reid? My guy, where you been bro?"

"Here the whole time, I should be asking you the same thing."

We were walking side by side now. Anthony kept on.

"How you been? Haven't been getting into any trouble have ya?"

"Ah, I haven't been," I said. "Keeping my head down, haven't done anything stupid in a while."

"Yeah?" he asked, "I see that uniform! Mind slipping me a slice sometime?"

"If I could slip anything it wouldn't just be a slice of pizza, I'll tell you that."

He laughed and swung his hand out as if to clap me on the back. In my mind's eye I saw a cloud of black particles flying out onto my cheeks and all against my sides. Then his hand fell, following the arc of his arm, back the way it came to slap his thigh. Between street lamps still unactivated, I paused, wondering if a black cloud did puff out. It was on the cusp of winter, a quarter past 6 p.m., and the dimming light was weak. It trembled slightly, holding aloft, far from my eyes, like a poorly tuned magnifying glass, a grainy filter where edges become suggestions and any minutia was a smear, the mere impression of shadows in the dark.

Anthony was still chattering, talking all about the trouble we'd get up to when we were young. "Oh, and what the hell did we do to get Mrs. Ishee cussing us out? She wasn't even teaching us that year, right? Was it seventh grade? No..."

The way he trailed off I figured he'd realized.

"Sixth, maybe," I said. I didn't want to leave him hanging despite myself.

"Nah man, cause remember? That was the summer before I left."

Unconsciously, my hand felt for my pocket. "Yeah? Why did you end up leaving by the way?"

"Fuck if I know, my parents couldn't make up their minds right up until the day we moved. We didn't even get a van or nothing, just tossed out half our shit and took like eight trips for the rest."

"Ah, crazy shit man."

"Yeah, insane."

"Can't believe we survived that."

"Yeah."

We had been walking, I remember a fine sheen of sweat on both our foreheads that gleamed in the summer sun. We'd just hopped the wireframe fence, that was why Mrs. Ishee was screaming, and we were still laughing minutes out, caught up cracking jokes, when some guy almost ran into us. He was brisk and we barely dodged opposite ways as he cut through. Lightly jarred, but still laughing.

I remember the man's neck, covered not in an even perspiration but a web of striations, the rivulets flowing down to contour his jugular. His hands were in his hoodie pocket and his eyes were a bit wide when we heard a tire screech. The man's hands left his pockets and the sidewalk around us popped. Then we were running, our backpacks bouncing as the bullets ricocheted past from the street and I tripped amidst the shouts and revving of engines, my forehead slamming into the concrete. Everything rang so close and loud. When I looked up, Anthony was a dark silhouette rounding the corner. I couldn't see his face. He didn't look back.

I didn't see him the rest of that summer. When he didn't turn up the first week of classes I asked around and heard his folks had moved out up north, been planning to for a while. He'd never told me, and now he was telling me he had so many chances. He'd had eight opportunities, eight back and forths of escalating goodbyes, eight moments looking in the rearview mirror of his parent's beat up Honda to maybe wonder, maybe think back on... maybe I was being harsh. The results were the same. I thought about that summer, how as far as I was concerned we'd never meet back up, never face each other again, and I was left alone to contend with what remained. I didn't walk past that spot again. It was easy not to, that stretch of sidewalk wasn't an efficient route anywhere I wanted to go since. And if it was, what was another block?

We were walking, I alongside him, veering off a couple blocks from my usual route. I realized that we were close to that

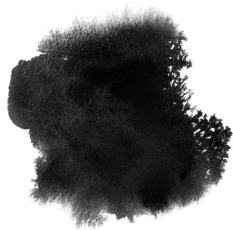
cracked sidewalk, our route running a block parallel. It was dark and I wasn't scared. Shootouts were rare and no one was out for me. I knew that, just as I felt now this heated sense of inevitability. It was a feeling you carried within. One you grew up with, and its presence or void can always be marked.

That summer I became a furnace, one that continued to burn for years. I'd sent his afterimage, that stupid fourteen year old, all the hatred and resentment I could. It choked me. It burned itself out years ago, still incomplete, whatever was left blackened and insubstantial but downright carcinogenic. Whenever I felt that acrid burn in my lungs I scrubbed deep into the recesses, scraped all the stubborn, ugly bits off. I'd put in the work. It should've been enough.

Anthony was looking at me from the side. "You alright, man?"

Why did he look meek now, his mouth shut as if he were leaving it up to me how I should react. I took a breath, felt the air expand in my lungs like bellows fanning the flame. I stopped under a light, and Anthony paused to look back at me. He was picking up more soot. It fell onto him, drenched his outline, obscuring him into just shadow. It covered him, piling up all on his shoulders and the top of his head, in the spaces behind his ears. In the growing silence, I really wondered how I'd known it was him. A shadow and an outline, words that should've come but wouldn't.

Anthony stood before me now. How was it that we had been talking this long, wrapped up in an immediate familiarity, and it was only at this point I felt I recognized him? The street lights flickered. I felt the urge to shake his hand, to dap him up, to wring his neck, to shove him as we did when we were young and the streets glowed with new life.



## PETALS FALL

*By Maria Suggs*

You've fallen out of my memory  
bits and pieces at a time  
The lines on your hand  
the shape of your nose  
How you smelled when you were close

I wonder if mourning  
Is really the right word.

I am sad I have ghosts of you in my memory  
Doing laundry while we spoke  
Telling secrets in a parking lot  
I am frustrated that I know you,  
knew you?  
Your favorite candy to pick off the shelf  
Songs you loved to play in your car  
Haunting my senses with familiarity

And if I'm grieving,  
When will it cease?

Your name brings me back  
Like the smell of home,  
A reality I can no longer acknowledge.  
You've fallen out of my memory  
But the roots remain.





# IS THERE STILL TIME?

On *I Saw The TV Glow*, Temporality, and Abundance

By Joseph Mazzola

[Spoilers for *I Saw The TV Glow*]

At the end of Act 2 in Jane Schoenbrun's 2024 feature film *I Saw The TV Glow*, a shot dissolves from lead character Owen working at a movie theater to a suburban road. Chalk-drawn swirls and ghosts cover the asphalt with the text "**there is still time**" in bold lettering in the foreground. Literally, this is a message for Owen to tell him there is still time to make a crucial decision. The film follows Owen and his friend from high school, Maddy, the latter of whom claims to have entered the fictional world of *The Pink Opaque*, a television show they both watched as teenagers. Maddy tells Owen that they are actually the protagonists of the show, Isabel and Tara, two teenagers who fight the supernatural. Maddy says that she and Owen are supposed to be there, in *The Pink Opaque*. The season 5 finale of the show ends with Isabel and Tara captured, drugged, and buried underground. Maddy tells Owen that they must return to *The Pink Opaque* (by burying themselves, of course) to continue the show.

At the end of Act 2, Owen refuses to join her.

This is supposed to be final. Owen decides not to join Maddy, and he never sees her again. The assertion that "**there is still time**" gives Owen room. There is at least a potential, a window, for Owen to (re)turn to *The Pink Opaque*—to what is real and true, should he take Maddy's word as such. Or, as Owen put it, return to some place and become someone "beautiful and powerful . . . very far away on the other side of a television screen."

"**There is still time**" is not a commandment; it is information. The chalk message only proclaims that there is still time for Owen. It tells Owen what he has, not what he ought to do. The only reason to read this as a suggestion instead of a decision is because Maddy told Owen they need to return to *The Pink Opaque*. This decision is ultimately what the film's plot hinges upon.

The imperative to return comes from Maddy. She tells Owen that time felt like it was moving too fast in this world. What's more crucial for Maddy is that, if she and Owen do not return to *The Pink Opaque*, they will suffocate and die—a fate the protagonists are already suffering. Staying in this world—what Maddy refers to as "The Midnight Realm," the mythical place in *The Pink Opaque* where Isabel and Tara were sent after their kidnapping and drugging; and what Owen refers to as "just suburbs"—means suffocation. For Maddy, who says they are Isabel and Tara, there is an imperative to move-move-bury-bury-return-to-the-soil. Remember that time is moving too fast. So, for Maddy, staying in "The Midnight Realm" means risking actual death.

But not yet.

Taken in isolation, "**there is still time**" is remarkably open. It suggests *abundance*. An abundance of time, always more time to become something or someone, or to go some place, to decide differently is allotted to Owen. If the viewer takes Maddy's word as truth, there may be an imperative *that* Owen does this. Nothing in the phrase "**there is still time**," however, necessitates that Owen decide to return *now*.

"Decide" comes from the Latin "*decidere*." "De-" meaning "off" or "remove," "*caedere*" meaning "to cut"—literally meaning "to cut off." To decide means to cut off or remove the possibility of one outcome for the reality of another. This initially implies finality. "To decide" conclusively sets *what will be* and *what will not be* as two separate worlds. Schoenbrun pushes the limits of that notion.

Owen's decision to stay in The Midnight Realm is not absolute, binding, or ultimate. This is a decision that can be revoked, reworked, re-evaluated, or taken back—provided Owen takes the proper steps to (re)turn to *The Pink Opaque*. If "**there is still time**," there necessarily must *be* time for Owen to decide differently. Perhaps an abundance of time. Perhaps not *enough* time, or perhaps not *more* time than is needed. Perhaps *too little* time. But there is time *still*, perhaps an abundance of it—the chalk does not indicate that this is or is not the case—waiting for Owen. **There is still time** to change something, to move to a new world, to become someone new, should Owen decide to act on that. This assertion of time's apparent availability is not only a reassurance for Owen; it is an affirmation that what Is Now does not Need To Be Then.

# HORROR VACUI

*By Samantha Fallon*

The study of vacuums has fascinated chemists, engineers, physicists, and the general public since the dawn of science and observation. To wonder about matter is inherently to wonder about the absence of it. Scientific development has pushed us to create progressively ideal vacuums, yet we have not, and will not, achieve perfection. A perfect vacuum (one without the presence of any matter) is only theoretically possible due to pesky protons inhabiting space. In the face of this impossibility, scientists and researchers continue to pursue proximity to the unmanageable with fervor.

Despite these advancements, the vacuum we encounter most is not the biggest vacuum in the world (The Space Power Facility at NASA Glenn Research Center's Plum Brook Station with over 800,000 cubic feet of space) or the one that cleans your carpets. The greatest man-made vacuum must be the one we have imposed upon ourselves - A divorce of the humanities from natural sciences. As a student of both disciplines, I have seen firsthand the systemic and forced separation between these fields. From the battle for funding and representation to the physical division of North and South campus (much greater than a measly 800,000 cubic feet) it appears as though art and science are constantly at odds. The injustice of this boundary creates future professionals who are stuck in boxes and unwilling to expand their portfolio.

Despite the difficulty of bridging this gap, we all embody the arts and sciences in our daily lives. Each brush-stroke of an artist can be simplified to the electrical impulses of their body and each research paper written can, in some way, be considered an artistic expression. To branch out instead of existing in a singularity is against the wishes of a societal vacuum, but in perfect alignment with natural forces. Branching out can often appear a matter of infiltrating a sterile space as a proton infiltrates a scientist's matter-free chamber but know in a short time you will not exist alone.

# SENIOR SEMINAR

## in COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

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