

Issue 1 | Winter 2021

SPELLBINDER

A Quarterly Literary and Art Magazine

Fiction

Kaitlan Bui

Poetry

John Grey

Essay

Olympe Scherer

Art

Alicia Markey

Cover

Linda Arrighi



Spellbinder
Winter 2021

Spellbinder

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ISBN: 9798588895507

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EDITOR'S LETTER

We are incredibly excited to be able to share the first Winter issue of *Spellbinder* quarterly literary and art magazine with you. When Covid-19 plunged the world into national lockdowns and left people with very little to do except read books and watch films in their homes, we were reminded of the importance of the arts, such as literature and film-making in entertaining our society, in keeping it going during the hardest of times.

This led us to consider the value of magazines in helping people to reconnect with literature and art. The act of reading provides us with the opportunity to engage and feel emotionally connected with other people; we believe that this is especially important in the wake of the pandemic. As Zadie Smith has observed, in her essay 'Suffering like Mel Gibson', our 'misery is very precisely designed, and different for each person'; whilst one living alone might 'have never known such loneliness', an individual living with company might have 'dreams of isolation within isolation'. The potential for writing to explore and communicate across these differences, to transcend the physical restraints of spatial distancing is something that is more powerful than ever now.

Wanting to create something positive out of the undoubtedly devastating year of 2020, we set about creating the magazine. Our organisation was established with the aim of giving emerging writers a platform upon which their work could be valued and celebrated. Our attempt to find new talent was launched in October of this year. From the outset we were keen to hear from a diverse range of voices and so

international marketing was a very immediate strategy for us. It was not long at all before we were sifting through all of the submissions, deciding which ones would get a place in our very first issue. We are delighted by the responses we have received and the diversity of our contributors. Reading the poems, essays, and stories, as well as looking at the fantastic art works submitted, has been a very enjoyable experience. It has been incredibly interesting to engage with the variety of themes, styles and forms our contributors have used in order to create their art.

Setting up a magazine like this at the same time as pursuing our own postgraduate studies has been no easy task, but it is one that has brought us closer together and has reminded us of the importance of creating a global network of contributors and readers who will interact with and inspire one another to become better writers. This is not unlike the environment we cultivated together when we first met at Durham University Creative Writing society.

Now that the editing and formatting process has finally been completed, we cannot wait to begin the long-awaited 2021 with the publication of this magazine. We hope that the publication will continue to grow, and that this moment is just the start of an incredible artistic journey which will stimulate international conversation around the arts for many years to come.

By Amber Kennedy

POETRY

On Joining Arabic Class at University

Why you are learning Arabic
I do not ask
My hijab outs me as foreigner,
Un-American,
A target on
my back, or
on my head

Your gun is drawn

Resist: There is war on your hands

Mother wants me to learn Arabic
I try in tongue-twisted words of
what was left
behind in a country that is
no longer mine

My pronunciation is fluid. I know all
the letters that reach so far into your
throat I wish you'd at least try harder

I do not ask because we all know
why you are here:

Why we learn how to say army
before children
Why the word for government is in
the first chapter with salaam--
greetings that mean peace

The government has never been on
our side

You didn't have to be Arab to see
our pain
Why there are blood-scruffed
children
Why their last words are breath-
starved

And we are left in the country that
destroyed our homes

Amongst ruins, we learn our mother
tongue in school
with you
Grandmother nods
at my bro ken syl la bles

I wonder if you feel remorse
Think about Arab children who
cower at your drones
Think about Arabs scattered around
the world
looking
for

new homes
I hope you feel it every time you say
salaam

Tahani Almujaheed

Promontorium Sacrum

Honey buzzard soars above
the salt-brush,
Steeply rising from the ocean
furnace,
Lifted high by hot winds, steeper still
climbs
Over Sagres; at the end of the world.

Past a crumbling chapel held
up by
Strange oaths, relics from holy lands,
Henry sending blood stones to
Canary Isles,
Rotting parvelos marking forgotten
madness.

Over singing fishermen
casting hungry sea songs,
Hanging high lines that intertwine
cliff ties,
Morsels dangling in remorseless
tides,
Praying for heroic meaning in the
catch.

Laden sirocco dust winds
call forth
Atlantic moon beams dragging ocean
swells,
Land is cast and cast again, returning

Him, not wanting and determined.

Single sand grains are the
shoreline,
Ocean spray forms the sea whole,
Darkly shadows are the night sky,
Buzzard feels the cosmic magnetism.

John Kelly

Atlas

The star always in the same pane,
third from the left
like a box it's kept in is nothing,
probably
just travel exhausted light but gutters
on regardless.
The wonder it stokes

in my small, animal imagination is a
close, warm, space
in the dark when the sound of my
heart expanding and collapsing
seems more house noise than bodily
function.
What constellation is that,

the story of the stop between beats?
A clock is watched in expectation but
stars are watched
to see what's been; not till, past. In
the pauses between
sleep cycles they,

in their dogged runs, lull us into
assuming that
today's experience is tomorrow's
promise.
Which is what I'm doing now,
watching remembered morning

turn the redbud suckers thin and
bright as crazes in glass,

anticipating morning while night
lasts, which is what night does, a
sightless day for our kind anyway.
How cold the black around the star
looks and funny how often smallness
causes us to imagine ourselves large,

like looking at a distant mountain and
pinching it between fingers or lying
now in bed imagining I'd like to
grow giant size and stride out of the
house and down this hill which is
itself a pinched remnant,

but even giant I know that I'd be just
a small thing keeping still within a
larger shape like the centre of a crow
in the rain. Smallness is of a course
for a thing born where
there is more nothing than anything.

This bed is commonplace and warm
with promise,
a given name in a clutter of unsigned
things,
a kind of public recording and I feel
claimed
if by nothing but needs temporarily
met and

the sweet pop of vertebrae adjusting.
When I close my eyes I see
my atoms arrayed, my own emitting
light,
my own distant sisters; like me
not burning but radiating

effort, shouldering the order of
things. Sometimes I wake
in the memory of a long gone
intimacy and that star and I are
bound like that, coinciding for a
while and then separated by degrees,
following momentum

through the matter of the hundred
billion souls scaffolding Atlas. But
that's tomorrow's work. Tonight
I'll watch time pass until it slips
beyond the window frame,
and stall, bed in my senses while I
can.

Matt Thomas

Devonian Virtue

Ammonite ridges
Suspend the dust among us,
In suspired need,
Of being uncovered.
Weathered rings of rock,
Permeate the dualities,
If we stay to be cemented
Under Earth's duress.

That if in understanding
The depth of all that is concentric,
Burdened with exacted age,
Are kept within brittle crevices,
Then tomorrow,
We would absolve
Those behind to leave
The limpid truth
In positions of sleep.

Gabrielle Loren

The Magic Wishing Well

Once upon a time in the valley of Blessed Nell
by mountain side overhang, there stood a water well.
I was young,
there was so much to see,
so sit down and listen to this story you must hear to believe.

The hillside fairy nymphs were good
when one's adoration for the surroundings were understood;
so their alluring magic was found in that well,
so deep inside this enchanting valley of Blessed Nell.

There was a miner's daughter named Angel Em',
she was more lovely than a string of fresh bass hanging on an
oak limb.
My eyes were soon fixed,
my young heart was spooning heavy,
for this mesmerizing angel who drove a 1926 Superior Chevy.

She was wild,
and so was I,
this silent ghost of river basin and the forest blanketed hill side.
She kept food on the table
when her Pap was no longer able;
this beautiful pixie who lived in an A framed cabin by the
wishing well,
so deep in the West Virginia valley of Blessed Nell.

I soon adored her so passionately,
but she knew me not;
so I listened closely to the ageless tales of the local elders,

praying to the Puck King Fairy at the wishing well;
kissing silver coins, wishing hard, and tossing them in,
while longing that a binding love with that darling, Angel,
might soon commence.

The movement of true love took quite a long while,
between me and this immaculate miner's child.
When love finally came it burned so scorching hot,
lo the magic of the hillside fairies had finally proven their lot;
in this valley of Blessed Nell,
near the mountain overhang by the wishing well.

With such intense passion we both were soon overcome,
my phantom gazes backward now: there's no one to blame.
Her father hated all out-landers and wouldn't allow her gentle
hand to go,
as he roared and screamed by his pot bellied stove.
One dark and dreary day both me and his dear Angel bid fare
thee well,
then we rode the bucket down to the bottom of that water pit
in Blessed Nell.

We ne'er meant to make him so disappointed,
we ne'er meant to make him cry,
our ghosts now long to explain our reasons why;
but for all eternity we are forever bound
to the bottom of this bewitching water pit a hundred feet
down;
so deep in the West Virginia valley of Blessed Nell,
by the old A framed cabin at the water well.

H.L. Dowless

The Artist

In Greek tragedies it always
takes a preponderance
Why would birds' silhouette have
the chiaroscuro of dreams?

Richard P Feynman was fascinated
by the Moon; he tried in earnest to
see the Moon. But science could only
see the
Moon as a mere glob of gas atoms!

The Moon too mesmerises me;
But for me the *Moon is a Muse*.
She engulfs me in my nights of
loneliness. And embalms me
with her love.

Avijeet Rabindranath Das



L

Stranger to Me

Some memories are thin air.
Or they take vacations,
for years, one or two of them.

And they're lazy.
Not workaholics like
the ones I'm pleased to remember.

Or they're restless
like the people in them,
don't stick around for
when I want to recall.

Or they're considerate,
slip away, knowing that
a mind is limited,
and room must be available
for ideas.

As to why
you're a stranger to me,
some memories are good
at taking orders.

John Grey

Unfolding

It waited
because flowers have the patience
innate to very few,
it waited for her to weary
of paint on lips and cheeks,
of flattering the eye-lashes,
teasing the brows.

It waited
while locks of hair
took foreign shape,
collar rose above
neck wrinkles,
until she'd exhausted all ways
of looking her loveliest.

It waited until she had
closed down her frustrated preening
before it opened fully.
She turned toward the vase
just as sun hit bud
and petals unfolded.

In her bedroom,
the satisfaction was purely the
flower's.

It was natural
not desirous,
a tribute to morning in kind,
not a vigil before the mirror.

John Grey



L

THE POETS

Tahani Almujaheed is a Yemeni-American writer from Dearborn, Michigan. She is an undergraduate studying English and International Studies at the University of Michigan - Ann Arbor. She currently works with Michigan Quarterly Review as an Editorial and Marketing Assistant. She has written for the Michigan Journal of International Affairs, Michigan Daily, Writer to Writer, Oakland Arts Review, and is forthcoming in other journals. She focuses her writing on her experiences, language, family history, identity, love, and loss. In her free time, you can find Tahani editing her friends' essays (or reading a good book).



John Kelly is an Irish poet and novel writer living in London.

Matt Thomas is a livestock farmer, D.C. tech worker, and occasional community college teacher. He lives with his partner and their daughter in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. His most recent work has appeared in *Tiny Seed Literary Journal*.



Gabrielle Loren is a university student and budding poet living in rural Durham.

H.L. Dowless is a national & international academic/ ESL Instructor. He has been a writer for over thirty years. His latest publications have been two books of nonfiction with Algora Publishing, and fictional publications with combo e-zines and print magazines: *Leaves Of Ink*, *Short Story Lovers*, *The Fear Of Monkeys*, and *Frontier Tales*.



Avijet Rabindranath Das is a poet, writer, and wanderer. His debut poetry book "A Handful of Shiulis" was published by Clare Songbirds Publishing House, New York in September 2017. He made it to the Wild Card Number - 6 long list in the Saboteur Awards UK in 2018. An art film "Muse" infusing his poetry with the digital artistry of Harvard University Visiting Artist, Carla Ciuffo, received applause in film festivals in 2018. His poetry, amalgamated with the photography of Vanessa Thomas, featured in "Worth 1000 Words Art Exhibition" in Bankhead Theater, California, in 2019. Apart from writing, he loves teaching and inspiring bright and curious minds to chase dreams and achieve their goals in life.



John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Soundings East*, *Dalhousie Review* and *Connecticut River Review*. His latest book, "Leaves On Pages", is available through Amazon.

SHORT STORIES

Fish

It has been raining for over two years now, every day the sky streaked in blue and grey. I have watched the pitter patter from the window of my home: strangers yielding to the madness in umbrella-less indifference, paying no attention to their soaking jeans and mushy hair. They put one spongy shoe in front of the other and trudge from steely bridge to steely bridge. It's an incredibly praiseworthy effort, really, in all that pouring rain. From my berth, I wish them wetness and life and blissful forgetfulness. Then I turn to my breakfast.

I myself am a very forgetful being. It's in our condition, and that's why we've been able to survive these past two years without much sunlight. Dreary days aren't pleasant, but they're liveable, and that's perfectly fine to me. Instead of dwelling on the sopping world outside, I float around in my home the way I imagine writers do. I piece together words from old water bottles and stolen chip bags and your great uncle Werner's newspaper clippings, and I make up stories to occupy myself. When I am too full of my own bland emotion, I bubble over, laying on my side, and I sip the air.

My friends think I'm strange for people-watching. They say it's useless, that I'll forget their faces anyway. But I can't help it. I can't help but feel an affinity towards the one or two strangers I see each day, their spines the only thing holding them up—that, and their lackluster expressions. Five times out of ten, they attempt a futile cigarette. Some carry books over their heads. Many look sad, and most seem busy. But in those brief moments of pause, I peer into their eyes and will them to return the gesture. I suspend myself in hope, waiting for them to pass on to me what is left of their human glimmer. I imagine that is how

transformation works, anyway: invisible streams of energy sailing from their oculi into mine. And as heavy as their frowns might be, I can always make out the slightest hint of a smile. It is this tiny potential of human joy that makes me return daily to my window.

I have people-watched every day since it began raining, and only one person has ever stared back. His name started with a V, and I only know that because of the newspaper headline I came across the next day. V had been walking the length of the bridge for what seemed like hours, his ankles steeped in rainwater, his socks so bloated they looked like pillows. He was one of those Umbrella-less Indifferents, too lost in his own world of rain and worry to account for the fever he was sure to suffer the following day. V stumbled over himself until he reached the middle of the Golden Gate. Then he paused and slowly turned his head towards me. From the rusty bridge railing, he peered down into the water, and tears—tears and not raindrops—slid from his face into the oceans below.

My whole world slowed at that moment—for it was my chance to finally touch a piece of human—and I swam in desperation towards V's dripping tears. My scales bristled against my body; my fins sliced through the grey water. And then I felt them: raw human tears. They melted into my bitter flesh, caressing every naked inch of me, licking the cold out of the San Francisco Bay. They beat on me like little hands of God, like exploding packets of fallen heaven. And I learned that tears carry the weight of a thousand raindrops. Tears are warm with passion. They are fuller.

I looked up at the man. V looked down at me. He stared straight into my fishy pupils. A buzz of energy shot through my vertebrae. Fish and man watched each other, each yearning to be the other, each believing there was freedom in the confinement of an alternate body. As I called to him, *Come*, V gripped the red railing and



leaned over. *Join me in this water, and rain won't bother you anymore.* I beckoned to him in the most human way I could, which is to say without words. *Come.*

Come.

Come.

The more I called, the more V cried, the more wearily he drooped over the side of the paint-patched bridge. In the very last moments, he smiled at me as if to say *yes*. And then he jumped.

His body did not plummet towards me, and his arms did not flail like fish fins do when out of water. When I looked up and witnessed only simple streams of rain, I realized V had not jumped towards me at all. He had jumped backwards towards the safety of the bridge, breath-sucked in and eyes wide open. At that crucial moment, someone had touched him.

It was a woman. Her hair was just as wet as his, eyes just as deep, skin just as human. Her index finger pointed in the air inches from V's shoulder—and when he swivelled around to face her, she cracked a feeble smile. The woman's mouth moved, but no sound came out. V trembled in response, but no sound came from him either. It was in this silence that I remembered just how many worlds we were apart. Rage filled me like a tsunami.

V stood there for a moment, bearing the weight of the rain and the world on his shoulders. He wept. Then he bungled the woman in a hug, his big human tears thawing her scarf. V sobbed, and the woman soothed him, and they both smiled. I ached.

It was that wretched, beautiful human smile that had won the moment. It was the gentle touch that had scattered the chess board. I had lost to their ordinary triumph: their human glimmer to human glimmer. And regardless of many years I continue to wait, I could never inhabit such feeling. I will never experience such pain nor such beauty. I can only watch—

But no matter. In a day or two, my scaly little body will forget.

Kaitlan Bui

Dear Mme Lucinda

September 27, 1979

217 Bath Estate

Roseau, Commonwealth of Dominica

Dear Ms. Lucinda:

I hope this letter will find you in good health. Your cousin Ms. Mona is a good friend of mine, as you might remember from our days at St. Mary's School. We gave the nuns so much trouble then. Ms. Mona told me I should write to you because you are the Directrice at the l'ecole in Basse Terre. By the time you get this letter it will be October and the school term will be in full swing. I am so proud to see that someone from our humble island can achieve such an important position.

As you know, Hurricane David came over a month ago and it is only by the grace of God I am alive to write this letter to you. My children and I have been living with the builder Mr. Giles Frederick, but we cannot complain. It is better than living in the tent cities. There is all kinds of madness happening there, especially at night. Some people are living in the schools, and I hear the conditions there are very bad as well because of no lights or water. We have a lot to be grateful for. Our house will need a new roof and some fixing up but for the most part we are intact.

I have four girls, from age 5 to 12. They are coping well and are being very helpful to Mr. Frederick who has been kind enough to take us in. Mr. Frederick told me he built your sister's house -- it is still standing strong. But you wouldn't recognize the rest of Jolly Lane with all the damage. The big tamarind tree is rooted up, and a big landslide came down over Mr. Lister's house. He escaped in time but, sadly, his three cows have died. A lot of the animals were washed down in the Roseau river. So much tragedy in our little neighbourhood, the whole

country. I hear that Jimmy Carter will be sending us help soon, God bless him.

My main concern is my daughters' schooling. It will take maybe six months before the government can figure out what is up and what is down. You know how it is here. Ms. Mona told me that her daughter will be going to you and that you will even pick her up from the ferry in Basse Terre and take her to live in your school until life is back to normal in Dominica.

I would be grateful to you if you would consider taking my daughters so they could go to school in Guadeloupe. They speak enough French to understand and write. I will not be able to pay you at first. My husband was stranded in port during the hurricane. It took two weeks after before he was able to come to us. We thought he was dead. It has been very hard. As you can imagine, the demand for fresh water is even higher now so West Indies Transport has put him back on his sailing route so he is not with us. My brother is the one taking on the rebuilding of our house and helping me out. But we will have the school fees no problem. Thank you for your kind consideration.

Mrs. Theresa Charles

P.S. My mother was Louise Charles from Delices and I think she knew your mother and your aunts from the village.

**

October 30, 1979
22 Vieux Habitants
Pte-a-Pitre, Guadeloupe

Dear Theresa:

Forgive my English. After thirty years in Guadeloupe I still have the problems with my language. I am sorry to hear about the hurricane. We here had a lot of wind and rain. I lost many of my

gardens. But this is well. This is well that only twenty people lost life and not more. Blessed virgin pray for their souls.

Ms. Mona Massicot is an old friend. We went to Convent High School; but I do not remember you. St. Mary's is a long time ago and I do not see Dominica since 1949. In 1945, Mona's brother went to fly a plane for the Royal Air Force and he did not come back. That is my daughter's father. My husband now is a French man. He is very rich from Paris. He likes to live in the warm islands but he will take me to Paris again every year.

Our *maison pour les filles* is not room enough for four more. We will take one, maybe two. You will need to pay when you send them. It is five hundred francs. There is English school here but it is very rich. Send the five hundred francs and one girl on the next boat in two weeks. She will need her clothes and books.

Mme. Lucinda Elwyn Jean-Pierre

**

November 15, 1979

217 Bath Estate

Roseau, Commonwealth of Dominica

Dear Mme. Lucinda:

I hope you and our husband are in good health when you receive this letter. Your letter was not very clear to me. Is it five hundred francs per girl? Ms. Mona thinks you meant five hundred francs for all the girls. I understand English is very hard after you have been speaking French for so long.

Mme. Lucinda, things have gotten only a little bit better on Dominica. There is a curfew every day so no more looting at the grocery. God be praised. There is an American and a British ship in the port so we have a lot of fresh water. We still eat too much Army food

but it is better than nothing. Some people from the tent cities have started to go back to their houses. Our roof is back on the house and we will go back in a week or two, before Harvest time. My husband has not been able to get leave from work yet. But he has sent money.

Once you let me know that it is five hundred francs for all the girls I will send them to you. I am willing to pay seven hundred francs if you will take all four of them. They are good girls, very studious and quiet. Please write me back soon. Mme. Lucinda, I pray on your merciful heart. The girls cannot be without each other. It will rip my heart to not have them with me. But they are doing nothing here. The country is not progressing, and I do not want them to stand still with it.

Mrs. Theresa Charles

**

December 22, 1979

22 Vieux Habitants

Pte-a-Pitre, Guadeloupe

Dear Theresa:

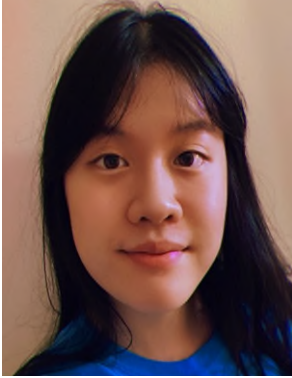
Bon Noel. I heard good news from Dominica. I hear from my sister that her house and her shop did not destroy. She said it was the people who built cheap who lost house. It is a sad thing for everyone all the suffering. Non? Blessed virgin pray for your souls. We have been getting the rain and wind too much.

I am sorry, but six more girls have come to *maison pour les filles*. They are Dr. Nisaf's children. He said his hospital clinic on King George V Street is under water. They are beautiful, good girls and they speak French. Not the village patois. I have no room for more girls now. If I have more room next year, I will write to you.

Mme. Lucinda Elwyn Jean-Pierre

Joanne Skerrett

THE FICTION WRITERS



Kaitlan Bui is an emerging writer based in Southern California. She loves words because they give her room to explore: to create alternate worlds, to wrestle with her Vietnamese American identity, to understand what it means to be human. Kaitlan is currently working on a book based on the life of her great aunt, who was born in Vietnam in the 1930s. You can keep up with her on Instagram @by_kaitlan.

Joanne Skerrett is an attorney living in Washington, D.C. She is also a candidate for a Master's in Writing at Johns Hopkins University's Advanced Academic Programs. Prior to becoming an attorney, she worked for various newspapers including the *Boston Globe* and *Chicago Tribune* as an editor. She has written four novels; three were published by Kensington Publishing in the early to mid-2000s (*She Who Shops*, *Sugar vs. Spice*, *Letting Loose*) and one tween-focused novel (*Abraham's Treasure*) was published in 2011 by Papillotte Press, a small Caribbean-based publisher.



CREATIVE NONFICTION

Super Powers

CW: anxiety, depression

I. Crisis

It's 4:44 PM. *We should have left 15 minutes ago*, I think. Leo had said *You finish online class at 4, so then we leave at 4:30*. But there he is, shoving t-shirts into a backpack, while I move my own bag closer and closer to the door. Luc is also still packing. Luc, Leo's lifelong friend and roommate, is a curly-haired goof, as opposed to Leo, my boyfriend, who's a cropped-hair goof. I start, despite myself, to calculate what time we'll arrive in Hudson if we leave now.

It's looking grim. 8 PM, 7:45 if we're lucky. On a Friday afternoon in Brooklyn, half the driving time will be spent creeping at 5 mph through traffic out of the city. I'm expected in Hudson at 7 PM for dinner with my parents. I glance at the GPS on my phone. **Estimated arrival time: 7:45**. My throat tightens. I'm having a hard time breathing.

"Is there anything I can do?" I say to Leo. "Did you pack your computer? Did you pack your toiletries? Did you fill your bottle? I can fill your bottle..." I grab the Brita from the fridge. I pour water inside Leo's bottle, then Luc's. Meanwhile, they're still moving in slow motion about their tight Brooklyn apartment. It's maddening.

I try to sit on the couch and then shoot up, move the bags closer to the door, and sit back down. Not only is dinner at 7, but Uncle Mark is going to be there, and I don't get to see him that often

during school. Now I'm going to be late and he'll be gone when I get there.

It's all because Leo and Luc were watching *South Park* and decided to finish the episode instead of packing. Maddening.

Leo finally exits the front door and watches me dash to the car with my bag. I get into the passenger seat, figure that I'm upset and don't want to spend the whole drive flustered next to Leo, open the door and go sit in the backseat. "*Go to bed angry*," said the headline of an article I read last week. Leo and I have been dating for a little over a year.

I am mortified at the idea of texting mom that I'm going to be late.

"Can I tell her that it's your fault?" I say to Leo as soon as he plops into the driver's seat. He sighs.

"Are you sure you don't want to be in the front seat?" Luc asks me.

"No thanks, I'm sulking back here."

We fell behind on schedule, I text mom, we'll be there at 7:45. Don't wait up for me to eat. Really sorry

The text message is translated from French. Picture impossibly apologetic grammar.

"I can't be late, Leo," I say to Leo, "It's not correct in our culture. We're not American, there is no 'fashionably late.' You might think it's okay to be late. But to me being late is a sign of disrespect. I--" How can I convey to mom that it's Leo's fault that I'm going to be late?

I'm distracted by a *ding* from my phone. Mom just answered my text.

Don't worry about it, I'll ask Mark to come at 19:30 so that we can wait for you

My brain immediately stops quivering.

Oh my god.

Oh my god. A silence fills the car that perhaps was there this whole time, unbeknownst to me. It feels like waking up from a dream where you're being chased by a shark with human legs and realizing that you fell asleep at the DMV again, and that everything is fine but you still have to take your learner's permit test.

"I'm *SO* sorry," I say to Leo, who's calm as ever. "I was overreacting, wasn't I? Mom says it's totally fine, she's telling Mark to come later. But oh my god. I was acting crazy again, wasn't I?"

"You're fine," he says.

"Yeah, you were," says Luc at the same time.

"I'm so sorry," I say, ashamed.

The truth is, I do this shit all the time. Whenever some minor inconvenience arises, like running late to dinner, I get anxious and lash out at everyone. But this time was particularly bad. The reason is that yesterday, I missed a train for the first time in my life.

Matt was driving me to the train station in Providence and halfway there I realized I'd forgotten my phone. I got Siobhan to wait downstairs with my phone and grabbed it. We then spent ten minutes in agonizing traffic and missed the train by one minute. Yelled "*Fuck!*" on the steps to the tracks. The ticket I'd bought had a transfer in New York City for a train to Hudson, a small town in upstate New York, where my parents live. I missed the train *and* the transfer. All of a sudden, getting to Hudson that day was impossible. I pictured my parents' disappointment. Wanted to kick something or run really fast. Wanted to pull out my hair.

When life slips out of my control, it doesn't look good for the people around me. Matt got an earful. "Maybe we can drive to the next train station and catch the train," I rasped during the car ride home. I answered myself: "No, that's insane. It's fine, I missed a train, it's fine."

"Yeah," said Matt meekly. He dropped me off on Wickenden Street and I felt too upset to even go up the stairs to my room. I called

Leo and cried. He reassured me and we came up with a new plan: I'd take the next train to New York and spend the night with him in Brooklyn. He was driving to upstate New York the next day anyways, where Luc's parents have a house. It all worked out. I called my dad and told him I missed the train but was coming up Friday. He told me *it happens to everyone, that sounds great, see you then*. Still, I had the creeping feeling that I was a failure.

II. In my Defence

I've had anxiety for at least as long as I've had grown-up teeth. I've officially had depression since 2018. I make my own choices but, in my defence, I've always had a tense relationship with control: I'm eager to control every aspect of my life and equally eager to relinquish all control to the elements, to the fates, to a plane pilot (if we crash, we crash), et cetera.

Last March, coronavirus started sweeping across Europe while I was studying abroad in Edinburgh. One minute, I thought I was spending the weekend steeped in a hot spring in Budapest. The next, I was booked on a direct flight to JFK.

I was not sad, not about the abrupt ending to my semester abroad, nor about cancelling my travels in Europe. I was not happy, either.

I felt nothing. In the moment, I was acutely aware that I felt nothing. Leaving went smoothly because my depression and my anxiety teamed up and took care of everything.

Sometimes, mental illness is a superpower. Check this. My depression blocked my emotions long enough for my anxiety to help me pack efficiently, wake up one minute before my 4:45 AM alarm, catch my flight, and navigate two airports on zero sleep.



L

As soon as I accepted that I had no control over the situation, my depression said *there's really nothing to worry about then, luv* while my anxiety said *we're gonna do everything we can to get you home, innit?*

The depression-anxiety duo was *fantastic* for this crisis situation. The problem is, I don't think I ever shifted out of survival mode since the start of the pandemic. I'm 90% sure that's how I ended up being mean to my boyfriend.

III. Viving

My mom, of course, didn't mind having dinner at eight. By the level of crisis I described, you must have thought that she's the most uptight, least forgiving person ever. No, no. *I* was projecting *my* anxiety. As soon as she pushes back dinnertime, I slump in the back of the car (oh my god), nursing my shame.

We drive by Green Ave, in the north part of Bed-Stuy.

"Why am I in this lane, Luc, why?" says Leo.

"You suck!" yells Luc at a cyclist running a red light.

"Oh asshole asshole asshole" says Leo. A car narrowly merges right in front of his. I watch a nine-year-old Hasidic girl push a stroller down the street. October. It's finally chilly in New England. Her long skirt matches the weather perfectly.

The silence feels oppressive. Suddenly I remember I brought a CD and pass it to the front. Luc takes it and chuckles. The CD cover shows an up-close Walkman with *Awesome Mix Vol. 1* handwritten on the tape. Luc puts the disc in the CD player and presses play.

Loud and jarring singing comes out of the speakers.

OOGA CHAKA OOGA OOGA OOGA CHAKA OOGA OOGA OOGA I CAN'T STOP THIS FEELING...

Leo doesn't respond by lowering the volume. Instead, he rolls down his window. We're still inching through traffic.

A-A-A-A, I'M HOOKED ON A FEELING

I sing along, unconvinced. I see a billboard on the side of the highway that says *JESUS OFFERS YOU A NEW LIFE*, line-break, (83) *FOR-TRUTH*.

I grew up in New York City Friday afternoon traffic. Once you stop getting nauseous as a child it actually becomes quite enjoyable, as long as you're not the one driving. I'm twenty-one and I still look at other drivers to see what they look like. *Is the aggressive Subaru driven by an antsy young man or a sour older man?*

I turn my head. *Leo is so confident when he drives*, I think. He has a slack, one-handed grip on the wheel. *It's quite sexy*, I think.

Hey y'all, says a signboard in front of a Popeye's, *We're Back (Please Wear a Mask)*.

"Viving" is what happens when you remove the "sur" from "surviving." To survive is "to outlive, to continue in existence after the death of another," according to the Online Etymology Dictionary, "from Latin *supervivere*... from *super* "over, beyond." I ran that back in my head. The removal of the prefix *sur* (from *super*) is best attained through blasting 80's music in the backseat of a Volvo. You're left with a stump of a word, *viving*.

Sitting in the back of the car, I realize that Leo and Luc had been *viving* since the beginning of the decade. When Leo lost his job at the beginning of quarantine, he never started living life as if he were simply *outliving* other people. *Viving* is a slack hand on a driving wheel in bumper-to-bumper traffic. *Viving* is sexy.

IV. The Last Leg

We've just left Queens. "No contact payment" warns a BP gas station.

The feel of red brick in New York is so unique. It's like a deep blush followed by a stutter. Brick as a colour is nothing like the brick of New York, where brick is beige and also cherry brown. Every brick in

New York is the same. Brick means “cold” in New York slang. (*“It’s mad brick out here.”*)

Just then, the first notes of “I want you back” bounce out of the speakers. Luc starts dancing. He says something about Michael Jackson, but I can’t hear over the music. I start dancing.

“Leo, I don’t see you dancing very much,” I shout.

“I’m driving.”

“*Ouu baby give me one more chance!*” Luc, bobbing side to side, sings to Leo.

By the number of U-Haul’s I can see, we’re still somewhere in the Bronx. The clouds look like q-tips (the tip of q-tips?). Later, they look more like pieces of satin strewn on the ground.

“Escape (The Pina Colada Song)” is an excellent song. It comes on right when a Tito’s billboard ad passes us by. The traffic is letting up; as mom would say, *les chiottes se débouchent* (“the shitter is unclogging itself”).

“Do you like getting caught in the rain?” I ask Leo.

“Sure.” He glances at Luc. “Sure from the front row.”

Forty miles later, I muster enough chill to approve a stop at a gas station. Leo gets pepper chips and nerd rope and other slutty snacks while I pee in an immaculate bathroom. Luc gets Yo-yo’s, a snack that looks and tastes like chocolate Twinkie. Leo declares that gas stations stocking Yo-yo’s are rare and our stumbling upon one is a good omen. The whole stop sets us back thirteen minutes, which I calmly telegraph to my mom over text.

It’s dark out now. Leo’s face glows red from taillights ahead.

Suddenly, at 60 mph, we glimpse at a deer standing very still, inches from the road. The deer could’ve leapt out and gone through the windshield. I add it to my list of soft near-death experiences.

Twenty minutes later, Leo pulls up to the curb in front of a dark blue house. I thank him for the ride, leave the car with my bag, and hobble over through the yard to the back door of the house. I step

into the kitchen's warm light. As I take off my sneakers, I see mom arriving to greet me.

"Why did you come in through the back door?" mom asks. "It's good to see you! Did Luc and Leo want to stay over for dinner? Did you have a nice trip? The traffic must have been horrible. Well, you're here now. It's so good that you're here."

We kiss cheeks.

"The trip was very good," I say. "It's good to be here."

Mom is back to hovering over her beef burgundy, giving off the smell of vaporized red wine. It's my favourite dish of hers and she knows it. Already I feel guilty being the centre of so much affection. I go to the living room. Dad and Uncle Mark are on the couch, basking in the same warm, dim light. Three empty glasses sit on the coffee table.

I beg myself to enjoy this moment. One, two breaths and I get out of my own head, briefly, and remember the car ride. We could have hit a deer.

"How are you doing, Miss?" says Mark.

"I just had an idea of something to write about," I tell him.

Olympe Scherer

Talking Walls

I don't think my dad ever wanted kids. As a child, I was often asked if I was raised by a single mom. That's what it felt like. Yet my dad was always in the picture, and for 20 years of my life I worked towards an unachievable task. To have a relationship with him.

June 2000 - March 2019:

The rooms in my three-story brick house, placed in a bubble of privilege called Rochester, where I spent all my childhood, tell stories that shed light into the relationships that have been formed inside. The cherry red front door blocks outsiders from knowing all that occurs within, although these people share their opinions regardless. They see my dad as a hard worker, a provider, a caring man, and someone who could do no wrong. That front door is sturdy.

If my living room could talk, it would tell you about how cheap my dad is. One afternoon, my dad was slumped in our brown leather armchair that had scratches along the back from when my brothers and I were young, and a hole in the stitching on the right armrest revealing the white interior, which is typically covered by a draped blanket placed carefully by my embarrassed mom. My mom and I step inside, all bundled up to avoid the harsh chill of a winter storm. We had just returned from CVS to replenish our makeup stash which consisted solely of mascara, concealer, and chapstick. We hardly realize my dad is even present, due to his silence, which is broken by a sigh, then a question. "What the hell did you spend \$20 on at CVS?" he asks, stressed and miserable. An argument broke out, and I went to my bedroom and played music - a tactic I learned at a young age to maintain sanity.

If my kitchen could talk, it would tell you about my dad's unrealistic standards. When I was sixteen and could finally get a job, I

did. My older brother had been getting praise from my dad for being an, ironically slow, delivery driver for Jimmy Johns, and I wanted to be congratulated by him for once. I would come home and plop down on our wood high top stools and cover the granite countertop of the island with crumpled dollar bills I accumulated from carryout tips during my hosting shifts at a trendy brunch restaurant. I had had the job for a matter of weeks, and with being a teenager who just got her first job, I felt rich. I could always tell who was coming down the stairs by the sound and speed of the footsteps, so I rearranged the cash on the counter to clearly display how much I had made that day to show off to my dad. His feet, covered in his Sanuk slip-ons, dragged across the floor and I prepared a bright smile that would express how proud of myself I was. He was frowning when he approached, but that didn't dampen my excitement, because he was always frowning. After an uncomfortably long silence, which I'm certain he spent counting the sum of money on the table, he finally spoke. "You need to get a job that pays better." My heart broke, yet I was still determined to make him proud of me.

If my dining room could talk, it would tell you about my dad's selfishness. Neither of my brothers or I ever hung out with my dad unless it was forced upon us. We knew him as well as you might an uncle. He only wanted to spend time with us if it was off-roading in his Jeep Wrangler (which we always called his favorite child), fishing, or at the bar. On the other hand, we knew everything about my mom. We were told stories about her childhood in Waterford (also known as Watertucky) where she burnt down a field, found a drunk guy who puked on her new sweater in her basement, drunk drove to her boyfriend's house to see him with another girl, was sexually assaulted by her professor, and was apparently "cool" at her high school, even with glasses and a back brace. My mom knew just as much about her kids, as we knew about her, and my dad knew just as much about his kids as we knew about him. It was never a priority of his. Christmas in

2017 was just like any other. As a family we always celebrated by opening presents on the morning of the 25th by the tree which filled the house with the fresh scent of pine. The youngest kid always went first, and we proceeded in age order. Our presents are covered in three different wrapping papers depending on who the gift is from, the kids, my parents, or “Santa”. One by one, that wrapping paper is ripped off in excitement exposing new clothes, video games, books, and whatever else we put on our Christmas list that year. With only a few presents left unopened, I reached for one that was packaged in a cylinder container. I opened it with the same excitement as the rest, but when the red wrapping patterned with reindeer is removed, I look up in confusion. My mom was looking back at me, curious to see what it was, my brothers were preoccupied with their newest toys, and my dad looked pleased with himself. That’s when it clicked. The package wasn’t incorrectly labelled. The collection of screwdrivers and wrenches in this reused package really were for me. I forced a smile, hoping not to hurt his feelings with my disappointment in the gift and in how little he knows me.

If the stairs that lead upstairs could talk, they would tell you about my dad’s problem with alcohol. During my senior year of high school, I spent more time in my room than I ever had. It was the only place I could escape being involved in screaming matches between my parents. Most days were predictable: my dad would storm out of the house after an argument with my mom about something petty around 4pm, then return 10 hours, and a dozen beers, later. I would always know when he got home because I would no longer be able to sleep with the sound of his snoring shaking the house. The next morning my mom would be infuriated that he drove home drunk, rather than calling for a ride. I was too defeated to get frustrated. One afternoon, when I was waiting for an argument to subside and the front door to slam so I could go get a snack, I noticed that something felt off. Maybe their voices seemed louder than normal. Maybe the fight had lasted

longer. Whatever it was, it was not a typical day, but I chose to ignore it. At least until the next morning. When I crawled out of bed and headed for the bathroom to do something about my bedhead, I almost had a heart attack when I saw someone asleep at the bottom of the stairs. It took a couple of seconds for me to realize it was my dad and not someone homeless. Apparently, he had been too drunk to walk up the stairs, but somehow, not too drunk to drive home. That was the morning I realized just how pathetic he was. I had wasted my entire life trying to make someone proud of me, that even I wasn't proud of. That was the morning I promised myself I would no longer kill myself trying to build a relationship with my father.

In March 2019, I was told that my parents were getting a divorce. Everyone had seen that coming.

In October 2019, my mom called me to tell me that my dad had finally gotten a DUI. "Took long enough" was all I could respond with.

January 2020 - Present:

My dad moved out of the brick house with the cherry red door in January of 2020. At this point, he had been sober for four months. I only saw him when I would come home from school for holidays. That was until a global pandemic hit, and I was forced to move back into the house that holds so many stories, causing my relationship with my dad to take a 180. I was told my dad is a new person, that the DUI whipped him into shape. But this is coming from the people who stand on the front yard, not the stained carpet inside.

Once a week I get a text from my dad asking me what my schedule is like, and if I can find a time to meet. He promises me lunch. Smart move on his part. He tells me I can come out to visit him at his new house in the middle of nowhere. I refuse. If he wants to see me, then he has to make the effort. I come up with a list of

rules to make this meeting worth it to me. It must: be an hour or shorter; no more than a 15-minute drive; my brother must be there to ease the awkward silences; and because I am on a college student budget, food must be involved. My dad, younger brother and I meet once a week at a diner in Rochester for lunch.

Because my dad knows nothing about me, and I know nothing about him, our relationship remains shallow. We busy ourselves with boring conversation about my new tattoo or piercing, taxes, oil changes, his house, or whether I've used those tools yet. In the diner I have been a regular customer at since it opened, I start to notice something about the person who I've always sat across from. He regrets being a shitty dad. And with this realization, I am left with more questions. Why was he a shitty dad? Am I to blame? Was he ready to be a dad? Does he even know how to be a good dad? Did he think the job description of "dad" only entails being a provider? Was his dad the same way? Is this new, sober, not-responsible-for-kids, version of my dad who desires the relationship I had dedicated my life to, permanent? Or would I be wasting my time again? Can people really change?

I walk through the rooms of my childhood house, reminiscing. Those memories replay like a broken record through my mind. I rely on them for answers. They all have something to say, not only about my dad, but about me as well.

The living room tells me that he is a man filled with fear. That regardless of what the number on our bank statements reads, we will always be "barely making ends meet." That his mother raised him to be this way. That although he may have tried for a short period of time, he can never ease his stress. It's wired into his DNA. The living room also reminds me that he is a lesson. That once I moved out on my own, I began to worry about money, too. About making ends meet. And that I should thank him for being so stressed. It reminds me not to be.

The kitchen tells me that he is a man that doesn't want us to end up the way he did. That his unrealistic standards were his form of tough love. That he wanted us to make enough money, so that we would never need to lose sleep over it like he does. That he simply doesn't know how to express how proud of us he is. The kitchen also reminds me that I shouldn't look for approval from others. That personal acceptance is all that matters. That I only need to be enough for me.

The dining room tells me that he is a man that doesn't know how to make small talk. That he is socially awkward and has a hard time reading social cues. That he didn't avoid getting to know his kid, but that he didn't know how to. The dining room also reminds me that I can't expect effort to be one sided. That a relationship requires give and take. That I should try to be interested in things he likes if I want him to reciprocate. That I was being selfish all along.

The stairs tell me that he is a man that relies on alcohol to cope. That he is an alcoholic for a reason more than "liking the taste of beer." That his depression is easier to manage when intoxicated. The stairs also remind me that I can be too quick to categorize. That being an alcoholic doesn't make him a bad person. That I should be helping him, not shaming him. That I too have coping mechanisms. Mine are just more socially acceptable.

When my phone buzzes and my screen lights up with a picture of my dad's face, covered in a grey beard that is hiding a lip sore, with small bright blue eyes which look like mine, and crooked teeth stained yellow from excessive coffee addiction, an addiction I share, I pick up.

Isabella Malatesta

ESSAYS

Where Hell Seems a Heav'n: Tracing Milton Through NBC's *The Good Place*

“Pandemonium is from *Paradise Lost*. Chidi tricked me into reading *Paradise Lost* by telling me Satan was, and I quote, ‘my type,’” shares Eleanor Shellstrop of NBC’s *The Good Place* at the end of the show’s third season, “and, I mean, he wasn’t wrong” (“Pandemonium”). In *The Good Place*, Eleanor (played by Kristen Bell) is a self-described “Arizona trash bag” who died to reawake in “The Good Place,” her entry into which she realizes must be due to an unprecedented case of mistaken identity (“Everything”). The Good Place’s architect, Michael (in an Emmy-nominated portrayal by Ted Danson) and a helpful “Janet,” one of the afterlife’s human-esque interdimensional knowledge banks (played by D’Arcy Carden), tour Eleanor around the Good Place’s meticulously-designed neighbourhood and show her to her house, which is tailored to the objectionable decorative tastes of the individual Michael mistakenly believes Eleanor to be. Here, Eleanor meets her purported soulmate – Chidi Anagonye, a moral philosophy professor (played by William Jackson Harper) – and shares her fluky predicament with him after swearing him to secrecy. At Eleanor’s urging, Chidi concludes that he has a moral responsibility to teach Eleanor ethics so she can attempt to become a better person and truly belong in the Good Place.

However, by the end of season one, Eleanor, Chidi, and two others – Jason (Manny Jacinto) and Tahani (Jameela Jamil) – confront Michael with a shocking revelation while fighting amongst themselves over a torturous ethical decision: “They can’t take any of us on a train to the Bad Place, because we’re already here. This is the Bad Place”

(“Michael’s”). Michael, his secret discovered, then wipes the humans’ memories and re-choreographs their now-re-unsuspected psychological torture to similar disappointing results, rebooting them and his Good Place schtick hundreds of times until his demon peers (that is, everyone in the Good Place besides Eleanor, Chidi, Jason, and Tahani) eventually mutiny. Michael is left with little other choice but to turn to the four humans for help, at which point Chidi and Eleanor spur Michael’s knowledge and eventual voluntary adoption of moral ethics. With his newfound moral and ethical understanding, the former Hell architect spearheads an underground ethical investigation of the potentially unjust entry-selection system for the Good and Bad Places with his original Janet, who has become more human with each reboot of *The Good Place*, and the four humans. The rest of the show follows the four dead humans, the interdimensional human-like Google search bar, and the reformed demonic torture designer as they try to bring afterlife justice to humanity while – quite literally – all hell breaks loose around them. As hinted at by Eleanor’s “pandemonium” bit in the season three finale and a small Easter egg in another episode (“Janet[s]”), I would argue that NBC’s *The Good Place* is deeply rooted in the writings of John Milton, the internationally-renown 17th-century poet, polemic, civil servant, and intellectual. A number of prominent lines, character concepts, and fundamental themes from Milton’s lapsarian epic *Paradise Lost* underlie key elements in *The Good Place*, particularly with regard to the show’s central twist, its questioning of afterlife authority figures or structures, and the attention it implicitly draws to the concept of restorative justice.

The Good Place’s central twist is that the realm Eleanor, Chidi, Jason, and Tahani believe to be “The Good Place” is actually “The Bad Place.” This revelation comes after Eleanor realizes that she and her three friends constantly undergo various psychological tortures in a neighbourhood that should allegedly be perfect. The constant chaos was initially explained away as the result of a glitch or mistake in the

neighbourhood's design – Michael truthfully shares that the Good Place is actually his very first project as an afterlife architect – the cause of which Eleanor and Jason, who lived the most blatantly “bad” earthly lives of the Good Place's residents, believe themselves to be. However, Michael reveals at the end of season one that all the torturous decisions and terrifying chaos are entirely intentional, as is the stress each character has been feeling. His “Bad Place” architectural idea was to make Hell seem like Heaven (“Everything”). The concept of Hell as Heaven stems directly from Milton's writing, specifically from his character Satan's speeches and self-reflections throughout *Paradise Lost*. “The mind is its own place,” Satan tells his likewise-banished comrades after being cast into Hell, “and in itself / Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.” (*Paradise I.254-255*) Michael Schur, who created *The Good Place*, seems to have adopted this Heav'n-of-Hell concept as the basis for his demon architect's seemingly heavenly torture neighbourhood. Michael (the demon architect character, not the T.V. show creator) literally made his victims think that Hell was Heaven, appropriating a Miltonian line almost plagiaristically. Eleanor's revelation in and of itself that their supposed Heaven is actually Hell calls to mind another one of Satan's *Paradise* lines to a similar effect: “[T]he Hell I suffer seems a Heav'n.” (*Paradise IV.78*) Thus, it seems *The Good Place*'s central plot twist is a near-direct appropriation of one of the most famous lines/concepts in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* with the explicit goal of “justify[ing] the ways of God to man” (*Paradise I.26*), which inherently begs the question of whether he succeeded in doing so. Throughout the epic, both Milton's character Adam – the first human, alongside Eve – and we as modern readers find ourselves confronting Milton's God and the reasoning behind the systems he has put into place. Likewise, a central theme of *The Good Place* concerns itself with the questioning of deific authority figures and their established systems. Beginning with Eleanor's confrontation of Michael about the Heav'n-of-Hell situation,

The Good Place's protagonists spend most of their screen time challenging once-untouchable authorities and implicitly begging us as their audience to do the same. In *Paradise Lost*, Adam speaks of Eve in ways that contrast the archangel Raphael's views (and thus presumably those of his Heavenly boss) about Eve's worth and agency. Adam heaps praise upon his partner during her absence, asserting to Raphael that Eve's intellectual merit, irresistible beauty, and general aura of deserved authority are characteristic of someone who should have been created before him, not after him (*Paradise* VIII.535-559). When Raphael attempts to dismiss his views, Adam rejects Raphael's diminutive discourse – "[...] I feel, not therefore foiled [...]" (*Paradise* VIII.608) – in a lengthy retort to the effect of "you wouldn't understand" (*Paradise* VIII.596-617). During Michael's ethical investigation into the afterlife judgement system in *The Good Place*, he, too, is met with dismissive attitudes and better-than-thou lectures from haughty heavenly higher-ups. For instance, afterlife accountants refuse to believe that their placement system's infallibility could ever be disputed, ("Janet[s]"), much like the archangel Raphael refused to believe that Eve could ever be rightfully considered Adam's equal or superior. Both Michael and Adam defend their controversial beliefs, though, embodying a never-before-seen challenge of divine authority within their respective contexts. Our own questioning of untouchable authority and the systems it puts into place comes via the levels of trust John Milton and Michael Schur want us to have in the windows through which we are being told each story. When Milton's Satan initially describes the civil war in Heaven that resulted in his brethren's fall to Hell, he describes what seems to have been a nearly successful revolt:

That with the mightiest raised me to contend,
 And to the fierce contention brought along
 Innumerable force of spirits armed
 That durst dislike his reign, and me preferring
 His utmost power with adverse power opposed

In dubious battle in the plains of Heav'n,
And shook his throne. (Paradise I.99-105)

However, when the archangel Raphael relays a full retelling of Satan's fall and the civil war in *Paradise Lost*: Book VI, we learn that Satan and his forces chose to hurl themselves down into Hell in fear of the Son of God and his "ten thousand thunders" (*Paradise* VI.836) after an admittedly valiant attack prior to the Son of God's advance. This contrast is only one example of the many instances that establish Satan as an unreliable source of information for us as Milton's audience. In *The Good Place*, Eleanor's revelation about "The Good Place" being a disguised wing of "The Bad Place" produces a similar effect with regard to our trust (or lack thereof) in how things are being presented to us – we no longer know if we can trust any given element of the story we are fed. *The Good Place* thus also adopts the critical stance of John Milton regarding deific authorities. Few, if any, other writers of Milton's renown (of whom there are already few to begin with) could have claimed such an active commitment towards questioning and ultimately rejecting so-called divine authorities – after all, the man did help dethrone (and ultimately dispatch) a real-life "divine ruler" in England's Charles I.

Through the critical attitudes its characters display towards the morally-binary judicial system portrayed within it, *The Good Place* subtly but strongly emphasizes the concept of restorative justice – that is, a penal justice system focusing on offenders' rehabilitation through reconciling them with those they have impacted. In *The Good Place*, the afterlife's system for establishing whether or not a human gets into the Good Place depends upon how many "points" they earn in their lifetime. For example, maintaining composure at a water park in Houston is +61.14 points, while overstating personal connection to tragedy that has nothing to do with you is -40.57 points ("Everything"). However, if an individual's point total does not surpass a certain threshold, they go to the Bad Place – regardless of extenuating

circumstances or intention. Michael realizes that unintended consequences and extenuating circumstances make certain people's roads to living good lives much more difficult than others. His final experiment with his "The Good Place" Hell neighbourhood is designed to test whether or not "bad" people can become "good" with the help of others and under the circumstances of specific situations, just as the four human protagonists unexpectedly did within Michael's original neighbourhood ("Pandemonium"). Michael deems the afterlife judgment system in *The Good Place* unjust and unethical when he realizes that it fails to account for the unrealized potential for people to become "good" – their afterlife system allows minimal to no opportunity for rehabilitation or reform, much like our own abysmal penal system within the United States. Milton's God in *Paradise Lost* seems to create a similar binary judgement system for his constituents – if angels or humans do not obey his commandments, they suffer tremendous consequences for all of eternity. The cold, unforgiving nature of *Paradise Lost*'s judgement approach and that of *The Good Place* thus both call to mind a more humane, ethical system of restorative justice that we as modern-day human beings – and thus as members of the groups that both works' so-called justice systems negatively impact – would much rather see, for our own sakes if for anything. Whether or not that was intentional on the part of either work's creator is debatable, but it certainly seems that Michael Schur and *The Good Place* turned to Milton and his *Paradise Lost* as an inspiration for its plot basis and justice themes.

Jack Wolfram

THE NONFICTION WRITERS



Olympe Scherer is a fourth-year college student studying English Nonfiction at Brown University. Her work has been published in the College Hill Independent (Indy) and the Alexandria Quarterly. She is currently taking classes remotely in Providence, Rhode Island.

Isabella Malatesta is a student at the University of Michigan, who plans to get a Ph.D in creative writing with the dream of becoming a professor. During the course of the academic year, Isabella runs an Instagram blog with over 18k followers and has been posting her writing on this account for over two years. While her main passion is for essays, she also has experience in professional writing which she gained during internships with GoNanas and Seen Magazine. In both her academic and professional life, she has been told that she is interested, timely, adaptable, understanding, and well written by her employers and peers. Regardless of what she is doing, she applies proven communication, organizational, and writing skills, which she intends to utilize in her current and future writing.





Jack Wolfram is an undergraduate scholar and peer educator at Emory University, pursuing a degree in Creative Writing with a minor in Theatre Studies (May 2022). His hometown is Louisville, Kentucky, in the United States. He previously earned an Associate of Arts degree and an Ethical Leadership & Social Change certificate at Emory's Oxford College (May 2020). Now a third-year student at Emory's College of Arts & Sciences, he explores interdisciplinarity and storytelling in praxis as a student-professor, writing tutor, research fellow, thespian, and both an academic and artistic author. He has been published in the *Apollon Journal* (December 2020) and his projects have garnered audiences at numerous theatrical and conference stages.

PHOTOGRAPHY



City Crash — Fabio Sassi



Double Points — Lauren "Aris" Richardson

IT CLOWNS are Worth

IT CLOWNS are Worth

ART



Birth in a Pandemic – Alicia Markey



Who Are You
(Who Am I)
-
Inga Zhang

THE ARTISTS



***Fabio Sassi** is a visual artist. Fabio Sassi makes photos and acrylics using what is hidden, discarded or considered to have no worth by the mainstream. Fabio lives in Bologna, Italy.*

***Lauren "Aris" Richardson** is a student attending the University of California, Berkeley. Aris has been working as a freelance photographer for three years. "Double Points" was taken in an indoor ropes park and arcade. It reminds Aris of childhood wonder and the "magic" of friendship.*





Alicia Markey was born in Connecticut in 1979. She completed a Bachelor of Science in Graphic Design in 2001 and went on to obtain a Masters in Web Design in 2007. Markey continues her work in the Design field as a Design and Multimedia Coordinator at Cecil College, winning several design awards from NCMPR. Alicia Markey started painting in October 2018, and a year later she began presenting the

artwork that helped her process life events that have occurred in her recent past. Painting allows her to more easily carry on through the journey of life. Her hope is that the viewer of her series, *Art Heals*, will identify with her story as they travel through their life stories. Alicia Markey is a self-taught painter. She lives in Delaware with her husband and four children.

Inga Zhang is currently an MA Illustration student in RCA, London, UK. He would describe himself as an illustrator, observer, and designer. His creations are based on his experience of life and his imagination, as well as from films and readings.



SPELLBINDER

Tahani Almujaheed

Joanne Skerrett

John Kelly

Olympe Scherer

Matt Thomas

Isabella Malatesta

Gabrielle Loren

Jack Wolfram

Avijeet Das

Fabio Sassi

John Grey

Lauren "Aris" Richardson

H.L. Dowless

Alicia Markey

Kaitlan Bui

Inga Zhang