

Spring 2017

"The Mouth of the Void," "Hum"

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Recommended Citation

Comeriato, Hannah L., ""The Mouth of the Void," "Hum"" (2017). *Honors Research Projects*. 472.
http://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors_research_projects/472

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Hannah Comeriato

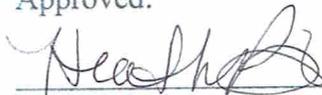
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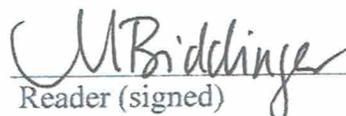
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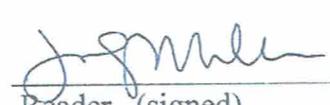
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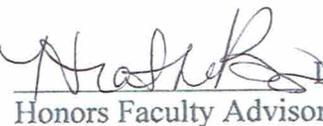
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4,700 words

The Mouth of the Void
by H. L. Comeriato

Raymond strikes a match and lets it burn to his fingers. He drops the charred stick into a bucket of water between his feet. There are forty-seven blackened matches floating on the surface. It's warm for November, and Raymond's neighbors are scraping leaves into small piles on their lawns. Hunched and grimacing, they drag metal rakes over the sidewalks. Autumn disrupts the astral geometry of this neighborhood, thinks Raymond. It is an unwelcome reminder of a natural consistency that eventually slates us all for the curb.

Raymond inhales. He watches Mrs. Newman struggle from across the street. There is a homemade scientific mechanism strapped to her face – a pair of circular glasses outfitted with a dozen colored mirrors extending outward from a metal frame. Reflected light colors her silver hair in streaks. She is walking backward. Her temperamental Maltese, Greta, follows close behind. Knowing Mrs. Newman, Raymond guesses the device is designed to increase abnormal brain function – colored light bent back into a retinal circus. Raymond guesses it is meant to confront the wearer with the ultimate reality of the brain's full potential.

“Hello, young man!” Mrs. Newman yells, accompanied by an emphatic wave of the hand.

“Hello,” yells Raymond.

“Bet you didn’t think I could see you with this contraption on, eh?” Mrs. Newman stumbles over Greta, her legs tangled in the dog’s pink leash. “Well, I can,” she screams. “I can absolutely see you!” Mrs. Newman marches in place, trying to untangle herself. The tiny mirrors bob beside her ears. “The very essence of the universe lies within us, young man!” She tugs Greta’s leash, still marching, her knees pulled high and hovering in some astrophysical ballet. “Young man,” she yells, “we are made from the stuff of stars!”

A flock of yellow birds beat their wings against the top of Raymond’s skull. They gnaw at the base of his neck, their tiny beaks picking at his brain stem. Raymond pinches his eyes shut. He is thinking about the statistical probability of the existence of conscious human life in far-off galaxies – our doubles, smiling wider, orbiting another star in some distant aligned planetary network. He is thinking about Mrs. Newman and a sharp increase in abnormal brain function, a CT scan lighting up like a Christmas tree in the reflection of some surgeon’s glasses. The birds puff their bellies and unhinge their beaks. They screech in perfect disunion – a choral arrangement no other human can hear. Raymond blinks hard.

Across the street, Mrs. Newman bumps against a trashcan. She stumbles backward, waving her arms in wide circles for balance. The birds spin behind Raymond’s eyes. He strikes another match and lets it burn his skin.

Melanie has dragged Raymond to a *Women Empowering Women* event in the city for extra credit. She has already missed eleven classes and is beginning to feel guilty. Not guilty

enough, however, to keep her from getting stoned on a beach towel behind the Planned Parenthood booth. She cups her hands against the wind and lights a spliff next to a giant inflatable vagina. She inhales hard. “This is fucking lame,” she says.

“It’s better than the Republican National Convention.”

“True, Raymond. Very true,” says Melanie.

She is lying on her back, fingers banded tightly with rings folded across her stomach – her dark hair spread fan-like over the towel. Melanie crunches into a sitting position, legs tastefully crossed, and punches the inflatable vagina mindlessly. With her other hand, she twists a leather necklace between two fingers, a smooth opal stone attached to the end. “Hey!” a woman from the Planned Parenthood table screams. “No punching the vagina!”

“Sorry!” Melanie shrieks, more out of retaliation than actual remorse. Raymond waves apologetically in the general direction of the booth. He stuffs his hands in the pocket of his sweatshirt. He wishes he was home, and also someplace else – somewhere further from the sun. Melanie hits the spliff and Raymond hears the birds – just barely, from a distance, a low growl building from the bottom up.

“Y’know, I’m all about this *affordable and accessible reproductive healthcare for all women* shit,” Melanie says. “I seriously am. But I’m tired as fuck.” She takes another long drag, brightening that orange cherry tip so that all Raymond can think of is a house fire – a slow black gnawing and all that hissing aluminum.

“Feminism is my *life*, dude. But this shit is the last thing I need right now.” Melanie raises a hand to her face, pinching the spliff between her lips as she rifles through her purse. “I need, like, an Advil or a Valium or something,” she mumbles. “Because *let me tell you*, Raymond, this hangover is fucking brutal.”

“You went out with Ryan?”

Raymond blinks in the sun.

“Yeah,” she says, “we went to a rave somewhere in Brooklyn.”

“Gross,” says Raymond.

“Exactly,” says Melanie, sliding her sunglasses up the bridge of her nose with an index finger. Her glasses are enormous plastic rimmed mirrors. They reproduce the whole skyline, condensing centuries into a dollhouse portrait of the earth’s curvature. “Dude, look,” she says with a nasally exhale. “I’m not just some liberal bitch, okay? I need *quality shit*. Like, Bill Clinton level shit.” She pauses, catching the sun in those enormous mirrors. “I need a real man, Raymond. *A real man*. Ryan isn’t cutting it.”

“I understand,” says Raymond.

“Yeah, but *do you?*”

“I mean, yeah. I’ve loved with Maxwell Gains for three years. He’s quality shit.”

“Oh, dear god Raymond. Maxwell Gains is not *quality shit*. He’s like, I don’t even know. He’s honestly just gross. He plays *football*, Raymond. Football.”

“Oh,” says Raymond. “Okay.”

On some level, Raymond understands that Maxwell Gains is gross – a loaded jock with an eight dollar haircut. But he’s loved him for so long it seems almost useless to stop. It is a pointedly casual kind of love affair – one in which Maxwell dates girls and Raymond thinks he is somewhat handsome, though not particularly charming or intelligent. Melanie hits the spliff again.

“Raymond,” says Melanie. “You’re a fucking idiot.”

“You empower me, Mel.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“Hey!” The woman from the Planned Parenthood booth shrieks. “You can’t smoke that here!”

“Alright, alright, we’re out,” says Melanie, hopping to her feet, hands raised in resignation. She stuffs the beach towel in her purse and she and Raymond head toward the East Side – Melanie still sucking on the spliff, now clipped into a bobby pin.

Walking through the park to 59th for the train to Herald Square, Raymond hears the birds. They arrive more quickly this time – a shrill and injurious dawn. They make him nauseous, pushing hard on the backs of his eyes – wild flashes of yellow light filtered fast through pin prick photoreceptors. They are inside his skull. He is thinking about the stuff of stars and Melanie is talking and talking. The birds are deep – circling the hard center of Raymond’s brain. Their beaks click open, turned up toward the sun. Raymond is unreachable. People pass him on the sidewalk and leave streams of color behind from their faces, their eyes and mouths still stretched and suspended – the pinks and blues of their lips incandescent threads of light. A slow swelling roar swallows the city – a thousand frantic wings beating and beating against the bars of a cage. Melanie is still talking but Raymond only hears the birds. They blind him.

And then the tunnels make them silent – the deep hum of traffic from above, bodies shuffling – all hollowed and echoing against the rails and the tile. Standing on the platform, Raymond closes and uncloses his eyes rhythmically. He is submerged, blood red and in utero. The doors to the car slide open and the birds are distant now. They cannot survive inside the train. Melanie describes her real man in further detail. “Like, Anderson Cooper but less gay,” she says. “Maybe like Wolf Blitzer.” Raymond nods in agreement.

After they cross the Hudson back into Jersey, Raymond counts pairs of shoes tossed over telephone lines, counts the conversations running through the laces. “I just need a dude who wants to smoke me out and fix all my appliances, y’know?” says Melanie.

“I know,” says Raymond. He scratches a pair of tiny lungs onto the clouded glass.

In the kitchen, there are rainbow plates and napkins scattered across the counter. Above the sink, a string of letters reads *hapy birthday* – crooked and misspelled. Earlier, at the party, Raymond and his father were the only guests, hunched over a cluster of candles – smiling wide. A birthday cake sits on the kitchen table, tilted and half-eaten. Purple balloons still bob against the ceiling. Raymond’s hands are sticky, blue from dyed frosting. His cheeks are still pink from the extra attention. He tongues the corner of his mouth, standing in front of his father’s bedroom door. In the living room, a gang of multi-colored puppets dance the samba on the television – spinning one another in circles on a stage drawn with crayon. They count to twenty.

From the other side of the door, Raymond can hear the birds. When he shuts his eyes, he can see them, too. He presses an ear to the wood. Yellow balls of light smear against the glassy parts of his little eyes. Behind the door, something metal rattles. Cages – maybe, thinks Raymond. Gold cages from the floor to the ceiling filled with frantic pulsing blurs. They are gold like a sick body, like flakes of ash in a slow spin toward earth.

Raymond’s teeth ache. He presses one palm to his chest and hums loudly – an elliptical galaxy already swirling at his feet. Raymond pounds his small fists against the door. At first, once – and then over and over. His eyes tear and wet his small cheeks. He is red-faced, caught in a revolving swing of screams. Raymond is thinking about his father – trapped there, curled on the carpet at the center of the cages, his skin glowing in a square of sun from the window.

Raymond is bathed in the dust of every ring around the sun. He closes his eyes, tears welling in the crease at his eyelash – dazed in the reverie of this sickness. With his eyes closed, Raymond names the birds. He counts them. One, two, three-hundred, maybe more – waiting with their beaks wide and throats pulsing – yellow wings beating frantically against the gold bars of a thousand cages.

Raymond opens the fridge. He counts and recounts thirty-seven chocolate pudding cups. There are three missing. He adjusts a few, turning them to match of the lines of blue painter’s tape on the bottoms of the shelves. The refrigerator light dims and flickers. He stares at the stacks of pudding, the four cartons of orange juice lined up against the blue tape in perfect symmetry. He shuts the door.

Raymond sits in the living room alone. On the television, a forty-three year-old Caucasian male loses control of a single engine plane flying at an altitude of four thousand seven hundred and ninety-three degrees. The plane smashes directly into the side of a four unit apartment building – the engine explodes upon impact. The news reporter smiles – her smooth brown skin wrinkling at the corners of her mouth.

The chain on the front door jingles and Raymond hears his father shuffle through the living room. “Hey, dad,” Raymond says from the couch, twisting his back to face the kitchen. His father is so thin – sallow and translucent purple. Raymond thinks he is dying. A few thin wisps of hair still cling to his blueish skull. The yellow bruises on his forearms fade and reappear with unsettling consistency. Raymond believes that he has been marked, eaten from the inside by some hushed malevolent thing. There are no traces of his former self. He no longer speaks. Raymond, too, is mostly silent – consumed by some un-named thing buzzing in his blood.

His father smiles. He opens the fridge and takes a pudding cup from the top left of the stack. He gives Raymond a double thumbs up.

“No problem,” says Raymond.

His father shuffles behind the couch toward his bedroom. On the television, they are interviewing a poet. He is only nineteen years old. His work has been published in fourteen languages. The interviewer asks the poet how he is coping with such rapid global success – grinning and pale under the camera lights. “I take it as it comes,” says the boy poet. “I call my mother a lot.” The interviewer squeezes the microphone with both hands and chuckles.

Raymond is thinking about Melanie and her real man and Maxwell Gains and his fucked up haircut. He is thinking about stardust and the boy poet’s mother receiving eighty-nine love letter voicemails every day. Thirty-two thousand four hundred and eighty-five love letter voicemails every year. Raymond’s father slides the latch on his bedroom door, pudding cup in hand, and the birds arrive – ceaseless and maddening. Raymond is thinking about microscopic particles of dark powder packed against the walls of his lungs.

Raymond fumbles for the industrial ear-muffs on the end table, but he is already delirious. His father slips into the bedroom, and before the door snaps shut behind him Raymond feels the frenzied wings hammering hard against the gold bars of the cages – the birds and their collapsing throats bulging and ruptured. Raymond’s eyes roll to their whites. He snaps the muffs against his ears and the relief is immediate, though not complete. He clicks the television remote and the thick static settles him. It centers him like some bottomless weight. The ensuing calm is biblical.

He is nascent – vibrating at the speed of light. He presses the palms of his hands against his chest and hums. Everything is blank, he thinks. Everything is smooth and blank and endless.

On the other side of the conveyor belt, Marcia bends her arms back at the shoulder, tying an apron behind her back. For a moment, her swollen torso has no limbs. She struggles to knot the strings. Her fingers are plumped and blue – every purple fingernail swallowed by years at the edge of the conveyor belt, not to mention localized fluid retention and generally poor blood circulation. Raymond’s father watches Marcia’s face. The corners of her mouth turn down in concentration. Her tight curls bounce against a pair of smooth pink cheeks.

Raymond’s father bends against a conveyer belt. He fingers a few stray metal triangles into a pan at his hips. His hands are gloved. His rubber apron squeaks against the edge of the tray. He pulls a pair of green safety goggles away from his face, a pink line printed into his skin like roads on a map. He is a pond frozen over – the purple surface of a distant and vaporous world. He lets the green goggles snap back into place, two twisted elastic ends sticking out against his shining head like a pair of antennae.

Every day, Raymond’s father stands across from Marcia at the conveyor belt. Fifty-three hours a week, two hundred and sixty days a year. Raymond’s father is always counting the minutes down backward. Always waiting for the press to reset – for Marcia to plant her body on the stool behind her tray. Marcia is familiar, if nothing else. And she passes the seconds. In the break room, she shows Raymond’s father photos of her three sons standing on a set of stairs wearing matching purple shirts. They are tall. They have smooth skin and white teeth.

“Took this photo last month,” says Marcia. “They’re handsome,” she says, “but they’re bastards.” Raymond’s father nods. “Don’t let ‘em fool you,” says Marcia, shaking her head. “They’re a buncha little slobs.” Raymond’s father spoons a gob of pudding from a plastic cup. Week after week, he nods through Marcia’s stories. Her sons dye their hair – steal bills from her

purse, kiss girls behind the dumpsters at school. They hang from the ledges of their bedroom windows at night and drop down onto the lawn without so much as a single clumsy knock against the siding. They live incautiously – and their mischief keeps Raymond’s father here on earth until the press resets.

On the other side of the belt, Marcia’s ballooning arms finally drop to her sides. Raymond’s father taps the pads of his fingers against the belt. The collar of Marcia’s shirt sits crooked across her clavicle. She has skipped a button. Raymond’s father doesn’t notice. He is consumed – rawboned and sharp at every edge. The humming deepens behind his eyes. He is always spiraling toward some limitless trajectory. He is always waiting for the mechanical press to soften his landing.

Marcia snaps on a pair of industrial earmuffs. They flatten her curls against her ears. From across the conveyor belt, Marcia gives Raymond’s father a thumbs up – a toothy smile stamped into her plump face like a plastic mold. In his throat, Raymond’s father can feel the buzzing. He is thinking about the ancient Egyptians carving intricate irrigation systems into the desert floor – kings wrapped in cloth buried deep inside soundless tombs. He is thinking about veins and vessels and blood and the swift primordial swoop of this sickness – shrinking slowly into the perpetual hum of our own genomic pools – a globular cluster of stars swirling into the mouth of the void. He is thinking about Raymond, asleep in his bed across the city.

Raymond’s father clicks his jaw, his throat still throbbing like the pulse of some desperate animal. It is something ancient and ceaseless – this buzzing. It is blood borne, etched into every cell. It is the map of his ancestors – every chromosomal sequence alive and spinning. Across the belt, Marcia is still waiting, chubby thumbs popping up from a pair of bluish fists. Raymond’s father nods. He mirrors her thumbs up. Behind her, two mounted lights blink red.

The press fires up and thunders down hard – clicks and hisses six sheets of metal into triangle stamps and spits them out in small piles onto the belt. Giant pistons grow and shrink over and over in a mechanical roar that crunches Raymond’s father’s ringing nerves into stillness. Every thirteen seconds, the press resets. Raymond’s father’s face goes slack. The press punch is orderly in a way that the universe is not. Here, he is buried in a rhythmic hum – an able apparatus – finally, a simple machine. Every engine spins outward from the center of some cold knot at the center of his brain. Raymond’s father closes his eyes.

This is an interstellar memory of the womb – embryonic, a long and radiant thrum. Raymond’s father collapses into every frequency. His palms hover above the moving belt. He is thinking about the pounding press – about how not everyone’s underground feels like the same amount of miles. Across the belt, Marcia wags a pudgy arm in the air. Everything is clean, thinks Raymond’s father. Everything is clean and white and static.

Melanie sinks into the center of Raymond’s mattress – legs spidered out over a pile of pillows. Her eyes are closed. Her arm hangs over the edge of the bed, a fat joint pinched between two fingers. Blue veins snake just beneath her skin at the elbow. She folds her arm and hits the joint, elegant under the low light of Raymond’s bedroom. A low beat thumps from Raymond’s laptop on the floor.

“You remember that dude I dated for a couple weeks after Philip Seymour Hoffman died?” she says.

“Which one?”

“The one with the red track pants and the dry scalp.” Melanie says.

“Right,” says Raymond, “the track pants.”

He twists to look at her, slumped sideways on the carpet with his back against the bedframe. Her eyes are still closed – hair tucked under her neck. Smoke snakes from her curled fingers – ringed with silver and beaded bracelets. Next to Raymond, a Candyland board sits unfolded on the carpet. Two colored plastic gingerbread men stand at the edge of the Ice Cream Sea waiting on their fates to materialize.

Melanie wraps an arm around Raymond's chest to pass him the joint from behind. He pinches it from her fingers and takes a slow drag – the end lit up cherry red. Raymond blows smoke up to the ceiling.

“Didn't you fuck that dude in the Hoboken Costco?”

“Beside the point, Raymond.”

“Mel, he stole fourteen dollars from your purse after.”

“*Again*, Raymond. Irrelevant. Also, there's no admissible evidence. And nobody asked your gay ass for a play-by-play of every mistake I've ever made in a Costco.” She taps Raymond's arm with the back of her hand for the joint. He hands it over his shoulder.

“Anyway,” she says – her voice thick from the exhale, “he came into the store today on my shift.”

Raymond makes a face and draws a card. One yellow box. He slides the green gingerbread man six colored squares closer to the Licorice Castle.

“He asked about the lobster bisque,” says Melanie. “And then he gave me a Barnes & Noble gift card with seven dollars on it and told me to take care of my feet.”

“Ew,” says Raymond.

“Yep.”

Raymond squints. He is stoned and dizzy, clicking his jaw under the slow drum of the music. He opens his mouth wide and snaps it shut. He is thinking about the bisque. He is thinking about that gross motherfucker shuffling around a pointedly non-descript Barnes & Noble wearing a pair of filthy track pants and combing through every shelf for books about foot fetishism and crustaceans.

“Mel?” says Raymond.

“Yeah?”

Raymond licks his lips. His cheeks are cottoned and tingling.

“Did you keep the giftcard?”

“Yes, Raymond,” she says. “I kept the fucking giftcard.”

Raymond says nothing. He kneads a patch of dirty carpet with his feet – his white t-shirt stretched tight across his stomach. He tucks his hands under his legs. Melanie hits the joint again.

Raymond’s room is hazed and warm – a safe cavern in the late afternoon sun. A thick red blanket hangs pinned over the only window. Melanie rolls to the edge of the mattress, stretching to pull the top card from the deck. Her hair curtains her face. A thrifted bowling shirt hangs away from her chest – *Anthony* embroidered in red above the pocket. She tucks a handful of hair behind her ear, her bare feet wrapped in a heap of Raymond’s bedsheets. Her toenails are painted, chipping orange. She presses her palm flat on the carpet and wiggles back onto the bed. When she’s finally settled, she flips the card. On the other side, there’s a lopsided purple square drawn in magic marker.

“*Raymond,*” she hisses, “what in the *actual fuck* is this?” She wraps an arm around his neck and holds the card between two fingers in front of his nose. Raymond blinks to focus his eyes.

“We lost a couple cards,” he says. “I made new ones.”

Melanie groans, the card still pinched between her fingers. “So you’re telling me that this poorly drawn makeshift card has absolutely nothing to do with you cheating, Raymond?”

“What?”

Raymond squints. He hits the joint again.

“The glass ceiling, Raymond. The glass *fucking* ceiling.” Melanie throws the card at the board, but it catches air on the underside and flies back toward her. She closes her eyes, her fingers clasped together directing a concerto of old school feminist rhetoric.

“We can *see* the top, Raymond. We can *see* it,” she says, “but we can’t ever *get* there.” Her eyes are still closed. Behind her, the red blanket lets in a sliver of hard sunlight. It illuminates the ends of her hair. “*Raymond*,” she whispers. “Do you know how fucking *shitty* and *frustrating* it is to watch dudes just *cheat* their way through the goddamn *Molasses Swamp* of corporate America?”

“What?”

“This is the *real world*, Raymond,” she says through her teeth.

Raymond hits the joint and coughs up the exhale. His eyes water.

“But it’s Candyland,” he says. Melanie blinks. Her hands folded motionless in her lap. She tilts her head in fake shock.

“Wow, dude,” she says. “Have fun acting like a giant dick for the rest of your life.”

“Wait,” says Raymond. “I’m sorry.”

Melanie swings her legs over the edge of the mattress, denim shorts swallowed up by the bowling shirt. Her shoulders are hunched and she crosses her legs at the ankle. Her bare feet swing just above the carpet.

“Damn right you are,” she says. “You gonna let me hit that?”

Raymond stretches an arm across his chest to pass Melanie the joint. His shoulder clicks in its socket. He is thinking about the echelons of interplanetary design – every iridescent ring exposed to the eye. He is thinking about the Candy Cane Forest. He is thinking about a slow seething fire – every colored tile melting into a glob of cancerous plastic at the foot of Gumdrop Mountain. Yellow – skip three. Purple. Green. Cherry pitfall.

Raymond strikes a match. Through the curtains, he can see Mrs. Newman and Greta on the sidewalk across from his house. The tiny mirrors are still strapped to Mrs. Newman’s face. She waddles slowly backward, her pink flip-flops slapping the cement. She turns her face away from Raymond and waves. Raymond waves back. The match burns to Raymond’s skin, and he drops it into a bucket of water between his feet. His father is at work, running big machines somewhere in the city, and Raymond is thinking about galaxies – the sad inevitable sway of the cosmic order of things. He is thinking about an interstellar blast – and a thin dust settling over everything like snow. He turns away from the window.

Raymond closes his eyes. He is thinking about his father – his bones bruised and thinning to powder. He is thinking about the birds, picking at his father’s skin, all rubber and stretched over a soft skull. His father, the machinist, dulled and aching – folding out under himself with joints like hinges and melted plastic. Raymond opens his eyes and strikes another match.

Over and over he strikes them and drops them – letting them burn in a small pile on the floor. The birds are screaming from inside the bedroom and they have made him this – this mask and recoil. The carpet melts away in patches, shriveling into clumps of blue and red and soon the curtains catch too and dissolve. Raymond stands alone against the heat. Flames tongue the

ceiling and blacken the edge of the couch – the fabric hissing as it peels away and melts. The birds spin yellow circles behind Raymond’s eyes and he walks through the living room, sucking in hot ash and coughing it back up again. He closes the front door behind him.

From the curb, Raymond can see the how the planets are aligned. Across the street, Mrs. Newman stands facing the house as it melts away, the mirrored device still strapped to her face, Greta chewing a stick at her feet. The porch caves and black smoke plumes in a fat cloud over the debris – a bending tunnel of aluminum gutters. Mrs. Newman smiles wide at the fire. She can only ever see what’s already behind her.

A piece of aluminum siding peels away from the house. Flakes of white ash spin up to the sun and this house is now a signal. All Raymond can think of is Melanie and her real man and his father already almost gone, and all those hellish birds – screaming, their tiny lungs filled and bursting with the stuff of stars.

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4,100 words

Hum
by H. L. Comeriato

It is 8:02 A.M. on a Tuesday and Miss Catherine curls two soup cans up against her shoulders – chicken noodle right clam chowder left and she sweats it out to the beat. She alternates high kicks alone in the living room, her white socks bright against the dark blue wallpaper. In Miss Catherine’s opinion, *Disco Sweat* is the single best video from the Good Times Home Video Platinum Collection. Richard Simmons swings his little arms at his sides. Fat women dance behind him in straight lines – each wearing a pair of thick leg warmers, thick prescription lenses, thick like eighty extra pounds on average. Lines of static blur every face into the image of some ancient automaton. Miss Catherine’s pink shorts stick to her thighs.

Come on, baby, says Richard, do the locomotion.

He points two fingers through the screen right at Miss Catherine.

Make that body move.

Miss Catherine does the locomotion alone in an empty living room. The thump and echo of her new life is at least something other than what she had before. If not better, then at least different. In this beehive, Miss Catherine is untraceable – obscured by some other woman’s

name scribbled on the dotted line of the lease. She kicks twice at the screen, punching at the air with a closed fist. Miss Catherine's cheeks are pink, and her former self is buried.

The person who lives in the apartment above Miss Catherine's drops a porcelain mug on the linoleum floor. It shatters, and Miss Catherine shakes her head to get rid of the sharp pieces. She blinks away the lingering explosion.

Come on, says Richard, give me some energy!

Reach high, he says, and sizzle.

Miss Catherine drops the soup cans. They thud against the carpet and roll toward the television. She reaches high and sizzles back down – wiggling her fingers in front of the screen. Her thighs burn. She is trim and efficient – an updated model. She is shaping herself into something swift and strong.

There you go, says Richard.

Look at you go.

It is 10:06 A.M. and Miss Catherine is ready for some protein. She claps her hands at the top of a jumping jack.

Now kick, says Richard.

You're doing great.

The girl who lives in the apartment next to Miss Catherine's pounds her fist against the wall. Muffled, through the vent, Miss Catherine hears her little voice.

“Hey!” the voice says. “Hey, lady!”

Miss Catherine eyes the vent. She touches her toes and sparkles back up into another jumping jack.

“Could you chill with the fucking tapes?”

Reuben flips a bag of makeup brushes upside down onto the kitchen counter and picks through the pile with a fake lash glued to her thumb.

“What about Maxine?” she says over her shoulder.

Alan is lying on the couch with a pile of dresses stacked on his lap. His face shines blue in the light from his phone.

“She’s not coming.”

“What?”

“She said her cat ate a bunch of popcorn and she has to shoot kernels out of his nasal cavity with a syringe.”

“She has a cat?”

“That’s what she told Nathan. And Nathan told me. So, yeah. I mean, I’m pretty sure she has a cat.”

“What about Kevin?”

“Yeah, he’s not coming either.”

“He sucks anyway,” says Reuben. “Julie told me he’s a Republican and somehow still gay, which makes no sense. And he allegedly went to Lisa’s Christmas in July thing last week with Dustin and then they both lied about it so Nathan wouldn’t find out. He’s an asshole.”

Alan pinches his eyes shut between his thumb and index finger.

“We have no friends.”

Reuben is mixing makeup in a pallet on the stovetop. She stands up straight and turns to face Alan. She throws one hip out, for clear dramatic emphasis – her shoulders bulging in a white t-shirt pulled tight across her chest. Patches of stubble dot her neck and jaw.

“We have friends,” she says. “Just not any of the people we invited.” She throws her head back and wheezes hard for a fake laugh. She crinkles her nose and squints, pulls her lips tight against her teeth like a denture smile. Alan giggles.

Reuben turns to hunch over the counter again and knocks her knuckles against the burner, dumping a spoonful of clown-white Ben Nye over the grate. She clenches the spoon in her fist – pinching her eyes shut hard and whistling in a breath through clenched teeth.

“Well, fuck me,” she exhales. “This is Kevin the Republican’s karma. I can feel it in my soul.”

“That’s not how karma works.”

“Whatever. Just throw me the Cortisone from the tackle box.”

Alan kicks at a pile of wigs. He crouches over the box and flips the latch. He slides the Cortisone out of its tiny box and tosses it to Reuben from the living room. Reuben breaks from applying fake lashes, her face still stretched out long. She snatches the tube from air and twists the cap off with her thumb. She squirts it into the spoon on the counter – a fake lash still stuck to her nail on the other hand.

“Thanks, dear,” she says.

“Any news?”

“Get my phone,” she says, “It’s in the duffle under the dresses.”

Alan sifts through a mound of dresses on the couch, digging for the duffle. He thumbs Reuben’s passcode into the touchscreen and scrolls through her unopened texts.

“Oh, fuck,” he says. “Maxine says she’s in again. But we have to pick her up because she got too freaked out over the cat kernels and got drunk instead.”

Reuben glues the other lash on and blinks spastically – her face framed in a backlit circular mirror on the counter. It is 8:04 P.M. and she is taking form now. She is carving herself out of marble. Her real true self, that is. She applies liquid eyeliner with enviable dexterity.

“Is she ready?” says Reuben.

Alan’s holds his phone against his chest with two hands, lying flat on the living room floor. He squints at the screen.

“I don’t know,” he says. “She keeps talking about rent or moving or something.”

“What?”

“She keeps saying all her neighbors are, direct quote, *annoying little bitches.*”

Reuben snorts. Her face is still stuck long like it’s melting. The refrigerator hums behind her. In the circular mirror, her cheeks finally go slack. She tilts her chin to admire her handiwork.

“Okay,” says Alan. “She says she’s ready.”

Reuben smacks her lips.

“She damn well better be.”

Miss Catherine is alone in the living room. She kneels in front of the only window. She clicks a slit between two blinds with an index finger. The apartment is cavernous and everything opens up behind her like some hollowed cough – a metrical echo pounded out to bodies shuffling through the halls, doors with numbers thumping shut.

Miss Catherine can hear that fat tongue clicking in the pulse of the apartment building. The tapes let her sleep for a few hours at a time, but it is there, always, just beneath the surface – clicking out every silent second of Miss Catherine’s life. It is the cadence of her almost death – all that water in her lungs – eyes swelled and bruising purple. When she left Mississippi she

thought she left this too but the Lord had other plans. Outside, Miss Catherine can only see the halos from the streetlights on the pavement.

It is 9:02 P.M. and Miss Catherine remembers sea-foam green. She remembers Eddie's hair matted to his forehead like a black claw when he stood above her in the bathtub. "This is your very own rebirth," he'd said, pinning her there with a knee to her chest. His mouth hung slack and Miss Catherine can remember those yellow teeth – his lip hanging out away from his face and his gums all white and puffy.

His jeans are wet, half underwater to keep her there and then he starts clicking a fat tongue against his cheek. Clicking over and over and he cups his hands across her face and holds her under the water, her eyelid stretched open and burning. His huge hands bend her nose sideways and split her lips open against her teeth. She can taste the blood.

The pale green tiles map out the walls in a grid of single indivisible points. Miss Catherine remembers the water on the floor, Eddie's white shirt clinging to his chest. The lowest common denominator is always this almost death. Miss Catherine remembers her lungs ached like the aftermath of an earthquake – the slow inward collapse of a death by degrees.

Eddie clicks his tongue and Miss Catherine hears it in her sleep – an endless metronome counting and re-counting the tile grid and every amalgamated point. Even after she escaped into this building with a new thump and lilt – children in the hallways, locks and keys and the pulse of other people's secrets coming in soft through the vents – she can still hear that incessant metronome. It exists inside of her.

Miss Catherine's eyes trail the halos on the pavement outside. She collects every bit of data. She scans the perimeter. Miss Catherine pulls her fingers away and let the blinds click shut. Headlights slant thin lines through the blinds and run slow across the blue wallpaper, graphing

out her even breath in the image of those bathroom tiles. The girl who lives in the apartment next to Miss Catherine's bangs her leg against a piece of furniture. Miss Catherine can hear the girl hopping toward the kitchen and her small voice coming through the vent.

"God *damnit*," the voice says through the vent. "Jesus *fucking* Christ."

Miss Catherine closes her eyes.

Reuben turns the key and the engine chokes. She squeezes the wheel until her knuckles are white, shuts her eyes, and meditates for exactly thirteen seconds.

"I do not have time for this shit." Reuben slaps the wheel. A penis-shaped air freshener swings from the rearview mirror.

"Just try it again," says Alan.

"I fucking will."

The engine stutters and turns over and the dash lights up. Reuben checks her makeup in the mirror. She rolls her lips, smooths out the lavender lipstick she found online for half the original price. Her eyes are flawless – cat eye so perfect it looks etched into her skin. Reuben does a little shimmy, makes lips, and hits the gearshift with her wrist.

"So where the fuck is this place?" She hits the gas and Alan pulls a seatbelt across his chest but doesn't click the buckle in.

"Uh," he says "somewhere on the East Side."

"Well, fucking map it then. And get that thing of Funyuns out of the glove box. I'm not fucking around."

Miss Catherine wipes the vomit from her chin with the back of her hand. That incessant metronome has made her sick – that fat tongue always clicking. It makes her nauseous, to always be torn and hung by every sinew – to have Eddie’s knee crack her sternum and wake her from dreaming. She flushes the toilet and stands with her hips against an empty sink. This apartment has no bathtub.

Miss Catherine’s eyes hurt, and she remembers rolling a fat cherry at the edge of her plate with a fork. Across the table, Eddie sucking his teeth, his bloated belly pulling at the buttons on his shirt. Miss Catherine rests her chin in her hand, one bony elbow stuck to the blue linoleum table. Eddie slides his plate toward Miss Catherine – the guts of a thick red cherry pie smeared across the white porcelain. Miss Catherine keeps her eyes low.

Eddie clicks his tongue against his teeth and Miss Catherine hums low from the bottom of her throat. It thumps out against her forehead – slow and warm and heavy like a wool blanket. With her mouth closed, she tongues a mantra into her cheek.

“You didn’t eat?” says Eddie.

“Not hungry.”

Miss Catherine doesn’t look up. Eddie coughs into his elbow. He wipes the spit from his chin with the back of his hand.

You made it,” he says. “Why not eat it?”

Miss Catherine shrugs, still hunched over the slice of pie – that metronome set ticking and ticking against the inside of her skull.

“It’s good,” says Eddie.

Miss Catherine says nothing. Behind her, brown dishwater sits stagnant in a deep sink – bowls and plates lie stacked on the counter crusted with oatmeal and dried egg yolks. Eddie taps

a heavy boot against the checkered floor. He coughs again. Longer, this time – and harder. His eyes water.

Outside, a wind chime clangs against the side of the house. An old dog howls chained behind the shed out back. Miss Catherine rolls the cherry with her fork and the bayou drums out its secrets in code. Miss Catherine hears every heart beat swallowed up at the bottom of the swamp. The ceiling fan clicks in slow circles.

Eddie stands and kicks his chair away and before Miss Catherine can even flinch he drags her up onto the table by a fistful of hair. Miss Catherine kicks her legs – twisting on the table, her chest smeared red with cherry filling. Eddie snaps her neck back like a doll, his yellow teeth sharp at her throat. He growls.

“Eat it,” he says – hissing against her skin.

Miss Catherine whimpers. She claws at the linoleum, squirming under Eddie’s hot breath. Her bare legs hang over the edge of the table – pink mouth open wide and shaking. Eddie fingers a clump of cherry filling from the table and smears it across Miss Catherine’s face – down her neck and cheeks. He pulls her shirt into a fist and tears it away. Miss Catherine squeezes her eyes shut tight – still tonguing that mantra onto the backs of her teeth. Eddie grunts. The veins in his arms and neck swell fat and blue.

He coughs again. This time, uncontrollable. He heaves and bends at the waist, his eyes still wild with fury – still gripping Miss Catherine’s hair at the scalp. Miss Catherine smirks, held up on the table like an offering. She is a scarecrow – a homespun crucifixion.

Eddie chokes and gags, clawing at his throat, eyes bulged. Miss Catherine’s torn blouse hangs away from her chest and she grins wide, lost in a dream of prophetic revenge.

Eddie drops Miss Catherine on the table. She hits hard and splits her forehead.

He staggers toward the sink, grabbing at the faucet. Miss Catherine throws her head back and laughs. A thin line of blood slips down her forehead.

Eddie trips backward, legs jelly under the weight of two lungs and a heart and a stomach filled with cherry pie. He smashes through the screen door, half caught in the torn mesh. He is slumped against the doorframe. Blood and spit wet his neck – his eyes pinned open wide like an experiment – writhing under the dead weight of Miss Catherine’s homemade justice. He snorts and sputters white foam.

Miss Catherine slides off the table. The ceiling fan clicks and she can hear the bullfrogs all the way from the swamp – every buzzing insect filled with thick red juice – alive in the spin of this turmoil. The earth arrives in color. A strip of torn mesh hangs from the screen door over Eddie’s shoulder. It moves in the wind.

“Fuck, marry, kill: Sigourney Weaver, the dad from Little House on the Prairie, Bernie Sanders,” Alan laughs at his own joke, his cheek still packed with chewed Funyuns. Reuben responds instantly. Her eyes never leave the road.

“Fuck Bernie Sanders.”

Alan choke laughs. He spits little chunks of Funyun and they stick to the dashboard.

“Easy, Hoss,” says Reuben.

“Seriously?”

“One hundred percent,” she says. “Zero hesitation.”

“And marry Sigourney Weaver?”

“What? God, fuck no. I’ll marry Little House on the Prairie. Like, I’m into socialist dirty talk but I like suspenders and that sexy farmer shit, y’know?”

“Oh, I know.”

Reuben twists the knobs on the dashboard.

“Like, he’s reliable,” she says. “Like, he could build me a house if I needed him to build me a house.”

“That is totally reasonable.”

At 10:47 P.M. Reuben rolls through a stop sign. Alan texts Maxine.

Miss Catherine sits on the floor of the shower. The water hits her back and it is just one more low pulse at the base of her neck – humming beneath every other rhythmic thud. The people who live in the apartment above hers are having a party. They are silent and then they roar, laughing themselves sick with wine. Miss Catherine hugs her knees. Her eyelashes are heavy with water and somehow she can see what she looks like from somewhere else – somewhere further off. She stretches one arm up and turns off the water. The showerhead drips to a stop.

It is 10:56 P.M. and Miss Catherine hears Eddie’s tongue clicking. She wipes herself dry with a dirty t-shirt. She has no towels. She pulls a red sweatshirt over her head. There is an image of Mickey Mouse on the front. In the living room, she pops a copy of Richard Simmons’ *Farewell to Fat* in the VCR and sits cross-legged in front of the television.

The hallway is pale pink and crooked. Alan follows Reuben past each numbered door in the way that children follow their mothers through the grocery store. The light from his phone brightens his face. Funyun crumbs dust his black t-shirt. Reuben struts like it’s a runway. Her heels leave little indents in the dark green carpet – her silver skirt swishing against her legs.

“Well what the fuck is she saying? Which one, Romeo?”

“Fuck, I don’t know. I was on Twitter. The exit polls are coming in for the New York primary and I’m just so disappointed, y’know?”

Reuben stops dead and spins to face Alan. He trips and recovers before falling into Reuben’s chest. “Get it the fuck together,” she whispers. “You’re better than this.” Alan avoids eye contact. “And for fuck’s sake get rid of this shit.” She runs her palm down the front of his shirt.

“Sorry.”

“You fucking should be.”

Alan’s phone dings. “Okay,” he says. “She said it’s Apartment 12. And she sent a photo of the cat.”

Miss Catherine’s hair is heavy and dripping. There are two round wet spots on the red sweatshirt. Richard Simmons crouches and jumps. Fourteen fat ladies all jump behind him in perfect unison.

Say bye to that belly fat, says Richard.

Say goodbye!

Miss Catherine doesn’t move. She is absorbing *Farewell to Fat* in its totality. The colored images come through the screen and flash hopeful and honest against the closed blinds. The Good Times Home Video Platinum Collection muffles the hum of this honeycomb apartment. It is something other than the ticking of another person’s bomb – something more joyous. Something closer to the truth.

The girl who lives in the apartment next to Miss Catherine's stomps through her living room. Miss Catherine can hear her small voice through the vent.

"Oh my fucking god," says the small voice. "Stay still you little shit."

Miss Catherine listens to the girl struggle with some shrieking animal, tearing through the apartment from end to end. Miss Catherine laughs – the smallest hiccup in her steady breath.

It is 11:04 P.M. and Miss Catherine closes her eyes. She lets the television warm her like a campfire. She folds her hands in her lap and relaxes into the shake and tremble of this new life.

We're gonna do this move together, says Richard Simmons – arms outstretched.

We're gonna welcome you home.

Reuben knocks on Apartment 12's door. Alan slumps against the wall behind her. Reuben knocks three times and when they don't hear anything she knocks again. It is 11:33 P.M., which makes them officially late.

"Fuck, marry, kill," says Alan.

"Not a good time," says Reuben.

"Matt LeBlanc, Ted Kennedy, the Zodiac Killer."

"Alan, shut the fuck up."

Inside the apartment, someone is moving around.

"Come on, Maxxy!" yells Reuben. "I don't have time for this shit! Let's kick it into gear!"

Inside the apartment, a door slams – heavy footsteps thump against the carpet toward the other end of the apartment. Reuben shifts her weight from one foot to the other.

"Maxine!" Reuben yells.

The door snaps open fast and Miss Catherine is standing in the doorway wearing the Mickey Mouse sweatshirt – her legs spread wide for balance and her feet still bare. She is holding a Smith & Wesson 9mm semi-automatic – shaking, she brings her right hand up from the doorknob and cups it over her left hand at the grip. She blinks hard.

“Fuck,” says Alan.

Miss Catherine is shaking but she doesn't move and Reuben and Alan press their backs against the pink wall.

“Wrong apartment, lady,” says Allan. “We got the wrong one.” Reuben raises both hands, palms open and facing Miss Catherine. “We're leaving, okay? We're just gonna leave.”

Miss Catherine says nothing. Her hair is still wet and it drips onto the sweatshirt. The gun is hot in her palm.

Reuben spins and runs and an instant after Alan follows. Alan's saying, “Go, go, go,” over and over screaming “Go, get in front of me.” They trip down the hallway and Reuben rolls in her heels and claws at the wall to pull herself up again. She keeps moving on her knees until she's back up and running and then Alan slams through the emergency exit to the back stairs just in front of her. He turns and drags her through by her arms.

It is 11:37 PM and Miss Catherine has not moved. She is still standing with the door flung open, her elbows locked holding the gun straight out. A red exit sign buzzes above the emergency door and Miss Catherine imagines a kind of long trajectory that leaves her at the vanishing point – that starts with her and ends with her – only, always. Her ears are ringing. She can hear Eddie and his tongue and all his talk about rebirth. This is her rebirth, then – the hum of this new life, this gun still hot in her palm – this door finally open.

Miss Catherine can hear the door to the apartment next to hers swing on its hinges.

“Guys?” says the small voice from the other side of the wall.

Miss Catherine blinks.

“Are you guys there?” the small voice says. “I got the kernel out.”

Miss Catherine’s heart thrums slow at the back of her throat. The girl who lives in the apartment next to hers fumbles in the doorway. She drops her phone and it thuds against the carpet. Miss Catherine tucks the gun behind her leg.

“God *fucking* damnit,” the girl says.

She hunches into the hallway, and for the first time, Miss Catherine can see her – one arm stretched out grabbing at her phone on the floor. Her head is buzzed – bright blue and freshly dyed. She leans forward, and her jacket pulls up at the bottom. Miss Catherine watches the thin slip of skin on her back, her heavy boots crusted and crumbling mud onto the carpet – a green bag strapped diagonal across her back. The girl stands straight and trips back, phone in hand, startled by Miss Catherine in her peripheral. She gains her balance and cups one hand over her own neck. She adjusts her glasses – coughing a little to clear her throat.

“Oh,” says the girl – Maxine. She stutters – half question and half asserted fact. “It’s you – you with the tapes.”

Miss Catherine says nothing. She is immovable, still buzzing at some intolerable frequency. She blinks hard and her eyes well. Her nasal cavity burns. Maxine’s phone flickers and buzzes in her palm. She tucks one thumb under the strap of her bag.

“It’s my friends,” she says, tilting the phone toward Miss Catherine. “My friends are calling.”

Maxine looks at the buzzing phone, and then at Miss Catherine. Everything is delicate, crushed and changeable all at once. Miss Catherine is the cosmic bend of the seasons, the pull of every ocean's tide. Maxine leans forward.

“Hey, lady,” she says, wrinkling her brow. “You alright?”

Miss Catherine closes her eyes. Drops of water slip down her forehead and cheeks and wet her sweatshirt in patches. The gun is still hot against her bare leg, and the apartment opens up into the darkness behind her.

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Critical Analysis

Senior Honors Project

3 April 2017

Language, Grammar, & the Psychological Landscape: A Critical Analysis

The two separate and distinct works of short fiction presented and analyzed here are not linked explicitly by intersecting timelines or recurring characters. Each narrative exists independently from the other, and may be read as such. However, the works do interact with one another structurally, through intentionally stylized language, grammatical patterns, and a sectionalized narrative framework. Each work's narrative structure seeks to craft a rhythmic element within the individual context of each narrative – as well as a rhythmic cross-narrative pattern that can be felt indistinctly. This effect is achieved specifically through the use of persistent and recurrent rhythmic sound, the em-dash as rhythmic and aesthetic device, and alternating image-based and dialogue-based narrative sections. These intentional devices make visible a calculated paradox; when considered in relation to one another, both works elicit a similar *indistinct* aesthetic or sensation through the use of highly *distinct* and intentional language, grammar, and structure.

It is first important to discuss the specific ways in which stylized language and grammatical patterns build a narrative structure that allows the individual narratives to interact with one another. Stylized verbs appear within both narratives as patterned language that allows the reader intimate access to the internal psychological landscapes of multiple characters. These internal landscapes are primarily soundscapes, built by the use of recurring and persistent

cyclical or rhythmic noise (i.e. humming, throbbing, clicking, beating etc.). They function as auditory psychological maps, allowing the reader access to Raymond, his father, and Miss Catherine's respective psychological locations. These internal landscapes, and the language that shapes them, provide an internal depth and context for each character's ongoing psychological experiences with trauma and illness.

For this reason, Raymond's father's psychological soundscape is deeply important in pinpointing Raymond's own psychological location. While he does not exist within the individual narrative or the shared narrative structure with the same urgency or relevancy as Raymond and Miss Catherine, Raymond's father is the means by which Raymond becomes unlockable for the reader. He provides an identifiable template for Raymond's own experience with hereditary illness – which includes patterns of psychological detachment and audiovisual hallucinations. This “template,” is crafted by stylized verbs that serve specific auditory functions. Rather than simply describing the rhythmic and persistent sounds of the narrative's external world that trigger internal psychological reactions for both Raymond and his father, the movement of the physical objects and the human body is described with stylized verbs that directly link the physical body and the external world to the internal landscape.

At the factory where Raymond's father works, a mechanical press “clicks and hisses,” sheets of metal into small triangles. Waiting for the press to reset, Raymond's father stands at the edge of a conveyer belt, “click[ing] his jaw,” his throat “throbbing like the pulse of some desperate animal” (*Void* 10). The use of “clicks,” in reference to the mechanical press intentionally mirrors the “clicking,” of Raymond's father's jaw. The throb,” and “pulse,” of Raymond's father's throat, as well as the “clicking,” of his jaw, craft the body itself as rhythmic instrument. Each of these terms is an example of a stylized link between the organic and the

synthetic; the internal psyche and the external physical world, body and machine. The mechanical press could easily be described as having “stamped,” or “cut,” the metal sheets. However, because the machine “clicks and hisses,” the reader is allowed access to the rhythmic connections between the physiological function of the body and the auditory landscape of the factory.

The body as rhythmic instrument makes obvious the hereditary connection between Raymond’s own rhythmic internal soundscape and his father’s. Raymond’s own landscape, though perhaps not identical to his father’s, is undeniably shaped by the “ancient and ceaseless [...] buzzing, etched into every cell,” passed onto Raymond by his father’s genomic sequence (*Void 10*). For example, while Raymond and Melanie cross Central Park, the birds begin “circling the hard center of [Raymond’s] brain,” – connecting father and son, the rhythmic body and the psychological landscape (*Void 5*). This image is similar to the “cold knot,” described at the center of his father’s brain, during an episode of psychological detachment from the narrative’s physical world, triggered by repetitive sound (*Void 11*).

Additionally, Raymond and his father each experience relief in images of the womb. Upon reaching the train platform, where the rhythmic nature of the train and tunnel quiets the birds, Raymond is “nascent,” and “submerged, blood red and in utero” (*Void 8*). Raymond’s father also experiences a “long and radiant thrum,” and an “interstellar memory of the womb,” when the mechanical press relieves the buzzing and humming of his own psychological soundscape (*Void 11*). By the time the reader is allowed access to Raymond’s first encounter with the birds as a child, the reader already has a rhythmic, physical, and hereditary map of Raymond’s experience through his father.

From the time he is a small child, Raymond is able to sense indistinctly “some hushed malevolent thing,” that exists within his father (*Void* 10). When Raymond experiences the tortuous rhythmic nature of his own internal landscape for the first time as a child, the birds appear as “yellow [...] frantic pulsing blurs” (*Void* 6). Though they do not exist as audible or visible in the narrative’s physical world, the birds function within Raymond’s internal landscape as rhythmic instruments much like the human body. Their frenzied wings “[hammer] hard against the gold bars of the cages” (*Void* 8). In a separate instance, the birds envelop Raymond completely, “their frantic wings beating and beating” (*Void* 5). Here, stylized auditory language (i.e. pulsing, hammering, beating) makes visible the rhythm produced by the birds in Raymond’s own psychological landscape.

The rhythmic stylized verbs that appear throughout *The Mouth of the Void*’s narrative are also mirrored intentionally throughout *Hum*’s narrative. In some instances, the exact language used to craft Raymond and his father’s psychological landscapes is used to craft Miss Catherine’s internal landscape. Miss Catherine, who has endured horrific mental, emotional, and physical abuse, is haunted by her abuser long after she escapes him – most strikingly by the “metronome,” of his “clicking tongue [...] set ticking against the inside of her skull” (*Hum* 8).

The clicking of Miss Catherine’s abuser’s tongue plays on a rhythmic loop in her own psychological soundscape, and is linked to the rhythmic nature of the external world; for example the ceiling fan “click[ing] in circles” as she is attacked by her abuser, the “thump and lilt,” of her apartment, “the pulse of other people’s secrets,” and “doors with numbers thumping shut” (*Hum* 5, 6, 9). This internal “metronome,” is a psychological ramification of trauma, constructed through repetitive auditory sensations, and located within the context of her memory of abuse. Similarly, within the context of *The Mouth of the Void*’s narrative, the birds appear as a

manifestation of Raymond's illness. The repetitive sound of the physical world, as well as the persistent rhythmic nature of the human body, narrates Raymond and Miss Catherine's ongoing experiences with anxiety, paranoia, panic, and psychological detachment.

Miss Catherine's body, like Raymond's and his father's bodies, is coded as rhythmic instrument, and is therefore intimately connected to the psychological "metronome," of Eddie's clicking tongue. The "click[ing] ceiling fan," is a direct link to Miss Catherine's auditory experience of abuse and trauma. Additionally, during a separate instance of paranoia and psychological detachment, Miss Catherine "clicks a slit between two blinds," as she looks out the window of her apartment. Again, in the shower, the water against her skin produces "a low pulse at the base of her neck" (*Hum* 5, 11). Here, stylized language (i.e. clicks, pulses) codes Miss Catherine's body as rhythmic instrument – receiving the rhythms of the physical external world, experiencing the rhythm of the psychological soundscape, and producing rhythm itself in the process of its most basic physiological functions.

Miss Catherine's "metronome," and Raymond's birds display complex, intimate, psychological connections between one another, the human body, and the physical world. They allow the reader access to the psychological and physiological ramifications of Miss Catherine's trauma and Raymond and his father's shared illness. However, grammatical patterns – namely, the em-dash, also function to build a rhythmic structure that bridges *Hum* and *The Mouth of the Void*'s narrative structures.

The em-dash is itself rhythmic, and enlists the reader himself to produce a cadence. It allows for the production of rhythm in the real world, outside the context of the narratives themselves. It crafts a structured cadence by which the narrative itself must be read; instructing the reader to pause, inhale, and keep a measured pace – similar to the melodic map that sheet

music provides a musician. For example, in *The Mouth of the Void*, as Raymond struggles to keep the shrieking birds subdued, the em-dash combines with stylized verbs to allow the reader access to the cadence of Raymond's panic and psychological detachment from the physical world. It then describes the internal rhythm of his relief when "the [subway] tunnels silence [the birds] – the deep hum of traffic from above, bodies shuffling – all hollowed and echoing against the rails and the tile" (*Hum* 5). When read aloud, the em-dash functions like percussive musical notation inscribed on a staff. It provides a physical map of incantation – a layered rhythmic text.

This occurs too within the context of *Hum*'s narrative, when stylized language and the em-dash combine in a description of Miss Catherine's apartment as possessing "a new thump and lilt – children in the hallways – locks and keys and the pulse of other people's secrets" (*Hum* 6). Here, the em-dash works in conjunction with repetitive auditory language (i.e. thump, lilt, pulse), to code the reader himself as rhythmic instrument.

The em-dash also functions as a visual aesthetic break in image-based content; a literal physical mark, slash, and distinct line that both visually separates and connects a series of multiple incomplete images. For instance, when the reader encounters Miss Catherine submerged in primarily image-based sections of narrative that replay cycles of her abuse, the em-dash is utilized to arrange incomplete, and often strange or grotesque images. This allows the reader to gain an indistinct aesthetic sense of both Miss Catherine's memories, and the ways in which these image-based memories craft and inform her current rhythmic auditory internal landscape. The images facilitate a psychological and emotional retreat – a paranoia and psychological detachment from the narrative's physical world.

When Miss Catherine recalls being held underwater by her abuser, she refers to "the cadence of her almost death – all that water in her lungs – eyes swelled and bruising purple"

(*Hum* 5). Here, the em-dash offers a visual break in consecutive images, allowing the images to be viewed in quick succession as a single indistinct aesthetic experience for the reader. Again, when Miss Catherine recalls an instance of abuse in which she is dragged by her hair, the em-dash separates and connects two fragmented images. “She is a scarecrow – a homespun crucifixion” (*Hum* 9). In these examples, the em-dash allows the reader access to specific fragmented images that leave Miss Catherine debilitated – nauseous, and psychologically detached from the physical world. Miss Catherine’s internal “metronome,” then, is linked to and triggered by the rhythmic nature of movement and objects in the physical world.

The em-dash serves the same function within *The Mouth of the Void*’s narrative. Each time Raymond encounters the birds, the em-dash fragments specific rhythmic and cyclical images. When Raymond encounters the birds for the first time as a child, he counts them in his mind. “One, two, three-hundred, maybe more – waiting with their beaks wide and throats pulsing – yellow wings beating frantically” (*Void* 6). Again, as a young adult, Raymond encounters the birds while walking through Central Park with Melanie. As he passes people on the sidewalk, he notices “their eyes and mouths still stretched and suspended – the pinks and blues of their lips incandescent threads of light” (*Void* 5). Here, several distinct images appear in quick succession so that they may be perceived as both connected and separate. Much like the images that appear in Miss Catherine’s recollections of abuse and trauma, these fragmented images code Raymond as hallucinating, panicked, and psychologically detached from the narrative’s physical world.

Raymond’s father too experiences images that enhance and populate his own internal psychological landscape. As the mechanical press resets, Raymond’s father is confronted with “the swift primordial swoop of [his own] sickness – shrinking slowly into the perpetual hum of our own genomic pools – a globular cluster of stars swirling into the mouth of the void” (*Void*

10). These images are shaped and framed by the em-dash, and allow the reader to experience Raymond's father's panic and confusion through fragmented images rather than direct descriptions.

While the em-dash primarily occurs within image-based narrative sections, presenting the reader with fragmented images that craft and expand internal landscapes, it also provides images that root Raymond, his father, and Miss Catherine in the physical world. This effect is achieved through Miss Catherine's collection of exercise tapes. "Fat women dance behind [Richard Simmons] in straight lines – each wearing a pair of thick leg warmers, thick prescription lenses, thick like eighty extra pounds on average" (*Hum* 1). Here, both the reader and Miss Catherine receive fragmented images, produced by a machine – a combination of light, sound, and cultural material that places Miss Catherine in the mundane reality of the physical world.

In *The Mouth of the Void*, too, the em-dash is utilized to craft fragmented images that ground Raymond in the cultural reality of the physical world. Raymond, like Miss Catherine, receives fragmented images from the television. During his first internal psychological encounter with the birds as a child, "a gang of multi-colored puppets dance the samba on the television – spinning one another in circles." This cartoon image positions Raymond's first psychological experience with the birds in a kind of cultural context. He is both a detached, hallucinating, frightened child, and present in mundane normalcy of childhood. Again, as a young man, Raymond sits in front of the television, consuming cultural material that allows the reader to pinpoint his cultural location in the physical world. On the television, a "plane smashes directly into the side of a four unit apartment building – the engine explodes upon impact" (*Void* 7). Raymond experiences this combination of light and sound just as every other person does. And when the "news reporter smiles – her smooth brown skin wrinkling at the corners of her mouth,"

Raymond is invited to participate in the reality of these fact-based journalistic pieces in the same way as every other viewer. In addition to the symbolic nature of a fiery explosion, these fragmented images give Raymond access to a kind of normalcy that is rarely within his reach (*Void 7*).

Raymond and Miss Catherine, within the context of these image-based narrative sections, are both grounded in the mundane and tragic reality of these projected images (i.e. fat ladies, plane crashes, new reporters, leg warmers, Richard Simmons etc.). And yet they are each made to feel separate from these images, unable to remain present in the physical world for very long, constantly drawn back into their own psychological landscapes. Raymond's father, too, can be located in a cultural context through his relationship with Marcia, and the experience of viewing the photograph of her sons in conjunction with stories about each of their lives. Through the photograph, Raymond's father is able to receive fragmented images, facilitated by the em-dash, that link him to the physical world and locate him culturally. "[Marcia's] sons dye their hair – steal bills from her purse, kiss girls behind the dumpsters at school." These fragmented images of teenage rebellion "keep Raymond's father here on earth until the press resets," – much like Miss Catherine and Raymond are grounded and located by exercise tapes and news programs (*Void 8*).

Image-based sections of narrative structure primarily seek to craft the internal psychological landscape through a combination of both auditory and image-based stylized language and grammatical patterns. Alternatively, dialogue-based sections function *exclusively* to provide the reader with the physical and cultural locations of Raymond, his father, and Miss Catherine. Because Raymond, his father, and Miss Catherine speak very little, and each exist in their own rich and sonorous internal worlds – crafted primarily in the image-based sections of

the established narrative structure – the contrasting dialogue-based narrative sections function as a social locator.

Therefore, the crafting of realistic and functional dialogue is vital in establishing a framework for Raymond and Miss Catherine’s physical and cultural locations in the narrative’s physical world. For instance, throughout the dialogue-based narrative sections in *The Mouth of the Void*, Raymond listens to Melanie’s bizarre concerns about feminism and dating. Her concerns are both entertaining and painfully average. “Remember that dude I dated for a couple weeks after Philip Seymour Hoffman died?” she asks Raymond (*Void* 6). When she suspects that Raymond has been cheating at a board game, she assails him with a lecture about gender inequality in the workplace, otherwise known as “the glass *fucking* ceiling” (*Void* 14). In an earlier dialogue-based section, Melanie laments the lack of “real men,” in the modern dating scene, and pines for someone “like Anderson Cooper, but less gay” (*Void* 5).

It is through these interactions with Melanie that Raymond is able to remain present in the reality of the narrative’s physical world. He can be located, then, within the cultural context of the *Women Empowering Women* event, his conversations with Melanie about “real men,” foot fetishism, and Anderson Cooper. Additionally, even the physical objects present in the dialogue-based narrative sections function as grids and maps of the physical world. For instance, as Raymond and Melanie walk “through the park to 59th for the train to Herald Square,” Raymond appears physically at a precise location on Manhattan’s grid (*Void* 5). Furthermore, Raymond can also be physically located on the Candyland board – as powerless as the plastic gingerbread men against his own internal landscape, moving toward something fixed and ominous on a surreal and disorienting psychological path. Miss Catherine, too, is not only culturally located in the social context of the Good Times Home Video Movie Collection (i.e. Richard Simmons,

music, fashion etc.) but also physically located in the apartment building – a honeycomb of cubicles, each with its own inhabitant. Additionally, she can be physically located by the “pale green tiles,” that “map out the walls in a grid,” during her recollections of abuse and trauma (*Hum* 6).

The ways in which dialogue-based narrative sections root Miss Catherine in the physical world of *Hum*'s narrative are slightly more complex than Raymond and Melanie's conversations in dialogue-based sections of *The Mouth of the Void*. Miss Catherine speaks only once throughout *Hum*'s entire narrative. Therefore, dialogue-based narrative sections focus exclusively on conversations between Alan, Reuben, and Maxine – three characters physically removed from Miss Catherine. While Miss Catherine never speaks to Alan, Reuben, or Maxine directly, their ongoing dialogue provides a map by which Miss Catherine can be located physically and culturally by the reader.

The sound of Maxine's voice, in particular, draws Miss Catherine out of her own psychological internal landscape on several occasions throughout the narrative. Once, pounding a fist against the shared apartment wall, adding to the repetitive auditory sound within the narrative, asking Miss Catherine to “chill with the fucking tapes” (*Hum* 11). Again, Maxine's struggle to shoot popcorn kernels out of her cat's nose is entirely audible from the other side of the apartment wall – and it makes Miss Catherine laugh, which is itself significant within the context of her own physiological landscape. The clarity and consistency of Maxine's audible voice and sensed presence on the other side of the apartment wall places Miss Catherine physically in the apartment building – in the narrative's physical world, where other people exist.

Culturally, Reuben and Alan's outrageous game places Miss Catherine in the age of Bernie Sanders – post Sigourney Weaver's *Alien*, Bill Clinton's sex-scandal, and Matt LeBlanc's

Friends career peak. In conjunction with their physical movements (i.e. driving to the apartment in the car, navigating the apartment's halls etc.), Reuben, Alan, and Maxine's dialogue delivers the reader directly to Miss Catherine's doorstep. Though invisible, Alan's texts to Maxine function as a dialogue-based map that guides them, and the reader, directly to Miss Catherine.

Every image-based internal section is followed by a dialogue-based section. The reader experiences Raymond or Miss Catherine's internal landscape, and then returns to the mundane, humorous, normalcy of compact and simple dialogue. The motion inherent in the push and pull of the narrative structure is itself a larger cyclical rhythm. The reader is immersed in the internal sonorous landscape of trauma and illness – then, pulled from the depths of the psyche, met by Melanie's search for a real man and Reuben and Alan's game of “fuck, marry, kill.”

Dialogue-based narrative sections are intentionally crafted to serve a larger function, as are their image-based counterparts. Stylized language and grammatical patterns throughout both narratives work to craft this shared and rhythmic narrative structure. And while these patterns may not appear obvious to the reader initially, they are evident upon further examination of the narratives. When read next to one another, and considered critically in relation to one another, the reader should ideally experience an indistinct sensation that both individual narratives are somehow connected – that they were borne of the same struggle or cosmic pattern.

The reader has already experienced this sensation of indistinct connection in his real life – it is déjà vu, sensations of absence or loss, knowing a face without having ever seen it before, mixing up memories in a dream. This experience is inherently rhythmic – rooted in intuition, cycles of death and regeneration, the orbital paths of planets. Therein lies the central paradox of these works: they are meant to be felt indistinctly – provide the slightest sense of unease – some deeper connection to one another. And while the sensation is itself indistinct, the means by

which it is crafted within and between both narratives are highly distinct and intentional – crafted by the rhythmic nature of stylized auditory language, the em-dash as grammatical device, and the cross-narrative sectionalized structure that these intentional devices shape.

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Personal Analysis

Senior Honors Project

3 April 2017

Queerness, Capote, & Intentional Rhythm: A Personal Analysis

I remember reading Truman Capote for the first time with a crisp clarity that is mostly reserved for the handful of a-ha moments that alter one's life trajectory. I was fourteen, maybe fifteen, and always looking for something as strange as I felt. Nothing I liked made sense to other people. And then I found Capote.

I read *Miriam* first, then *Shut a Final Door* and *The Headless Hawk*. I blew through an entire collection of his stories in one sitting. I was transfixed. Those stories were my first real love affair with short fiction, and they've never left me. They still function as a template for the kind of fiction I love to read, and the kind of fiction I always hope to write.

They taught me the art and power of withholding explanation. They taught me how to build terror and curiosity using a simple set of language-based tools. And they certainly taught me the value of embracing queerness, in all its incarnations, both in the narrative and in oneself.

Capote reveled in his own queerness like no one I had ever seen before. He postured for the camera. He loved to be strange. And *that* is the thing I felt so inherently, that strangeness – and Capote's capacity to conduct it like electricity both in his life and in his work. In order to discuss queerness here, it must be understood as complex and malleable – strange in its very etymology. As Capote demonstrates, before queerness was anything else, it was peculiar – a shadow and unease always lurking just beneath the surface of things. Before it was hateful, and then reclaimed, and then academic, it was surreal and indistinct – even sinister.

Queerness is still this. Even piled beneath a century's worth of cultural context, queerness has never unchained itself entirely from strangeness. For better or worse, it is still the inexplicable. And it is still ghosts. It is Stanley Kubrick rearranging furniture in the background between shots of Jack Nicholson at the typewriter. It is Norman Bates grinning behind the reception desk. It is a monster and a very deep sink-hole and a mysterious vanishing just as much as it is some vegan girl with an undercut tilling soil for a co-op in the community garden. It is half personal identity and half haunting.

Capote knew that. He understood the duality of queerness – in all its pain and terror and complexity. He captured it and curated it. In that sense, my own work – especially the work I have presented here, is crafted in the image of Capote's – and, particularly, in the image of *Miriam*. Of all Capote's stories, *Miriam* has remained fixed in my mind for almost a decade as both an exemplary model of technique, and field guide for the kind of queerness by which I construct my own fiction.

In *Miriam*, Mrs. H.T. Miller, a solitary and contented widow, encounters a strange little girl at a movie theater. She buys the girl a ticket, and asks her name. "Miriam," the girl replies "as if, in some curious way, it were information already familiar."

"Why," says Mrs. Miller, "isn't that funny. My name is Miriam too" (Capote 39). By the time Miriam appears at Mrs. H.T. Miller's doorstep, the reader is well aware of the complexity of terror, queerness, and identity that Capote is actively crafting. Cracking the door, Mrs. Miller recognizes Miriam instantly. "How did you know where I lived?" she asks. "That's no question at all," Miriam says. "What's your name? What's mine" (Capote 41)? Mrs. Miller soon finds herself made "curious[ly] passive," by Miriam's strange demands (Capote 46). Her personal identity fractures. When Miriam demands sandwiches, Mrs. Miller makes them. When Mrs.

Miller finds Miriam standing over her jewelry box, admiring a beloved brooch gifted to her by her late husband, she meets Miriam's strange gaze. "It's beautiful," says Miriam. "*Give it to me.*" And Mrs. Miller does (Capote 43).

Here, Capote explores the part of queerness that is complex personal identity. Mrs. H.T. Miller feels strangely, just slightly anxious, as if her own identity is also Miriam's – somehow shared or stolen. Queerness is never just one thing, and here, queerness is complex personal identity underscored by an indistinct sensation of anxiety and dread. This complexity of terror, queerness, and identity is mirrored in my own work, and made more explicit in Capote's by illustrating the split between Mrs. H.T. Miller's personal identity and her psychological world.

After Mrs. Miller's first encounter with Miriam, a heavy snow falls for days on end. "In the falling snow," writes Capote, "there was no sky or earth" (Capote 39). The snow is a kind of strange veil that isolates Mrs. Miller from the physical world and conceals basic and seemingly irrefutable truths. The reader no longer knows definitively *where* Mrs. Miller exists – or if she exists at all. The snow is a peculiar symbol of Mrs. Miller's fractured identity and the boundaries of the physical world. The snow as "pale and impenetrable curtain," is perhaps all that separates Mrs. H.T. Miller from Miriam, who possess no existential boundaries – who is, herself, half dream and half reality (Capote 39).

My own characters exist as constantly pulled between the physical world and their own psychological worlds – Raymond debilitated by an imaginary flock of shrieking yellow canaries, Miss Catherine trapped in a loop of traumatic memories. These things are my own characters' Miriams – the source of their fractured identities and psychological torment. Just as my own characters struggle to maintain control over their own identities by remaining present in the physical world – constantly detaching and retreating inward – Mrs. H.T. Miller, too, exists both

in a physical reality and a psychological one. Her transition between these two worlds, like my own characters', is signaled by the appearance of persistent rhythmic sound. Raymond and Miss Catherine both experience psychological retreats calmed or induced by "the hum of traffic," "doors with numbers clicking shut," "yellow wings beating and beating against the bars of gold cages" (*Hum* 5) (*Void* 5). Consumed by dread and trauma and illness, my characters detach themselves from what is real.

Mrs. H.T. Miller too, detaches from the physical world when overwhelmed by dread or anxiety. For instance, when Miriam appears at her doorstep a second time, a horrified Mrs. Miller "fumbles through the hall," of her apartment, and "pound[s] frantically," on a neighbor's door (Capote 47). Upon entering the neighbor's apartment, she sits with a kind woman. "The woman turn[s] a radio dial; [and] tapping her foot, [keeps] excellent time" (Capote 48). In my own work, and in Capote's, each passage of rhythmic language indicates a character's psychological retreat from the physical world – the "ceiling fan click[ing] in circles as Miss Catherine re-experiences an instance of trauma, in Raymond's experience of "frantic wings beating and beating against the bars of a cage," and certainly, in Capote's work, the woman's tapping foot "[keeping] excellent time" (*Hum* 8) (*Void* 5) (Capote 48).

Additionally, my own work negotiates the body itself as producing persistent rhythmic sound. My own characters are often hyperaware of their own heartbeats or pulses, an explicit link between the physical body and the sounds that often signal psychological retreat. In *The Mouth of the Void*, Raymond "clicks his jaw under the low drum of music" (12). Raymond's father's throat "throbs," and "pulse[s]" (10, 13). Again, in *Hum*, Miss Catherine senses "a low pulse at the base of her neck" (11). Mrs. H.T. Miller, too, becomes hyperaware of her own body as rhythmic instrument during psychological transitions and moments of desperation and panic.

After Mrs. Miller purchases several items impulsively, as part of a “pre–arranged plan [...] in which she [has] not the least bit of control,” Miriam appears again at her doorstep (Capote 45). Quickly, Mrs. Miller recognizes that each purchase was somehow guided by Miriam – a vase to replace one that Miriam shattered, Miriam’s favorite cookies, a bouquet of white roses. In this moment of panicked realization, an “unbearably heavy pressure weight[s] the rhythm of [Mrs. Miller’s] heartbeat” (Capote 42). This instance codes Mrs. Miller’s own body as rhythmic in its most basic physiological functions. She senses the rhythmic nature of her own body; just as my own characters do during experiences of anxiety or dread.

When Mrs. Miller finally returns to her own apartment, she experiences a psychological detachment in the same way that my own characters do. Desperate and sick with terror, in what are perhaps the most telling lines of the story, Mrs. Miller is unsure of even the most basic facts. “Surely,” she thinks “the river was real, surely snow was falling – but then, one could not be certain witness to anything: Miriam, so vividly there – and yet, where was she” (Capote 49)?

Mrs. H.T. Miller is, like my own characters, unsure of her own location in the physical world. Having retreated to her own internal world – the transition itself a rhythmic gesture – she is disoriented, placed in some unrecognizable version of her own life. Mrs. Miller’s terror and curiosity are built by simple and intentional auditory language, just as Raymond’s and Miss Catherine’s terror and curiosity are built in my own work. As Mrs. H.T. Miller attempts to calm herself, she becomes “aware of a double sound: a bureau drawer opening and closing” (Capote 49). This last instance of rhythmic sound prompts Mrs. H.T. Miller’s last psychological transition – the equivalent of Raymond’s house fire and Miss Catherine’s encounter with Alan and Reuben. The bureau drawer’s rhythmic bang pulls Mrs. Miller from a kind of trance, and she opens her eyes to Miriam.

Until I was confronted with a formal analysis of my own influences, I hadn't considered how deeply connected my own work is to Capote's. My own stories are not an intentional homage or imitation so much as they are an inadvertent product of my experience of Capote as a young writer. Capote crafts a masterful narrative that negotiates queerness, identity, and terror in under fifteen pages – and then, withholds all further explanation. The narrative speaks for itself. To say my work does the same would be inaccurate and presumptuous. My work does, however, seem to hold the same things dear – and it certainly revels in its own queerness.

Whether in slow terror built by persistent rhythmic sound, or intentional lack of detailed explanation, the kind of queerness that exists in *Miriam* exists in my own work too. The stories I have presented here, in particular, are aware of their status as deeply influenced by Capote. They attempt to handle characters grappling with illness and trauma. And they attempt to build an indistinct psychological place – a fracturing of one's own identity – so that the reader may experience that strangeness for himself. That strangeness, that universally felt sensation of absence and detachment, is the true queerness of my work – and of Capote's.

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