

ESSAYS



Sale, Markus Hartel, 2008

ON GLEE



Lucas Mann

Two spotlights kiss the dark stage. One shines on a tall, broad-shouldered, Wonderbread kid. He strides forward in a cherry red t-shirt and the light envelops his beautifully boring face. Voices chorus behind him and a piano plays lush notes. Someone begins to shred on electric guitar. His leading lady glides forward in the same red t-shirt, pulled taught across young, optimistic breasts. The music swells from somewhere—the wings I suppose—and they lock eyes with the sense of gravity that only teenagers can muster. Never breaking his gaze, the dude begins to sing.

Just a small town girl. Living in a lonely world.

They smile, extend their hands to one another, and singing on, melt back into a chorus of red shirts. Black girl in a red shirt, Asian girl in a red shirt, gay kid in a red shirt, wheelchair kid in a red shirt—they harmonize flawlessly. They project out into the spotlights, not one seemingly bothered by the fact that the auditorium they're pouring their hearts into is empty. They are one in song—tokens all, but tokens with glorious pipes.

Collectively, they hit the low refrain.

It goes on and on and on and on—

I am standing now and I'm not sure how it happened. The book that I'm supposed to be reading has fallen to the floor. Rain has started outside and it's slipping through the open window, soaking the old carpet, but I don't care. In torn boxers and an undershirt, I have risen to sing. I hold the last note, my fists balled at my side—muscles tense, energy irrepressible. I am alone in a living room that is not yet fully furnished in an apartment that smelled like piss when I arrived and still smells like piss, no matter which fragrance of Lysol I spray or surface I scrub. In this moment I am singing along to my Walmart television and I am preposterously, uncomplicatedly full of *Glee*.



I swear I'm not this person. I proudly align myself with shows like *Mad Men*—shows that don't require defending, shows that affirm my impeccable tastes. But something happens to me over the course of an episode of *Glee*. An eerie calm. After ten minutes or so, I stop harrumphing at implausible turns in the plot, I stop pointing at the screen and saying *Come on!* to the empty room. I am pacified, wiggling my toes like a child as I wait for each new song, plunging with no self-consciousness into every melody.

It's the times like this, when the songs have all ended and I've quickly flipped to MSNBC, that thoughts come back, embarrassed thoughts like, *What the hell just happened?* I need some sort of explanation for my burgeoning, passionate relationship with a musical TV show. I have been sad lately—fairly broke and in a new place, giving into a quarter-life crisis and the prospect of a jobless future. And now add to that picture a weekly date with FOX to watch a bunch of unknowns rehash the Top 40. While it is tempting to locate *Glee* on a pretty hefty list of things I do and am ashamed of, there must be something deeper going on.



Broadway is booming right now, I read.

“It sounds like the title of a feel good musical fantasy,” said a *Variety* article from late July. “But amid the harshest economic climate since the Depression, denizens of the Rialto are quietly eyeing the prospect of cracking \$1 billion at the [box office] next season.”

The 2008-2009 Broadway season was the most prolific since the winter of 1982. Charlotte St. Martin, Executive Director of the Broadway League (and what else could she be with such a name?), proclaimed that, “It’s been an inspiring season! As we have proven, if you put on a great show, people will come—even in the midst of an economic downturn. Research has shown that theatre provides an escape from everyday life and especially during these tough times, we have given the audiences a reason to see a show.”

One reason stands out. Of the eighteen brand new productions last season, ten were musicals. And there were four additional musical revivals, as producers seemed tireless in their rush to get some catchy songs on the stage. Now there’s *Hair*, *West Side Story*, even a *Bye Bye Birdie* with John Stamos at the helm (one does not cast John Stamos unless one is in a serious hurry). Worse, they’re making musicals out of anything that made money elsewhere: *Billy Elliot*, *Shrek*, *The Addams Family* (imagine, Wednesday Addams singing). For the grandchildren bribed to hang out with Nana, there will be a rock opera based on the visionary storytelling of Green Day.

I think of a quote that I read once in a history class: “During the Depression, when the spirit of the people is lower than at any other time, it is a splendid thing that for just fifteen cents an American can go to a movie and look at the smiling face of a baby and forget his troubles.”

FDR said that and I read it first during an economic boom, when the notion of truly low spirits, of pop culture as penicillin, was nearly inconceivable. But it has always been easy to love the resolute shimmer of the films of the early 30s, the wacky romantic comedies, the slick gangster flicks. Most of all, I realize, we can locate Roosevelt's words in the musical—fifteen cents worth of catchy tunes and giddy dance numbers. *42nd Street*. *The Gold Diggers of 1933*. *The Gay Divorce*, which, judging by the title alone, is overdue for a sassy remake. *The Wizard of Fucking Oz*. Escapist classics.



Is that the line I've placed myself in, the line with the sad plebes waiting for the numbness of escape? When my grandmother saved up her nickels to go see *42nd Street*, I'm pretty sure she wouldn't have self-identified as escaping. If somebody would have stopped her on Second Avenue and said, "Esther, you're escaping," she would have waved her palm at them and said, "Feh, a lot you know, big shot. I'm going to the pictures." The truth is that my grandmother loved to sing. She sang through the thirties, shoving her salesgirl wages into an old mattress. She sang through World War II, she sang as she obsessively cleaned, she sang through Vietnam. She sang after screaming at my father, telling him he was stubborn like a mule. She sang while her husband was driving his cab through Brooklyn and while he was at the track spending his earnings.

I cannot remember any of her songs, so I ask my father to sing one. Over the phone, he attempts to copy some of the melodies: *da da DA dada*. He is tone deaf.

"Dad," I interrupt. "Dad!"

"Wah? Oh yeah, so I guess I don't have it down exactly."

But there is a video of the whole family together: I'm just an infant and it's my grandmother's 80th birthday and we're at

Windows on the World, high up in the World Trade Center. My grandmother stands in front of a crowd of thirty relatives, all in various stages of late eighties shoulder pads, all screeching in thick Brooklyn accents for “Aunt Esthuh” to *give us a song!* With the New York skyline hidden behind her, it is like a hallucination straight out of a Woody Allen film. The camera focuses on her tiny, wrinkled face, the skin hanging low off her cheeks as she smiles, a rather uncommon facial expression for her. She’s enveloped in a dark frock, but begins to sway like a girl and sing:

Please, Mama, buy me a baby. One that looks just like you.

I’m sure nobody even remembers the Yiddish theater production or obscure 1930s musical review her song comes from, though she recalls it in an instant, every lilt of the melody, and croaks it out of hoarse, tired lungs, still managing to be on key.

Near the very end of her life, my grandmother lived alone in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, mostly because her husband was dead and she generally misanthropic. Her favorite thing was a prime time soap opera about a Northern Californian pastor and his loving family. When we moved her to a home and she spent her days indignant, still she watched. I don’t believe the story entertained her; she distrusted all gentiles and most open displays of affection. It was the theme song she loved—the easy, treacly melody, its acoustic guitar and string arrangement and its dumb, innocuous words. When I visited, we would sing it together.

7th Heaven. When I see their happy faces smiling back at me.

7th Heaven. I know there’s no greater feeling than the love of family.

And then she would smile and shrug and suspiciously eyed the Jamaican nurse as he emptied her catheter bag.



I'm surprised at how vividly I remember the feeling—warm, perfectly at ease, even while stuck in a drab nursing home that always smelled of borscht. It is a feeling of contentment, I realize, that was replicated in early 2009, a decade after my grandmother's death, during that winter when half the banks I'd ever heard of had been put on life support. I was working at a poorly-funded, poorly-run homeless outreach program in New York. Each day, I turned twenty minute tasks into full afternoons, emailing exaggerated pleas for money, like: "If you become a member of our unique job-placement program, not only will you be an even stronger pillar of your community, you will be standing up to fight homelessness in a moment of crisis." I wrote this to some Ralph Lauren marketing executive whose business card had made its way to my hands. Then I stared at my computer screen and decided that "crisis" was too desperate. Time for a cigarette break.

I sat at Travis's old desk. Travis was the sincere guy who trained me and was fired for lack of productivity. He was soon followed by Bruce, the sixty-year old man who had furious, whispered phone conversations with his ex-wife in the office kitchen. He left his apartment in the Bronx at six every morning to make it to work and was fired minutes before heading out for his weekly indulgence of single malt scotch and a cigar. Desperate for self-preservation, I began to work overtime, cold-calling people in the dark, empty office, listening only to my wheezing breath and strangers' irritated responses of, "I'm gonna be homeless if I start giving money to kids who call me during dinner."

We still-employed of the office grew close: we shared our complaints, our Tex Mex takeout, and our music. Often, on

Tuesdays, when the weeks seemed longest, we'd crowd around Debbie's computer and watch Youtube clips. Debbie loved music and loved loving things. She loved God and she sang alto in the Harlem Baptist Choir for three decades. Her children had all moved out of the house, which is why she enjoyed feeding me Twizzlers and reaching her chubby hands up to rub my hair. We'd marvel at crooning babies, and videos of pets set to Whitney Houston songs. Mostly, though, we watched Susan Boyle, the British reality TV sensation with the hideous countenance and the angel's voice.

We watched Susan knowing full well, I believe, that she was destined to be a tragic figure. We listened to the perfectly inoffensive songs she chose, the epic noises she made. Debbie would shake her head, say this was her favorite moment of the week. Meghan would lean over Debbie's shoulder and tear up a little. Meghan was lost and not meant for New York City. She sat at the desk behind me, slowly forgetting the days when she was on the honor roll at Smith College and the whole world was going to open up for her. (Tuesdays with Susan, though, everything was lovely.) Next to her, Brad, the pretty boy failed actor working a straight job to support a new baby, cried too, but pretended it was allergies.

"Ay, I needed that," said Gwen, who was still arguing to get her daughter's preexisting conditions covered by our insurance package.

I made fun of the office to my friends, painting a sad tableau of delusional people just to get laughs at a bar. But this was a defensive, dishonest retelling. I, too, needed Tuesday afternoons. I, too, waited for the moments when the orchestra welled from fuzzy speakers, and Susan opened her crooked mouth to sing.



Now, with no job and no community of Boyle-ites, I turn to *Glee*—the newest brainchild of Ryan Murphy, the guy who created *Nip/Tuck*. Apparently, he loved glee club as a nerdy boy and wanted to share that passion with the world. Each of the shows characters are so blatantly underdeveloped, distilled down so much that I focus only on the sounds they make. I cannot believe that they were ever meant to be seen as more than a collection of types, sizes, colors; each could almost exist without a name.

In one of my favorite scenes, the one where the gang dresses up in sincere adult, black and white outfits to sing the Avril Lavigne ballad “Keep Holding On,” the leading lady begins the song, as usual. She is adorable and Semitic, with deep, yearning watery eyes. She is a perfect mixture of Molly Ringwald and Bette Midler—she spends each morning singing into a virginal pink hairbrush and dreaming of some combination of stardom and love.

Next, the leading lady looks to the blonde cheerleader who is, well, just that, a perfect Hollywood Blonde Cheerleader—starched cheer uniform, plucked brows and an aura of pure bitch. Recently, though, her world has been rocked by the most dramatic event possible in a high school sitcom: teen pregnancy. So, with her dimples and her haughty pride and her frigid Nordic good looks, she stands among the others and bravely sings through tears, even though she, I, and everyone else can see that the next few years hold nothing good for her. The two white-girl rivals, the blonde-brunette paradigm, exchange a soulful glance at one another, knowing that they aren’t friends but will support each other as any two harmonizers should.

From there I extend my gaze outward to the voluptuous black girl who has an amazing voice but usually sings back-up. Hers is the pain of being black at a predominantly white, middle-America school. To make things worse, she wants to find love and it doesn’t seem like that plotline will be made available to

her, given the fact that she is not a size zero and this is television. Often during musical rehearsals she is forced to spit out lines like, “We need to put some *chocolate* on this one.” But the wildly problematic, stifling norms of the show’s world fade for a few minutes as she steps forward with the group and belts *keep holding’ on ‘cause you know we’ll make it through. Just stand strong, ‘cause you know I’m here for you.*

And then, on opposite ends of the stage, enter the gay kid and the wheelchair kid, each who lend understanding humor to the show, far too subtly bringing to light the stupid insensitivity of the characters around them. They too have talent. The wheelchair kid deftly, almost impossibly, spins himself through each piece of choreograph. The gay kid, cocking his head with his chin angled toward the ceiling, regal, with a curious smile on his face, nails an unembarrassed soprano.

These are thin, stereotypical characters, rendered only to fill up the most Benetton notion of diversity. I know this just like I know Susan Boyle was held up as a freak, a sad monster for us to point at. But their voices, the glory of their voices. Alone, I watch the cast of dusty teen archetypes put on one hell of a show and I silently cry.



This is all so embarrassing. Privileging a song over a decent plot? Overlooking the kind of reductive presentation of difference best suited for a John Hughes movie just because it all leads to a chorus that’s so damn good? Aligning my tastes with the mobs that flock off New Jersey tour buses to see a Sunday matinee of *Ragtime*? I snatch open my computer and read about *Glee*, trying to find out what the world must think of me.

“It’s the latest iteration of that eternally uplifting ‘Let’s Put on a Show’ genre,” *The Boston Globe* asserts. “And if you’re a

fan of *Fame*, *Hairspray* or *High School Musical*, this scripted dramedic take on glee club is totally for you.”

I read that *Glee* slips nicely into the reality appeal etched in our culture by the ultimate escape, *American Idol*, “a competition that has stirred the self-confidence and ambition of every teenager who warbles in the shower or gets a standing ovation at Karaoke Night,” as the *New York Times* puts it. Ah, I see. I am the same as those fans tuning in to see Paula Abdul slur to some ordinary schlub that he is beautiful. Really, super, awesome, magical, beautiful.

I check the blogs, attempting to Google my way towards some sort of punishment. I want to be scolded by the snobbiest members of the online community. To my dismay, it is hard to find good reprimands; all across the internet culture vultures are throwing up their hands. They’re apologizing for their love of *Glee* or, far worse, they’re backpedalling with quick-draw explanations of how they can watch it and still keep their edge.

“Believe me, I am not a pushover for this kind of thing,” squeals a critic at *The Daily Beast*. “I would rather eat nails than see any production of *Gypsy*. If I enjoyed *Glee*, it must really have something for everyone.”

I nod. Ditto, ditto. I feel that angst.

Writing about an October episode, the sassy folks at Gawker.com explained that the show, “...went for some really genuine emotion. I’m still crying just thinking about it,” before ending the post with an almost sulky, “Fucking *Glee*”.

And *The New York Observer* online, perhaps the snarkiest of the blogging 20-somethings, the unfazed kuffiya-wearing Brooklytes I once wanted to be, squirm as they admit the same: “*Glee* [sic] isn’t about to replace oxygen, but it’s quite possibly the most fun we’ve had watching television in months. And, really, what’s wrong with that?” They throw the question out there, sincerely asking the Internet, waiting for anonymous comments to reaffirm their illness. Could snark be slowly dying?

Is *Glee* smothering it with a downy soft, glittering pink pillow?

It's liberating, really. If the hipster Williamsburg elite are being forced to (gasp) look for full time work, get rejected, and plot moves toward law school or Mom's basement, then what glib force is left to scorn emotion and romanticize grit in popular culture? A little bit of sappy harmony is looking pretty good right now. It is painful to feel predictable for those like me, whose most prized possessions are opinions, but it is unavoidable in the face of *Glee*.

In my head, I edit the image of me guiltily singing along with *Glee* alone. It is a split screen now—I have company, pretentious compatriots—who are also succumbing to the high school opus. And in each of our apartments, under Dali prints and *Pulp Fiction* posters, laptops momentarily closed, we sing.



Of course, as the bloggers give their reluctant props, my guilty pleasure is already becoming a bona fide juggernaut. Not only am I far from unique, I must come to terms with the fact that there's already a name for my kind: I am a *Gleek*. It is the largest club I've ever joined.

The show has been pulling in 8.6 million weekly viewers. And then—hooray for the modern age!—those of us Gleeks with short attention spans but an insatiable desire for three and a half minute slices of bliss can buy the music separately. In mid-October, *Glee* songs had reached 1.5 million downloads. The most industrious Gleeks have taken to Youtube, hollering support for the little musical sitcom that could with each pirated song.

In every adorable scene set on that auditorium stage, there is the cynical reality of big business hiding behind the curtain. While my leading man tries to juggle his singing and his football and his Xbox playing—every bit the relatable American boy—Fox

and Columbia Records and iTunes and Hulu.com are building a pyramid of profit. It is no accident, I realize, that there are so many places for me to turn to quench my pop lust. Before any episode is aired, I get an official taste of what to expect, via thirty-second aperitifs of song.

“There’s a tremendous amount of coordination that’s gone into trying to keep this incredibly rabid audience satisfied from a marketing perspective, while also protecting the flagship, which is the show itself.” 20th Century Fox television chair, Dana Walden, admitted this in mid October.

But my will to be critical, to work myself into a frenzy over the idea of these companies treating me like a golden guinea pig, is fading. A few weeks after *Newsweek* prints Walden’s comments, the morning after an excellent Episode 9, I sheepishly use my mother’s iTunes account to buy every track from the show that has been released.



In the morning hours, I go to FOX.com for “Video Extras!” I am the perfect malleable cultural citizen, not happy, really, but still smiling ear to ear at the sneak peak I’m fed of wheelchair kid unironically belting out “Lean on Me.” On the website I read fellow Gleeks sounding off on past episodes, all of us really and truly encouraged by the monstrous corporate network invitation to “Share Your Voice”. We can weigh-in on what we want to see in future episodes, the songs we can’t live without—a simple pleasure, but a real one.

One frequent commenter, Solsearcher, suggests “Seasons of Love” from *Rent*, and while that is clichéd, *oh my God it would sound good coming out of the mouths of all my favorite characters.*

My usual routine in these moments is to cover my tracks and click out of any tab on my Internet browser that might contain

evidence of my obsession. But I'm holding my ground now and, dammit, we Gleeks will not be shamed. Okay, so the musical underdog that resonates so deeply for us is in fact a giant and I am merely one of over 2.5 million faceless young people clicking and buying. And while I watch these pretend high schoolers sing, loving the drama of their melancholy existence, "*Glee: The Music, Vol. 1*" has ascended to #4 on the Billboard album charts, and FOX can count on an army of viewers every Wednesday night.

Like in 1933, when my grandmother and countless others helped *42nd Street* save Warner Bros. from bankruptcy, the songs of *Glee* are being credited with throwing a bubble-gum lifeline to the floundering music industry. FOX sent major record labels a copy of the first episode a month before it aired and, prior to the beginning of my love affair with teen rejects singing Journey, Columbia honchos saw the formula and salivated at its profitable stink. They made a deal in the Spring of 2009 and by that July, with FOX only airing one teaser pilot, there was already a super-catchy Gold single that 500,000 18-34 year olds immediately downloaded onto their iPods.

Glen Brunman, a soundtrack consultant, which is apparently a real job at Columbia, was eager to speak out about the *Glee* project. "We are hopefully going to make history together," he said with smug satisfaction and, while I'm tempted to hate him and his cocksure wealth, I totally agree.



With my cynical walls collapsed, I am free to gush, to form thoughts and write words that still make me gag somewhere in my subconscious, to build toward a *Glee*-loving crescendo.

These executives have conjured up something both familiar and innovative, I think, a new breed of escape. They've given me a weekly replication of that attainable, odd joy that managed to

shine through in my grandmother's puke-green nursing home cafeteria and a drafty, miserable office and yet I return each week not expecting to see any portrayal of a fantasy world kinder than my own. I'm watching a show about modern day Ohio, for Christ's sake. It is a world where educators get no respect, where college dreams are given up on, where high schoolers are and always will be viciously homophobic, consistently racist, and just plain cruel. It is a Midwestern town that looks no different than any you will find off of a random exit on Interstate 80, where the recession looms over the lives of each and every cartoonish character. Instead of seeing redemptive fantasy, I see myself in the claustrophobia of the bored classrooms and underfunded hallways.

More importantly, partly because it's a sitcom, I'm not expecting to see anything be resolved or anything to get better. In the world of *Glee*, Daddy Warbucks cannot come in and adopt you out of your misery. Me and my 8.6 million Gleek brethren turn up our noses at the lie of happy endings.

Instead, I find solace only in the songs. The characters remain stagnant, their lives bleak, but I can watch them blush with ecstasy when their afternoon gets an injection of Beyonce and I can understand that feeling. Even as I read of the voracious institution that is *Glee*, even as I acknowledge that in some lair Rupert Murdoch is counting his gold, I still cling to the pretend underdog characters and the desperately passionate songs they give me. We Gleeks are purchasing the smallest ideal. We sing for the moment of singing.

Sing with the stereotypes on the television, sing with Columbia records and FOX as they profit off us, sing with the bloggers as they wrestle their own cynicism. Sing with me grandma!

Don't stop believing!

AFTER THE COLONEL

Lina Maria Ferreira Cabeza-Vanegas

The cats were poisoned seven days before my grandfather fell from the sky strapped to a faulty parachute. One, Niky, made it to my grandmother's feet, washing them with blood before collapsing. Yuri never came back.

Before the cats, though, it was the chickens. About a month earlier, a plague fell on them like a man out of a clear blue sky. One died, then another, and another, and another still, and in between feathers and pestilence my grandmother asked what it was that was killing them but no one knew, so more chickens died and then the colonel fell from his plane.

My mother told me my grandfather had named both cats: "Yuri after Yuri Gagarin and Niky after Nikita Khrushchev." Niky, unlike Krushchev, was able to bear kittens; she gave birth to seven or so of them right before the colonel's death. But there is no way to be sure of the number—seven, ten—only that every one of them—nine or fifteen—was dead before my grandfather's fall.

Three. I'm keeping count. Cats, chickens, kittens: that's three. Seven days, seven possible kittens, one witch and one prophecy a full month before the colonel.

My grandmother has always been fond of witches, of their cigarette ashes, their tea leaves and Spanish decks, their plastic bowls filled with murky water and promises of prosperity. For this witch, however, there is no fondness left.

The colonel's wife had gone to ask about her sister's cancer and waited for the comfort of witchcraft: life, health, fortune. But when the witch looked into the depths of her eyelids she saw a vertical blur of a man dashing past and into the horizon.

"Your husband will have an accident." She told her.

“No. No, no. You are mistaken, that accident you see,” she corrected, “that accident he’s already had. He’s fine now.”

I want to hunt down the witch herself and ask her, “What else did you see? What else do you know? What other deaths came before, what others after?” But my mother tells me, “dead, dead, she died, she’s dead.” And I knew then, and I know now, that my mother has already tried what I’m trying now, and that there may not be much hope for our efforts, the witch died “not long after, I don’t think, not very long after all of it, she died herself. Cancer maybe.”

There are people who doubt the existence of their own organs and the immediate contents of their memory, but this woman, a stranger to the colonel and his sky, was sure of something: “I’m sorry to tell you *Senora*, but this is another accident, and from this one he does not come out alive,” she said. My grandmother had worn a red dress to see the witch; in the witch’s vision she wore black.

I have to think that she must have also known about my grandmother’s sister, Ana Cristina, who would die one year and one double mastectomy later, under a veil of saggy black skin draped over a flat chest and a broken heart. She must have known and chosen to say nothing of it.

Josefina says there was no blood left in her when she left that day. She says she caught sight of herself in a mirror and that is why she remembers the dress. “All white on red, all white.”

“What other accident?” I ask my mother.

“What?” she says.

“What ‘other’ accident did the witch mean?”

Before the witch, before the cats and the chickens, and right before the colonel’s plane crawled up into the belly of the sky, a cow, a desperate suicidal mess of black and white charged the aircraft from a neighboring pasture moments before takeoff. The colonel swerved the plane, and ended up in a ditch with a broken nose and shattered wings.

The cow is new; I didn't know anything about it until my mother emailed me a few days ago. One day she came home from school to find the colonel lying on the bed, in full uniform, partially blindfolded by a fresh piece of red meat and looking lost in his own home. In those days the colonel led the strike against the newly-formed Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, back when they still called Marquetalia a free republic and before they called Pedro Antonio Marin Marin, Manuel Marulanda the "Sureshot." All this was before that, when the Colonel's only real home was a stretch of sky above the tangled trees of El Tolima.

"If I could count the times I spoke with my father," my mother's emailed me in bright green letters, "I would not need all of one hand." That's less than five if I take the colonel's daughter literally, which I usually do. Less than five. Four, three, two. "You can count the cow among the deaths to precede his." One.

On my last birthday, my mother wrote an email she did not sign: "There are two details about the cats' deaths that you should know." The email is a four-paragraph list of two memories in a light blue font. Her first memory colors what she's already told me: my grandmother sits in the patio crying over a dying animal on her lap, the animal stirs under her hand, empties itself through the mouth and makes everything red and ripe.

The second memory is something I've never heard before. The soldier assigned to guard the colonel's home takes Niki from my grandmother's lap and wraps the cat in newspapers, rolling her up, crinkling the paper around her until it's soggy and quiet, adds two stones to the package and then drops in the Magdalena River. The soldier, my mother concludes, is an idiot, for he has forgotten to tie the whole thing together with string, and it begins to fall apart before it's even hit the water. The stones are gulped down first, then the cat twirls about, one

second, two, in a whirlpool of water or faulty memory, three seconds, four, then the newspaper follows, five seconds, six, no string at all, none, nine seconds, ten, and then she's gone.

The colonel was replaced by a sub commander who scattered bombs over Marquetalia like marbles. The colonel's wife and three daughters were replaced by the sub commander's wife and three daughters who threw laundry over the taut string in the backyard and green mangoes in the river. They filled the house and they filled the sky and to some, I have to think, it must have been as if he had never left at all.

Fifty days after he had, however, the base commander, chaplain, sub commander and their wives, all in a helicopter, were picked up by a gust of wind or pulled down by a faulty maneuver, and it flipped around, over and into the ground, spinning, twisting, hacking up clods of dirt and roots as it ripped itself open and apart against the earth and her orange trees.

The peasants near the accident claim to have seen the commander crawl out from the crumpled helicopter a charred stump of a pilot. "I killed them, I kill them," they say he screamed as he dug brittle fingers into the earth to pull himself forward. "I killed them, I killed them, I kill them, I killed them," pulling, and tugging behind him broken limbs and ribs over and on the ash of his own flesh.

My mother's emails again: "There is a detail about the cats' deaths that you must know. There was also a dog," a black cocker spaniel named Ninoska. "She was the only one who survived," my mother writes, though, like Lazarus, she was only really saved for later, for a quiet neighborhood and a slice of poisoned meat.

I read the line again, "she was the only one who survived." I've heard it before and I read it again wondering if my mother died in Palanquero, too. And then I wonder about dying more

than once, or twice, or about dying at all, or at least why she keeps writing and saying this sentence, word by word, like a wilted Hail Mary drained of grace.

I know I've asked her why they killed Ninoska, I know I've asked her twice or thrice, insistent and stubborn, as if I believed there was a reason. "Because she barked too much," she types, "at night, or in the day, possibly, like all dogs do. Maybe she was cold."

After the colonel struck the ground, bending his wedding band into an oval, my widowed grandmother took her three daughters and a black cocker spaniel to her father's home in Bogotá. At her father's home, though, no cocker spaniel had ever been allowed inside, and no exceptions were to be made. So maybe, Ninoska was cold and maybe she barked, and maybe it was my mother's grandfather who found her whimpering and shivering with damp whiskers and ribs like loose guitar strings.

"I'll never know if it was true." My mother writes me and I write her back asking what she is referring to. She tells me she doesn't know how she knows about the meat, or the neighbors, or if her grandfather really took the ailing dog to the college of veterinarian medicine in the Universidad Nacional, "to try and save the little dog." Then she tells me that she and her sisters asked for Ninoska, asked their grandfather, asked and asked, about the little dog, for a year, more, for two years, less, and always he told them not to worry, not at all, that the dog was in the university that they were keeping her there until she was all better, until she could come home.

I don't know which lie my mother doesn't know to be true.

I'm told that my great-grandfather, De Leon, the philanderer-philosopher, was "a terrible father and a worse husband, but a wonderful grandfather." He hid my aunt and mother beneath his coat, snuck them into bullfights and invented stories while three pairs of white lace legs dangled over his knee. "He was a

writer,” my grandmother tells me when I visit, “yes he was, a good one, a great one, a philosopher too! You are like him, you get that from him.”

De Leon died of pancreatic cancer about a year after the colonel. In the hospital’s emergency room he twisted and curled and begged them to bring him his kitty, to please, please, please bring *la gatita*, please. This was his nickname for the youngest of my aunts, my mother tells me. They did take *La Gatita* to see him die, my mother remembers, and she remembers this, she tells me, because it was not my mother whom they decided to take, she was no one’s kitty. I’ve asked *La Gatita* already, and she says she has no recollection of this event.

There is a chest in my grandmother’s house they call *El Baul del Muerto*, The Dead Man’s Coffin. Though it wears a half-peeled ID tag addressed to an apartment in Quito—where *La Gatita* now lives—the chest has never left Bogotá. Inside it, between kitchen rags and old sheets, there are half a dozen medals, a uniform or two, the flag that was draped over his coffin and a small leather travel bag with a dark yellow rusted zipper. The Colonel packed it himself forty-six years ago and it has since been opened only twice and always repacked in ritualistic exactitude. All remains as he left it. There is a metal talcum powder container, an orange toothbrush and a tube of Squibb toothpaste, two containers of Yardley shaving cream and aftershave, a Sulton Deodorant Stick and one heavy metal razor that has been slowly bleeding green-brown rust for nearly half a century. I took fifty seven photographs of approximately thirty nine items in the chest, placing ten thousand peso bills next to the silver cufflinks for scale. I put on one of his hats. It’s shrunk several sizes, we suspect; it barely fits my head.

When they disinterred the colonel they put him back just as they had found him, too. The ground in the *Cementerio Central*

is reserved for the freshly dead. In Colombia since the days of The Free Republic of Marquetalia and Pablo Escobar's Hacienda Napoles there are always plenty of freshly dead to bury, so they dig up the old dead to make room for the new, move the dead as if from guest rooms, pack up their bones in little boxes and hand them back to their families—a last discharge—so newer ones can taste, just as briefly, the honor of the massive heroes' grave.

When they tried to pack the colonel up in a metal shoebox however, they found no clean bones to stuff and stack. "Whole, whole, his entire body whole," my grandmother told me, "only his shoes like this." She explained and curled her fingers like spent matches, "only his shoes, like this," his body whole, fleshy and soft, but all of it, just like they left him, "Twisted, like this, see? See?" All of him but his shoes. She put her hands near my face and in vain I looked for twisted leather.

"Yes, like that," my mother agreed when I replicated the motion for her, "just like that," and with fingers curled like springs I looked into her hands for traces of the day when the military dug my grandfather up and my mother tore out of my grandmother's grasp to run through skirts and coats, to catch a glimpse of the colonel in his box. To finally, between knees and elbows, only be able to see a pair of shoes, curled like this, just like this, arthritic fingers, burnt hair.

My mother writes me emails with titles like "The Other Part" and "Other Events." She's trying to fill me in; I'm trying to fill myself. She writes me that that whole week, while the cats were dying, while Josefina de Leon was piling saints and prayer on her colonel, my mother found dozens of black butterflies, everywhere. "Moths?" I ask her.

"No. Black butterflies," shiny, dusty, black rice-paper wings. She found them everywhere, "in the patio, in the house, on the walls," black butterflies everywhere while she heard the gurgled

song of cuckoo bird. She's put an asterisks at the end of that sentence and I follow it down to the end of the page.

“*signs of misfortunes to come.”

When we finished cataloguing the contents of the chest we put everything back exactly like we found it. The only thing we were able to bare throwing away was a heavy bar of moldy soap wrapped in brown paper. My aunt Mirtha is the only one with solid memories of him and she seems of us the least bothered by the disinterment, she was concerned about spores so she chucked in trash and made fun of the old woman for having kept it all these years just as he left it. “As if he was coming back,” my mother says, “complete delusion,” my aunt replies, and then we put it all back just like he left it.

Wag's Revue congratulates MICHAEL PALMER on winning the winter essay contest with his work, "Bodies, Water." In this essay, Mr. Palmer undertakes perhaps one of the most difficult subjects writers are often driven to grapple with: mourning. This essay may at first seem simple; do not be deceived. It is Mr. Palmer's restraint, his reliance upon image to slowly let grief exist rather than expressions of emotion that make this piece's climax shockingly powerful.

—Sandra Allen
Nonfiction Editor

BODIES, WATER

Michael Palmer

For the first week and a half afterwards I spent most of my time staggering around my apartment, lying down in the dry bathtub, and going outside only to visit the sealed-over cave or to attend a funeral. I hadn't informed my work or given any reason for my absence, so I was surprised when I went back for my last paycheck and found out I still had a job if I wanted it.

I was working the grave shift at a low-activity 7-11 and I did not want to go back there. But I had rent to pay and was out of gin and groceries, so I re-took the job. The shift was from 12-7 AM, and nothing really happened after beer sales stopped. Officially that time was one AM, but it was almost one now, and I knew better than to look out the glass windows to the empty pavement thinking I was finished for the night. Every shift someone ran in late trying to beat the deadline.

At 1:20 a guy pulled up in a Jeep Cherokee and left it running while he pushed through the front doors like this was an emergency room. He hauled two 24-packs of Keystone Light to the front and wiped his brow as he placed them on the counter.

"Sorry, I can't sell it after 1," I said.

"Come on man, there are like fifty girls at my house right now," he argued. I honestly didn't know if there was a red flag in the system if I made an alcohol sale after one, and though after working there a couple months I'd started selling it to people I liked in these situations, I didn't believe him about the fifty girls, and didn't like him for saying it. The top two buttons of his shirt were unbuttoned.

"Sorry, can't do it."

It looked for a second in his eyes like he might try to take the beer and run, but maybe he remembered how heavy the cases were and thought better of it. He tried to argue with me, but I

was already listening to the low *Dawn of the Dead* hum of the store and thinking and about how I would spend the next five and half hours.

After he left I walked into the back area where we stocked the drinks, and drank a stolen beer of my own. Then I walked behind the register and sat down, positioning myself in front of the cigarettes so it would look like I was organizing them to the surveillance camera. I was pretty sure the manager didn't look at the surveillance tape to check up on me, but I wanted to be in the position of doing something in case he fast-forwarded through it.



This was their route: Winding in Blake's mom's Jeep above Seven Peaks water park, parking in an unfinished residential area, exiting into the night and climbing the steep but familiar hill until it veered off into a mysterious cement oasis half-mile up the mountain. Some of that dirt was loose and they have to grab at the sagebrush and dry trees for balance. In my head and on the back of my nightly to-do list I traced those directions, pictured the dark water shining wherever the moon hit. I could see their bodies slowly submerging until their heads were cutting through the glassy water like dorsal fins.

I had been in that cave. Before I stepped inside I could see only a flicker of the water when I shined my flashlight in there. I took my shoes and shirt off and touched the water with my feet. My skin tightened and my veins started to change colors.

I plunged myself under, wrapping my hands around the well-worn rope, and vaulting my body through a fifteen-foot-long tunnel filled with water. The rope ended in a second, tiny cavern, just big enough for my head and shoulders to break the water's surface.

When I emerged in the cavern I was nervous and afraid that I might somehow lose my energy, and I stayed there long enough only to look around, breathe deep, then swim back, hoping that the fire of fear would shoot me back through to the other side. Rising, dripping onto the weeds and dirt, felt as good as about anything I've known.

The last time I went was just before sunrise. The sky was violet when we arrived. In the time it took to make the hike, dart into the cavern, and arise back on the other side, wide-eyed and anxious, half the mountain had been bathed in sun.



Blake had a lot of tattoos on his body. I liked the railroad spike tattoos on his shins the best. He also had two half sleeves, the one on his left arm the more colorful. I never paid a lot of attention to the individual parts of that tattoo, but as a whole I knew it looked like a waterfall flowing down onto a pink lotus flower near his elbow. Besides the water and the flower, all I could remember of Blake's sleeve was the color: red lines following the curves of the water, dark green blurring into black on the outside.

I liked the idea that someone might be walking around with his tattooed skin. Blake once told me that one of the things he liked best about tattoos was the way they map a person's life—for him, there was nothing sad about a straight edge tattoo on someone smoking a cigarette, or the name of a long irrelevant lover on someone's arm because of the way it was honest about the past. He liked all of that, and I loved the vision of someone walking down the street with a second-hand lotus flower on his arm.



At 3:30 two cowboy-hatted blondes wandered drunk into 7-11. They asked me what it was like to work there and asked if I saw some crazy shit. I told them that that night I had seen a sober middle aged-guy and a teenager having problems with “chicks.” They said that sounded boring and one of them showed me her “country dance” without my asking. I didn’t have a lot of response to that and they bought some beef jerky and energy drinks and left.

Even though 7-11 coffee starts to taste like seething hatred after three cups, it still had the intended effect of keeping me awake, shaky and irritable through my shift, so I poured another cup and walked around the store and waited for it to get lighter outside.



When they brought Blake’s mother Laura to the morgue to identify the body, they accidentally pulled out the wrong one first. They pulled out Scott, a person Laura had never met. When they pulled back the sheet, she was relieved. This was not Blake, Blake had not drowned. There had been a mistake. Et cetera. Quickly the morgue workers realized the mistake, covered Scott’s face and reeled out Blake for proper identification.

Laura said Blake’s body looked like it was still trying to breathe. She threw herself onto his body and tried to force CPR. It took five men to restrain her. When they did pull her off, her mouth was dripping blood like a vampire, her eyes just as red.



I had about half an hour to go, so I started tying up the trash bags and carrying them out to the dumpster where a group of magpies were gathered every morning as if they were expecting me. The outside traffic was switching on—I heard cars starting and doors closing. Street lights were still shining, but the sun was close.



That morning, I dreamt about the deserts in Snow Canyon. Blake and I had been there together once, though nothing important had happened while we were there.

I was lying on a large red rock with two overwhelming blues coalescing overhead—the blue color of desert heat sticking onto the blue sky like a contact lens. I couldn't feel the sweat and coarse sand on my skin, just the warm recognition of insignificance. Sometimes a lizard would protrude from underneath a rock. Mostly, though, the dreams were just colors stirred together.

It wasn't the deserts that ran through my mind every night as I fell asleep, though, it was Blake's imagined last thrust for air, his last thought.



Blake donated his eyes, too. They were coffee black and saw things with more intensity than I ever could. I wondered if any of that would carry over to the new owner. I wondered if I would recognize them if I saw them again.



After I woke up I spent the afternoon looking at a mediocre view until birds in the driveway started to chirp loudly. I made coffee and started thinking about Blake's lotus flower. Up until now I had never cared about a flower that didn't eat insects or grow on a cactus, but the lotus flower reminded me of Blake. First because of the tattoo; also because when he and his mom lived in Orem, they used to have a glass pink lotus flower in the front window that I used as a landmark before I became used to

his house, which was roughly the same shape and color as the neighboring houses on both sides.

I picked up the maroon *L* encyclopedia from 1975 and brought it into the dry bathtub with me. The encyclopedia said that lotus flowers grow in water—their roots are planted in the soil of a pond or river bottom, while the leaves float on top of the surface. The leaves are brightly colored. The brightness of the flower combined with its aquatic life seemed unlike any landscape I had ever known, and I was interested that where I would likely have a cactus or a cliff tattoo, Blake—every bit the Utahn I was minus a one year stint in Vegas and another in Denver—went for the lotus flower. I remembered reading a description of Sri Lanka as the “Lotus-eyed one” somewhere and wondered if the tattoo had something to do with Blake’s Hare Krishna days.

I got out of the bathtub and called Blake’s mom. I called every couple of days, supposedly to see how she was doing, but mostly because I wanted to talk to someone whose mourning ran all the way through her bloodstream, hair and bones. As the phone rang, I thought I would ask what she knew about the lotus flower, symbolically or otherwise, but thought better of it when I heard her slow voice on the phone.

“Hi Laura, it’s Michael.”

“Oh hi Michael,” she said.

I didn’t want to ask how she was, either, so I asked if there was anything I could do for her. I knew the unlikelihood of that but I wanted to see her and had nothing else to do. She said she would like it if I would come by and go through Blake’s old things before she donated what she didn’t want.

“Also,” she said, “there have been a lot of flies in the house lately.” Laura lived in Hobble Creek Canyon where insects were always a problem; every year she hired someone to apply a sticky chemical around the perimeter of the house and in all of the crevices to keep them out. But apparently the flies were

fighting through that chemical and dying on the other side all over the house. I told her I could come over right now and she said that would be nice.



I sped along I-15 to the second Springville exit and wound up the canyon to Laura's house. I was used to the drive; Blake had lived there off-and-on for the past couple years, and I had driven him home many times. I rolled down my window and breathed the canyon air.

The house was behind a golf course, distinguished from the other cabin houses by its red roof. There was nowhere to park except the driveway where Laura's car was, so I parked on a flat area of leaves and twigs that looked like it used to be a campground.

I knocked on the door and waited. When Blake and I came here late at night we had to sneak in through the garage to avoid waking Laura up. Usually we went into the basement to get something and then left again, so the house stayed dark and limited. I didn't see the whole house until they asked me to housesit and feed the cat and dog late last spring. Since it was a far drive, I would spend the night there, sleeping upstairs in a room looking out over the neighbor's dog pen below and then through the trees and the golf course in the distance. I made coffee in the morning, and listened to the rain fall on the red roof at night, making the sound of anxious fingernails tapping against a wooden desk.

The house was quiet; Laura had a fire going in the fireplace and some papers spread out on her table. Before she showed me Blake's room, she warned me again about the flies, reminded me I didn't have to deal with the problem, she could hire someone to do it. I said I wanted to. She opened the door. She hadn't done much to change the room—there were still dirty shirts on

the bed, books and records on the floor. The dead flies were all over the windowsill, falling onto Blake's pillow. They coated parts of the floor, sometimes two or three flies deep. I would vacuum them. Laura said thanks and said I was welcome to anything I wanted of Blake's. Then she walked into the kitchen.

I waded through the room, feeling ambivalent at looking through his things without his having a chance to arrange or explain them. Miniature model trains that he had sent to graffiti artists around the country to paint and return sat on shelves along the perimeter of his room. Other than that it was mostly dirty laundry and old notebooks on the bed and floor. There were shelves of books and boxes of CDs in the corners. The flies vacuumed pretty easy but I was stupefied by how many there were. There were dead bodies not only along the windowsill and the bed and the carpet but also in open drawers and in the closet.



When Laura saw his body for the last time in the crematorium, all of Blake's reusable parts had been removed. He looked like a collapsed bunker, a shell on a rolling steel table under clinical lighting. The workers paused there for a minute and let Laura get a last look. She stopped them when they tried to move the body into the furnace. That kept happening for a while, then she let everyone go.

They inserted the body, hit a red button and the body burned. Then they hit another button and the burning stopped. Then they hit a button and it burned again, to be sure.

When Laura told me this story I pictured a stack of organs lying next to Blake's body, alive.



I found Laura in the kitchen and she asked me if I was all right. I said yes without thinking about the question. Darwin the cat jumped on the table. I decided this was as good a time as any to ask if she knew, specifically, where pieces of Blake's body had gone.

Laura drank her coffee and said, "I'm not sure about that." Another sip. "This is what I have left of him." She walked to the cupboard and pulled out a plastic container that looked like it might have held sugar. She opened it up and I saw Blake's ashes inside. The correct term is cremains, I guess, but the inside of that sugar jar did look exactly like the ashes in a fire pit; bigger pieces of bone looked like the rocks that would turn white in the heat but not burn.

"How much can they reuse?"

"Well, I know they can't use tattooed skin," she said. Then she scooped some of Blake's ashes into a plastic Ziploc bag for me. She told me that Blake's tattoo artist said he could mix the ashes into tattoo ink and give her a tattoo if she wanted. She was going to get a railroad spike on her ankle next week.



Even so, I could still imagine someone walking around in the world, seeing through Blake's black eyes. In my mind, it was a woman: she was 5'7" with long black hair and wore a red Stanford sweatshirt even though she never went to Stanford and never would go there. She grew up in a small town and during the summer at night she drove to 7-11 at 2 AM to buy the Limited Time Only Slurpee. Sometimes she drove back home, sometimes on to the nearest lake. She knew the difference between jumping into a lake and a pool. I saw her look into the water, unconcerned with depth or temperature because at nighttime in the summer the whole world was like a large, cool lake. She kept her poise as she walked into the lake,

one foot at a time, careful, delicacy in each step. Then she dove outward, face first, with a swish, kicking her way down through the water. She fell away from the surface for a while, then came back to it and began again. Anyone with those eyes would know how good it is to dive underground and let the water swallow you. And how good it feels to come back.

I saw her dive into the water and return to the surface; dive under and return again. Then I walked back into Blake's room to finish vacuuming the flies.