

In this issue, we present a multigenre review feature, curated by Jess Jelsma Masterton, with six reviewers addressing the topic of art and activism.

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## The Promise and the Compromise

*Finna*. Nate Marshall. One World, 2020. 128 pp. \$17.00 (paper).

Deep in the strange pandemic summer of 2020, I went to my local bookstore to pick up my copy of Nate Marshall's *Finna*. When I told the clerk, an older white woman, that I'd come for my preordered book, I knew I was speaking an unfamiliar language. *What's the name of the book? Fin awe? Let me check again? Spell it for me?* I'm a Black woman living in Vermont, so our interaction did not shock me. I spelled it three times, watching her try to make sense of the collection of letters. Later, as I read Nate Marshall's poems, my initial annoyance felt more significant. In experiences like these, we are taught to adapt, we are shown how our language is devalued.

*Finna* is a collection that celebrates Black language and speaks to the self-doubt that can accompany colloquial speech for a person of color. He captures how the deepest reverence for Black vernacular exists alongside a deep shame. Still, throughout the book, Marshall stakes a claim to language's power and the intimacy of a shared idiom. He celebrates the beauty of how we as Black people communicate, while inserting Black language into an academic context to help it gain reverence and relevance.

Marshall's definition of *finna* appears on the book's cover:

fin

na

/ˈfɪnə/

contraction:

1. going to; intending to [rooted in African American Vernacular English]

2. eye dialect spelling of “fixing to”
3. Black possibility ; Black futurity ; Blackness as tomorrow

Marshall’s exploration of Black hope feels energizing. *Finna* honors history, while focusing on potential. Black joy is central to the book and is infused in his definition of *finna*. The poems throughout his collection speak to the complexity of Black identity in America. His work celebrates the power that evolves when we are in community, and at home in ourselves, while acknowledging the ways we learn to code-switch and assimilate into white spaces.

Marshall speaks to the complexity of feeling the power of language, while simultaneously doubting the validity of expression. As a reader, I deeply identified with this sentiment, and I was grateful for his naming of this experience. For example, in “FINNA is not a word,” he says:

sometimes, i believe in all that my people make their mouths do.  
other days, i read books on grammar & proper style, correct  
my own usages.  
in those times my language is elevated,  
my diction is deliberate.  
my mind, undisciplined  
& spinning.

In the first line here, Marshall describes speaking in Black vernacular as an intuitive and physical action, in contrast to the cerebral and intentional “grammar & proper style” of white academic speech. These few lines emphasize the way the intellectual richness and rigor of Black vernacular is usually unacknowledged in that other context. Musically, the alliterative *m*’s in the first line sing, with *my*, *make*, and *mouths* in quick succession. The music rings through the lines that follow, with percussive *d*’s and soft *i*’s in *diction*, *deliberate*, *mind*, and *undisciplined*. Marshall’s use of rhythm and musicality seems effortless, demonstrating his experiences as a rapper, spoken-word artist, and page poet. The definitive end-stopped first line of this excerpt works in opposition to the title’s insistence that *finna* isn’t a word. However, the next line is enjambed on the word *correct*, leaving the reader with a sense of punitive self-doubt. The poem moves back and forth from acceptance and celebration of the words of his people to an internalized insecurity. In

the final lines, the tension shows the speaker regaining the power of Black language.

In fact, as in Marshall's definition (*finna* as "Black possibility ; Black futurity ; Blackness as tomorrow"), he opens "FINNA is not a word" with an epigraph aligned with hope and Black joy, by activist Mariame Kaba, whose work focuses on dismantling the prison industrial complex: "Hope is a discipline." This powerful statement suggests that in order to celebrate Black possibility, we must practice hope. We must dedicate ourselves over and over again to the celebration of our own vernacular, despite the constant drum of white supremacy.

The juxtaposition of internalized racism and Black joy is a primary theme in *Finna*. "FINNA," one of the closing poems of the collection, opens with Marshall's natural speech rhythms:

so this one time i was finna say finna in a academic context  
& a voice in my head said *shouldn't you be worried*  
*about using a word that ain't a word* & i was like *word*.

& for a long time that was how i let my life happen,  
i let my mind tell me a million nos that the world  
had implanted in me before i even formed questions.  
i let my power be dulled by my fear of fitting.

Marshall doesn't hesitate to name the ways Black vernacular is policed, while simultaneously staking claim to its existence. His incorporation of *word* as an affirmation is particularly resonant; white people have been surprised by my use of "word" in conversation. Even as I type these words, the grammar check in Google Docs is prompting me to correct my errors. "like word" should become "like a word," it thinks, and it perpetually flags the lowercase *i* Marshall uses as needing capitalization. While the speaker seems somewhat self-conscious in these lines, the wordplay and repetition of *word* create a sense of humor and play. The third repetition of *word* turns it into an affirmation, while the word itself links to the similar sounds of *worried* in line two and *world* in line five, unifying the text in a way that gives it power.

Also impressive in *Finna* is the tenderness with which Marshall grapples with white supremacy, and a known white supremacist who shares his name. The first section of the book, "The Other Nate Mar-

shall,” introduces this character and the poet’s navigation of their relationship. Marshall is willing to hold space for the other Nate Marshall’s humanity, despite his cruelty. In “Nate Marshall is a white supremacist from Colorado or Nate Marshall is a poet from the South Side of Chicago or i love you Nate Marshall,” he says:

i won’t lie to you Nate Marshall  
or to myself Nate Marshall  
i too have hated a nigga & lived  
to tweet the tale.  
i too have sat suspicious in my basement  
wondering who was coming for my country.  
i too have googled myself & found a myself  
i despise.

once, you left Twitter  
after i told my people to tell you  
that they loved you & your book  
& your commitment to Black people  
& i feel you Nate Marshall.  
i’ve left places & loves  
when they told me they loved  
a Nate Marshall  
i didn’t recognize.

Reading this poem, I was struck by the intimacy of the direct address, particularly in the line “i feel you Nate Marshall.” Their shared name becomes an incantation, a space for potential. The repetition has an atomizing effect, a word said enough times that its meaning dissolves, which heightens the conflation of the two characters in the poem.

However, in the staccato rhythm with the *t*’s in “left twitter/ after i told my people to tell you . . .,” the percussive effect asserts the speaker’s authority. Such a move could feel accusatory, but the sting is immediately dissolved in the following lines: the poet encourages friends to flood the unsuspecting white supremacist with affirmations of poetry and a celebration of Blackness. Within this stanza, Marshall’s ability to shift perspective repeatedly enmeshes the reader. Pulled along by his use of enjambment, I found myself trying to keep up with the poet’s

sense of justice. Do I hate the other Nate Marshall? Somehow, in spite of my expectations, within this poem I find compassion for him.

I also admire the gentleness of Marshall's devotion as he honors Black speech. In "what can be said," the speaker says:

tonight, i'm feeling tender  
because it's another time  
with my granddaddy  
& he's still here

I was so moved by the tightness and simplicity here. The lines are short and unpunctuated, and there's no pause in sight. The lines that follow are elongated, as the poet describes his desire to hear about his grandfather's life as a young man, and then they shorten again, when he acknowledges that his grandfather isn't "here in that way," that he has Alzheimer's. Instead, he just asks:

*how you living young man*  
& he answers *slow motion*.

These two lines are among my favorites in the book; they are distilled and unique, and so beautifully Black. They fall midpage in italics, calling the reader's attention to the sonic quality. The *o*'s in *how, you, young, slow, and motion* evoke gentleness, emphasizing the quietude of the poet's elderly grandfather and reinforcing the feeling of tenderness from the poem's opening.

*Finna* is a collection that fulfills the promise and potential of its title. The poems both celebrate Black joy and give voice to the internalized racism that seeks to de-language Blackness. *Finna* revels in the buoyancy of colloquial Black speech and grapples with the systems of oppression that denigrate its power. Marshall concludes "the valley of its making" with a strong declaration:

our people deserve  
poetry without meter. we deserve our  
own jagged rhythm & our own uneven  
walk towards sun. you make happening happen.  
we happen to love. this is our greatest  
action.

Marshall's poems elevate the presence and power of words I rarely see in print. In the bookstore where I purchased *Finna*, I felt the pang of isolation and self-doubt that can accompany being misunderstood. Reading this collection, I feel a renewed awareness of my own desire to celebrate words and usage that feel familiar and homey to me. *Finna* is a praise hymn; a collection steeped in reverence for the language that has been carved out, shared, and made our own.

## Humor as Resistance

*Heads of the Colored People*. Nafissa Thompson-Spires. 37Ink/Atria, 2018. 224 pp. \$17.00 (paper).

When writers take up topics like racial or social justice, it's easy for them to think that a serious approach is more appropriate than a humorous one. Late-night hosts may crack all kinds of wise about political malfeasance, but some subjects seem incompatible with funny business, their innate weightiness demanding a corresponding gravity of tone. Would you, for example, dare to tell a joke about a police shooting? In such cases, to make jest might appear to make light—or worse, fun.

Despite the high degree of difficulty in combining humor and social commentary, there are writers who succeed to exquisite ends. Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (Random House, 2000) is a classic of the genre, and Paul Beatty channeled satire to eviscerating effect in his masterful novel *The Sellout* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), reviewed in these pages in Issue 12.2. Both books are set in a pre-Black Lives Matter world, and theirs and the movement's natural heir may be Nafissa Thompson-Spires's debut short-story collection, *Heads of the Colored People*. In twelve hilarious and ferocious stories, this book captures the modern complexities of being Black in America, while using humor's unique properties to challenge dominant narratives and demand fuller representation.

Since the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin, young Black men in hoodies have become a de facto and tragic symbol of police brutality, and their image lies at the heart of the collection's title story, fully rendered as "Heads of the Colored People: Four Fancy Sketches, Two Chalk Outlines, and No Apology." As promised, the story unfolds in fragments and impressions, but most of the action centers on Riley, a "well-read, self-aware, self-loving black man with blue contact lenses and blond hair and a periwinkle suit," who starts the story dressed as a Japanese anime character, on his way to a Los Angeles convention center. He is a young Black man wearing what can only be described as the opposite of

a hoodie, and Thompson-Spires deliberately positions Riley in contrast to what you—“and yes, there is some judgment in the use of ‘you’”—might imagine when you picture someone of his age and demographic. Riley is not a symbol or type; he is gloriously individual—aided in part by how funny he is.

What makes Riley funny? Well, what makes anything funny? Comedians and philosophers can sweat the answer, but conventional wisdom holds that to be funny, something has to be original. Jokes are never quite as funny the second time around, and Riley’s humorous qualities, his unique delights and depths, are what help him register as original. Riley, with his contradictions and self-awareness, who “was not self-hating; he was even listening to Drake,” is funny, and because he is funny, he is also himself. In this, he becomes singular and subversive, allowing Thompson-Spires to unseat broad perspectives in favor of individual experience.

If watching cringeworthy shows like *The Office* has taught us anything, it’s that there’s considerable comedy to be wrung from discomfort, and this form of humor is on full display in the story “Belles Lettres.” This laugh-out-loud piece is constructed as a series of letters between two mothers, each one written in a fit of passive-aggressive pique and then exchanged via their daughters’ backpacks at school. In one letter, mother Lucinda claims that “it is true that Christinia’s hamster died recently, but it is absolutely not true that it died at Chrissy’s hand,” to which the other mother, Monica, replies, “I’m absolutely sure that Fatima wouldn’t tell stories about Christinia, the hamsters, or the microwave incident if they weren’t based on something Christinia had said first.” This back-and-forth sniping is delicious, but it becomes increasingly uneasy as the story progresses. It turns out that these mothers are both Black and that their daughters are the only two Black students in their school. Some readers might wonder what is gained by portraying pettiness between two Black women. It’s funny, certainly, but does this humor undercut a need for solidarity or positive portrayals of Black women? Such concerns have their place, but in this case, Thompson-Spires does not limit her storytelling to a rosy picture. Black women, Black mothers, are often subject to absurd standards and unfair scrutiny, and “Belles Lettres” offers the relief of two Black mothers being



normal people, with all their failings and foibles. In their humor, there is humanity—a requirement for any good story.

In addition, lest we forget, humor is akin to laughter, which is akin to joy. Too often joy is an afterthought in writing about “serious” topics. There’s much cause for sorrow and rage in the effects of racist structures on Black characters, but Thompson-Spires wisely sees a need to leaven the narrative. Throughout her stories, the pursuit of happiness is central to her characters’ being—in whatever form it may take. Growing up, Fatima (of “Fatima, the Biloquist: A Transformation Story” and one of the daughters in “Belles Lettres”) decides that she wants to “become black, full black, baa baa black sheep black, black like the elbows and knees on praying folk black, if only someone would teach her.” Another teenager, Raina (“Whisper to a Scream”), starts an ASMR channel in an attempt to find her voice and freedom, persevering despite needing to ignore “anyone who posted comments with the N-word, monkey references, and black-fetish cracks.” In “This Todd,” a woman with a disability fetish wonders why her boyfriend “could never balance his optimism about himself with his need for help. He was always like . . . ‘No, Kim, I don’t want to play candy striper. No, you can’t remove the bandages.’” These stories are obviously funny—with some discomfort thrown in for good measure—and while joy for these characters is not easily attained, they persist in their search for it. To not allow sorrow to dominate is a crucial component of resistance, and Thompson-Spires does vital work to ensure that joy is fully represented—as it should be.

Thompson-Spires even dares to tell a joke about a police shooting: Riley, that young Black man without a hoodie, falls victim to the same tragedy as Trayvon Martin and others clad in hoodies. In the aftermath, “the picture the Associated Press chose came from a Throwback Thursday photo that Riley had posted on social media. . . . His mother, and girlfriend, Paris, explained repeatedly that he was not dressed as a thug, but as nineties Justin Timberlake.” It’s a gut punch of a joke, beautifully crafted out of grief, absurdity, and recognition, and it tears down any barriers between sadness and humor. The joke works on multiple layers, combining a reminder of how silly Timberlake looked in his cornrows-and-bandannas phase with a sharp critique of how Black men are portrayed by the media. By setting these elements alongside each

other, Thompson-Spires speaks to the unexpected nuances of tragedy and finds laughter even in the deepest grief.

In the worst moments, there are still opportunities for laughter. Humor does not exist in contradiction to seriousness; instead, they together form the complex truth of being alive. Too often and for too long, the prevailing narratives of marginalized people have tended toward the tragic, biased, and negative, and against such portrayals, humor becomes a powerful and necessary counterweight. The originality, humanity, and joy that humor embodies becomes a mode of defiance, a way of ensuring every part of a story is told and celebrated. Writers like Smith, Beatty, and Thompson-Spires continue to show how humor in literature can be used to achieve brave and expansive storytelling, the purview of any “serious” writer. After all, what could be more appropriate than using a sidelined art form to tell a marginalized story?

## Now I See Me: *White Magic's* Miraculous Appearance Act

*White Magic*. Elissa Washuta. Tin House Books, 2021. 432 pp. \$26.95 (cloth).

At the beginning of a magic show, a magician often invites the audience to look closely, to watch the pattern of the moves, to discover the secrets to the tricks performed before their very eyes. The best memoirists provide a similar but distinct invitation to readers: let's follow my movements, and we'll discover the secrets and patterns together. The miracle of Elissa Washuta's memoiristic, novelistic, and lyric collection of essays, *White Magic*, is that we witness the transformation of its author's life as we journey through and map the book's complex and original structure, and we find ourselves becoming enchanted along the labyrinthian way. We come away asking ourselves the same question as those in the master magician's audience: How did she do that?

While witches cast spells through the intentional combination of patterns and elements, presenting their magic words and secret ingredients in a sequence specifically designed to influence a desired conclusion, the essayist, and perhaps especially the lyric essayist, must select the best representative moments from a lived and researched life and place her discoveries in an order that evokes narrative meaning, as well as curiosity, compassion, and shared humanity. Washuta presents a book of wonders, not only in its inquiries into her relationship to the supernatural—via underworld and other-worldish treks through nature and human behavior (abuse, addiction, trauma, rock 'n' roll clubs, and D.A.R.E. videos)—but also for the wonderment of its exquisite composition; it is “crafted” in the best sense of that powerful verb.

And Washuta is acutely aware of the craft she is constructing; she writes in the short essay that prefaces *White Magic's* Act II, “Dramatic structure seems most possible when story time is linear. In this book, time is folding, looping, told by a clock's minute hand advancing and retreating. . . . This book is a narrative. It has an arc. But the tension is not in what happened when I lived it; it's in what happened when I

wrote it. Like I already told you, this is not just a recounted story; I am trying to make something happen and record the process and results.” Washuta allows the reader to witness her gathering of information, as well as the shaping of the text. In following her internet searches to solid and questionable sources, Washuta is forthright with her findings: “Looking for the facts, I go down the Google rabbit hole and end up at a website [about the death of Mark Twain.] . . . The source article has unintentional font changes and broken image links, so I have to wonder about it. There may be a fact-checked book in the library that would put an end to my speculation, but it’s cold outside and I’m curious right now and I’ve got this portal right here that can tell me anything I could want to know.” In direct addresses about the book’s construction and content like these, Washuta reveals her compositional strategies, as if daring the reader to call the book an act of magic, as if saying, “Look closer; this is how I’m doing it,” even as she sets us up for the next amazement.

She converses with the reader while questioning her own crafting: for example, in the book’s fourth footnote (another of its compositional strategies being multiple epigraphs, with footnotes, to nearly every essay), she posits: “When you don’t understand the meaning of something you read, whose fault is it? Yours or the writer’s? It has to be someone’s fault. Everything does. Anyway, I just ask because this is my book. Do you think I understand everything in this book? If I don’t, can you?”

Repeated quotes from Alice Notley and Louise Erdrich poems introduce various essays, but the accumulation of the repetition constructs another bridge. We might think of these and other quotations and forms of epigraph as Washuta’s magic words, along with varying tarot-card spreads, and footnotes that precede the longer essays. The whole combination produces a hypnotic reading experience. We become charmed by these incantations. But when the words of the spell are printed in black on white (and in white on black, in the case of this book’s captivating design), can there be any sleight of hand?

Washuta removes the veil of illusion by sharing the complex notations of her life—even as she leads the eye elsewhere, in the ways of the best magicians, abracadabraing us back to repeating chords and choruses, via a structure of rotating loops through time and her revolving worlds of influence: being a Cowlitz Indian woman in the

twenty-first century, pop culture's music videos, TV shows, video games, YouTube, nature, and literature, not to mention direct investigations into witchcraft and the extranatural.

Following a three-act arc with subtle and stunning segues and asides, Washuta eschews adherence to any strict regimen, whether that's Freytag's pyramid or the author's own architectures. "Eight years ago, I began this book as a drawn line marked by plot points," she writes in the untitled preface essay that follows Act III's opening tarot-card spread and introduces the essay "My Heartbreak Workbook":

I outlined a novel about a girl who turns into a shark. When I realized the girl was me, I drew a new line. . . . I wrote messes and disappeared them into hard drive folders. I downloaded articles about ghosts and intergenerational trauma. . . . I made a Google map of all the important places in these pages and saw points nearly on top of each other, ringing the Salish Sea: fictional worlds, filmed worlds, the spirit world from which a'yahos emerged, the world called "Seattle" I lived in from 2007 to 2017. I needed a better form than a story, an experiment, or a map. I needed to build a memory palace, a set of mental rooms filled with images, a route to travel through it. But the memory palace was outside me, in the land and the calendar, the seasons dragging through both.

The memory palace she constructs then has many rooms and even more doors, with portals, portages, and bridges being primary in the way the collection links and navigates the reader, and its author, into and out of various moments and realizations. She writes of dream doors, "doors at the bottom of the rabbit hole," "doors in my mother," doors to hell, cave doors, bedroom doors, the "door to the underworld," and "down here, more doors," "down here, a labyrinth," "down here, not a door but a canoe" (subtitled sections from "The Spirit Corridor").

For the sheer volume of information on magic and interpretations of witchcraft, not to mention the numerous historical and geographical corrections necessary to convey any real sense of the Native experience in North America, *White Magic* is encyclopedic in its breadth and scope. Yet the collection is so carefully curated that to follow the author down one rabbit hole or another, not knowing where we'll emerge next, is part of the book's wondrous adventure.

While these individual essays stand on their own as distinct, original

creations, it's the accumulation of these lyric essays, and how synchronistically Washuta's touchstones collide, making greater sense through their metonymy, that builds up to the impressive finale. Throughout the book, we find abundant evidence of the dangers that disappear women, the choices that threatened to disappear Washuta, and the glimpses of magic and meaning that have brought her out of or helped her make sense of the underworlds. And in the book's longest and penultimate essay, "The Spirit Cabinet," the loops and sequences and mapping of preceding histories combine to provide a greater wisdom, or perception, of the previously charted territories.

Washuta quotes the 2006 film *The Prestige*, about competing nineteenth-century magicians, in "The Spirit Cabinet": "The second act is called 'the turn.' . . . But you wouldn't clap yet, because making something disappear isn't enough. You have to bring it back. That's why every magic trick has a third act. The hardest part. The part we call . . . 'the prestige.'" Washuta then goes on to pull off the ultimate magic trick: she makes a disappearing Native woman reappear. This is no small feat given the horrific statistics of missing and murdered Native women in North America.

Is Washuta a magician? Is she a witch? A juggler? Yes. She's a sorceress wielding many gifts. Is *White Magic* a book of essays, as its cover suggests? It's a carnival. It's a cabinet of curiosities, a book of essays, a memory palace, a memoir, and so much more. It defies the physics of our expectations. In magic, it's said that there is always more than meets the eye. And in a good memoir, there is more than meets the I. Washuta has crafted a nonfiction masterpiece: an appearance act.

## A Love Letter to Queer Southern Masculinities: Genevieve Hudson's *Boys of Alabama*

*Boys of Alabama*. Genevieve Hudson. Liveright, 2020. 304 pp. \$26.95 (cloth).

Here in rural Alabama, dirt in every earthbound color retains vestiges of an ancient sea dried in the heat. It is a place rarely seen in books put out by the biggest American presses. Some months, each book on my reading list—one after another—is set at least in part within the same few piss-stained miles in Manhattan or Brooklyn. Inevitably, the hot metal smell of the subway and the crush of humanity make their respective entrances. Every now and then, the Central Park duck pond shows up. Genevieve Hudson's debut novel, *Boys of Alabama*, takes place instead in the fictional town of Delilah somewhere near real-life Vance, Alabama, and as I read I felt the shock of recognition, because I have lived here since 2015. Landmarks abound, and spotting them became a game: here, the Mercedes-Benz plant visible from I-20; there, the University of Alabama stadium-cum-grounded-alien-warship. In such a landscape, the tradition of the Southern Gothic infuses the tangled skein of contradictions about nature, self, and identity at the heart of this book.

This shock turned to a thrill at the centering of LGBTQ+ life in rural Alabama—an updated version of the thrill I felt when I first read Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* (Random House, 1987). Both books contain loving queer relationships, which I see ample examples of here in real life but not often in novels. The fictional town of Delilah in *Boys of Alabama* exists only an hour's drive from a major metropolitan area where Max might attend an afternoon Pride parade, but he cannot drive and there's no dependable public transit. For rural youth without transportation, the nearest city can feel as far as the moon, and an open queer community may exist only through the web, through interpersonal relationships, and through books like this one. *Boys of Alabama* is a love letter to the complexity of queer Southern masculinities, in all their lushness and violence, their lust

and danger. The paradox of visibility means that while the coming-out process focuses on authenticity and self-definition, it can also result in directed violence. Inhabiting this paradox results in fierce joy, terror, and resilience. Max, the novel's protagonist, is a gay German teenager with magic healing powers. He reanimates dead creatures discarded as trash: cats mushed by cars, drowned puppies, bloated fish. In a place ruled largely by the death cult of the GOP, where both animals and queer people are treated as disposable, Max's resurrections fight back against the status quo.

This status quo is represented by the Judge, a larger-than-life character who could have emerged wholesale from *Blood Meridian*, been refracted through Neo-Charismatic Christianity, and landed a spot as a major player in Alabama politics. He is the unflinching avatar of "Those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them" (Proverbs 13:24). Think Kenneth Copeland with more dead followers (devotees of the Judge drink poison to prove the presence of God inside them). Instead of accepting his son's queer attraction to a classmate, the Judge ties his son to a tree and stabs him in the ribs for the thought-crime of sodomitical desire. Though he seems like an exaggerated figure, he echoes the ethos of real Alabama politicians like senatorial candidate Roy Moore and Rep. Mike Rogers. The drive to do violence to LGBTQ+ people simply because of our existence—let alone our flourishing—confounds me. Queer and trans people will continue to exist in spite of such violence, but so often our most vulnerable community members suffer the effects of these attempts to erase us from public life (a masquerade for our actual deaths).

Max is drawn to the Judge like a moth to a flame. The force of the desire to belong supersedes the type of sexual desire he has, and Max questions which knowledge about himself is real. This questioning seems akin to the first stage of coming out, identifying publicly as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Other characters seduce him with evangelical Christianity and by pretending they have all the answers. In far-right cultural discourse, queer and trans people are often accused of converting teenagers to a "cause" or "lifestyle," for example, in the book *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters* (Regnery, 2020), which posits the existence of this type of seduction. This harmful point of view claims that the natural self is heterosexual



and cisgender, rather than queer like Max or gender nonconforming like Pan, Max's lover. However, in some of the most gorgeous passages in *Boys of Alabama*, Max ponders the places on Pan's body he has yet to touch—"the edge of skin between earlobe and neck, the hollow of collarbone, the pink pad of foot bottom, the long line of shinbone, the tendon at the back of the knee." This soft attention, this simple desire, this healing space where someone notices the landscape of a cared-for body—they are what the Judge wants to crush under his boots.

The same characters who attempt to seduce Max into choosing a conservative lifestyle and joining an evangelical church become a synecdoche for the place where they all live. On the book's opening page, the narrator declaims that these "boys are Alabama. They are red dirt and caked mud. . . . They are pine trees ripped up to make room for gas stations, stadium lights, drive-thrus, gridirons, and steel mills." They become the land, and the land becomes them. Our environments seep into us: the minerals in our bones and teeth, the colonies of bacteria on our skin and intestines, our neurological growth and development. I often wonder about the relationship between memory and land in rural Alabama, where many places are marked by the history of the transatlantic slave trade and by the violence—and centuries-long resistance to that violence—which accompanied it. The land here bears the history of violence born of the intersection of capital and whiteness, and the first step in acknowledging it is to look at it directly, to let it burn like the sun, to let it pass through the body like the first sips of poison.

The boys in Max's peer group have made choice after self-destructive choice by the end of the book, yet its ending does not resolve. As a craft choice, it's a bold and successful one. Hudson arranges their characters in a final tableau at the moment of Max's most intense internal conflict between his burgeoning identities. Due to the strength of Hudson's characterization, the ramifications of his choice seem clear regardless of what he chooses. The lack of final resolution after his decision is a tight, savvy, and successful move—the antithesis to the way some books end without resolution, as though the author of that text simply got distracted. As a reader and media-imbiber, I tend to be frustrated by books and films that (essentially or literally) flip to the credits at the very moment the protagonist teeters on the verge of a crucial choice. I usually want to see what happens as a result of the character's choices,

with the agonizing slowness of a boulder coming to a complete stop. However, because of *Boys of Alabama*, I see that my frustration is likely not a failure of the texts but of my own readerly imagination.

It is my fervent hope that readers will get to enjoy many more books by Genevieve Hudson and many more books like this one. American Literature, broadly writ, needs more #ownvoices books, more stories about life for Southern LGBTQ+ young people. Sometimes it seems like most major-press novels put out about the South truck primarily in fulfilling Northerners' expectations, with poverty porn and unrelenting violence. Space for our real lives already exists from the Appalachian foothills to the coasts of the Gulf and the Atlantic. We need for these complex lives to be reflected in literature, so that young queer people the nation over know that they have a place, that there are many others like them, and that their stories matter.

## On the Power of Radical Transparency

*Things We Didn't Talk About When I Was a Girl*. Jeannie Vanasco. Tin House, 2019. 360 pp. \$25.95 (cloth).

During my first creative-nonfiction workshop, a classmate asked a question about character motivation. He didn't understand why my narrator, a twenty-three-year old version of me, had chosen to stay in an emotionally abusive relationship. From his perspective as a reader, it was hard to buy into a personal essay that didn't operate within a structure of familiar causes and effects. As a writer, I'd neglected to adhere to the expected "trauma memoir" arc: an innocent victim gains the strength to escape a much-reviled villain.

In revisions, I struggled to impose the narrative frameworks my peers had suggested. The neat explanations felt false, like I was writing a highly flattened version of myself. My experience was not cohesive. The logic never fully made sense. To pretend otherwise was to ignore the reason I'd turned to essay writing in the first place: to explore an uncomfortable space, one that was far more messy and self-implicating than it was a shocking *Lifetime* movie.

Since then, I've made it my mission to seek out nonfiction that privileges transparency over tidy narration. Time and time again, I've returned to fragmented memoirs like Roxane Gay's *Hunger* (Harper-Collins, 2017) and Terese Marie Mailhot's *Heart Berries* (Counterpoint Press, 20189), books that expose the real, imperfect, and vulnerable self, to arrive at some greater truth.

Jeannie Vanasco's second memoir, *Things We Didn't Talk About When I Was a Girl*, is just such a book. The project, as she often calls it, attempts to make sense of a sexual assault by initiating a conversation with her rapist, a close high-school friend she assigns the pseudonym Mark. Fourteen years after the attack, Vanasco decides to write about the experience, sending an e-mail that sparks two phone conversations and a final face-to-face visit.

Formally, the memoir eschews linear narration in favor of short themed chapters that invite the reader into the writing process. Through transcripts of phone calls, e-mails, and conversations with her friends, editor, and therapist, Vanasco grants us an insider look at the crafting of the project—from idea, to initial contact, to her fears about how the book will be marketed and received by a #MeToo audience.

From the opening section, Vanasco is transparent regarding her many uncertainties about the project. She puzzles over what she will do if Mark ignores her interview request, debating whether she needs his consent to write the book. She researches “legal considerations” for recording conversations and questions her desire to include Mark’s voice in a memoir about her attack. She openly struggles with her urge to portray her rapist in both a positive and negative light, writing, “I want readers to like Mark, to see why I trusted Mark, to think, *Of course Jeannie wouldn’t have expected him to assault her.* That way, his betrayal will seem as unthinkable and unexplainable as it seemed to me then—because, while I know it’s not my fault, some part of me still blames myself for trusting him.” It is not until their second phone conversation that she works up the courage to define what happened between them as rape. With each new doubt and hesitation, she lays bare her perspective as a survivor of traumatic rape, one that is far more uncertain and conflicted than popular media often portrays.

Once her dialogue with Mark begins, Vanasco includes full transcripts of their conversations. She interrupts with frequent asides that analyze and, at times, express anger and confusion about what has been said. Readers eavesdrop as she consults with her editor and friends, trying to make sense of one of Mark’s explanations or her own inability to hold him accountable for the attack. As she transcribes the moment where Mark admits to the assault, she pauses to “rewind and listen to the recording” repeatedly, baffled by her lack of expected vindication. She is annoyed by her conciliatory language, her frequent use of phrases like “*I hope you know that I don’t hate you*” and “*I really appreciate this.*” “Mortified isn’t strong enough” to describe how she feels about the transcripts, which is exactly why Vanasco knows she must include them in the final project. From a craft perspective, the recordings allow readers to see her performance of gender play out on the page—the same appeasing behavior that many a defense attorney has pointed

to as proof of his client's innocence. As the logic goes: if a survivor is cordial with her attacker, then the assault couldn't have been that bad, could it? By juxtaposing the transcripts with her emotional reactions and analysis, Vanasco helps the reader grasp the long-lasting impacts of her attack. Even fourteen years later, the accomplished writer and university professor struggles to assert herself when faced with her rapist. Like so many survivors, she is "imperfect," failing to live up to mainstream depictions of appropriate victimhood.

Rather than shy away from this potential criticism, Vanasco addresses it head on. She is acutely aware that her "reaction to Mark" might "disappoint other feminists" who expect her to be angry at him. She is ashamed of her desire to include her rapist in the memoir, scrutinizing her assumption that the assault "*isn't interesting without him.*" She questions how her narrative fits into the #MeToo movement—whether she started the book, in part, because she knew it would sell well in the current climate. As news of Trump's family-separation policy hits, she grapples with the role of art in activism, wondering how she can focus on the project when the government is "committing blatant human rights violations." She goes so far as to ponder what she hopes young readers will take away from the narrative: the message that, no matter how they might react to a sexual assault, they are not alone.

This type of metacommentary is not usually found in the pages of a published book. Such questions are typically relegated to an author interview or a creative-nonfiction workshop, spaces where writers are asked to reflect on their intentions and use of craft. To ponder these decisions out in the open—in fact, to frame much of the book around them—is to take a risk, especially with a mainstream audience. While fellow writers may revel in discussions of interview ethics and craft, others may find that the commentary serves to obfuscate what actually happened. As for me: Vanasco's questions served as a balm for my own insecurities, reminding me that other memoirists struggle with fears of backlash and not being believed.

In this way, *Things We Didn't Talk About When I Was a Girl* is not so much about Vanasco's assault as it is about her attempt to narrativize the attack. To read the book is to witness her attempts to "take charge of the material," cutting and rearranging the details to gain "some sense of control." If she neglects to uncover the reason Mark raped her,

it is not due to her failure as a writer but due to the operating status of our culture. There can be no series of familiar causes and effects, no expected narrative arc, when sexual assault remains an “aside” to men like Mark. By bringing the inner workings of her process to the forefront, Vanasco creates a road map for other writers and activists, carving a path laid with radical transparency.

## An Ocean Drama

*The Dyzgraph<sup>st</sup>*. Canisia Lubrin. McClelland & Stewart, 2020. 176 pp. \$18.95 (paper).

While reading Canisia Lubrin's *The Dyzgraph<sup>st</sup>*—a genre-defying long poem divided into seven acts, with a dramatis personae list, prologue, monologue, and epilogue—I kept picturing *Plastic Ocean* by artist Tan Zi Xi. For this installation, Zi Xi collected twenty-six thousand pieces of plastic, ranging from milk gallons and shampoo bottles to Tupperware lids, and hung them from the ceiling like party balloons. The pieces of plastic blocked the white lights above, casting the room in a blue color, an eerie, oceanic hue. A small white platform in the middle of the room let viewers rise and stand face-to-face with the plastic.

This positioning of the viewer underneath so much plastic garbage directly parallels Zi Xi's inspiration: the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a mass of debris in the central North Pacific Ocean. Photographs show turtles and fish swimming under the shadow of floating garbage. For us, the viewer of these photographs, the garbage, while random, holds glimmers of familiarity—a logo here, a corporation's emblematic colors there, etc.—but for the sea creatures, the garbage is foreign and intrusive. At least at first. I imagine that the garbage becomes familiar to the sea creatures over time—obtrusive, yes, but part of the environment. If throwing something out is an act of forgetting, photographs of the garbage patch are stark reminders, awakening us to the consequences of our neglect. Zi Xi's installation pushes this awakening further by placing us in the position of a sea creature under the garbage. The oppressiveness of the garbage, our implied human presence, the attempt to forget—all becomes tangible in those moments on Zi Xi's platform.

Creating moments where the consequences of your own life and those of others blur together so that it feels personal and impersonal all at once—this is the charge of lyric poetry. In Canisia Lubrin's *The Dyzgraph<sup>st</sup>*, this charge plays out in terms of linguistic density, evident

even in the dedication, which reads, “For the impossible citizens of the ill world.” As a reader moves through the poem’s seven acts, the range of what *impossible* might mean expands: from impossible to tolerate (passages interrogating acts that “disappear a people, dignity by dignity”); to impossible to keep existing as is (poems meditating on the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill); and impossible to fully articulate (the meaning most directly engaged with throughout the project).

This theme of articulation is braided into the other threads in the *Dramatis Personae*:

i: First person singular.

I: Second person singular.

I: Third person plural.

JEJUNE: THE VOICE addressed, every page. The chorus, the you, the we/un navigable self. The character never leaves the stage. The character must always leave the stage. This is an ocean drama.

Just reading through this list troubles lyric poetry’s idea of the speaker. The way that the multitensed i / I / I all stream into the final character, JeJune, the voice of this long poem, is narratively disorienting. The disorientation mirrors the multiple reactions we have to looking at photographs of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch and Zi Xi’s installation; only, instead of garbage and plastic, language itself hangs before us, implying our sense of self, our presence and that of others, and, later in the book, implying our guilt and helplessness.

The following excerpt from Act I serves as an example of how these polyvocal and polyvalent elements come together in a reckoning at the level of language itself:

JeJune has known I, they were children once  
children holding their heads up at the aquarium  
of ill-conceived enterprise, let that be all you need

to know, the dyzgraph\*st must lend the mouth  
to the flood of oil beneath the Gulf of Mexico  
the waves doing their best to save us from Amerikkka,



the premonition of coins, given plumage, red, jaune, blé ek  
owange, the children who know their job: know to never be  
done with answering the unanswerable: di nou ki les ki la

to never raise a hand or shield themselves against  
some agent of decay, lithographic forms of having  
to commit, to commit to the speaking, bluer

than perpetual lines of black tears, you meet I,  
now the elder one, wanting a haunting with Jejune  
though all of that is too much, too much to ask:

Here, the first stanza creates a mutual narrative of memory between Jejune and I, which is seemingly interrupted only to be taken up in the final stanza where the two meet again. I say “seemingly interrupted” because the polyvocal nature of the poem means the Jejune and I are connected. The connection, however, is purposefully threadbare. In the polyvocal narration of this excerpt, as well as elsewhere in the book, personal and public narrative wrestle. What we have here is a personal narrative interrupted by the narration’s need to “lend the mouth” to the more public issues of colonialism, capitalism, and oppression. The thread between personal and public is presence; by interrupting narratives, Lubrin evokes a sense of this conflicted impulse while also fulfilling it through inventory and juxtaposition. Born on the Caribbean island of Saint Lucia and living in Canada, Lubrin also brings multilinguality into play, using presence as a way to push against erasure, for example in “di nou ki les ki la,” which in Haitian Creole means “tell us which ones are there.”

Through this interpolation of polyvocal narration and multilinguality, we can feel the rich density at the heart of this book. Lubrin sets herself at the task of “[telling us] which ones are there” in the consciousness of this polyvocal narration while at the same time self-consciously interrogating what it means to be able to *do* this telling. Like photographs of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch and Zi Xi’s installation, Lubrin’s project shows us what the human enterprise of language can cost and has cost on a personal as well as public level. Lubrin answers the question of what’s at stake over and over again with a paradox: everything and nothing. Everything, in that one’s personal

consciousness is alive and in peril in an “ill world” that everyone is implicated in making ill; and nothing, in that articulating this peril is impossible due to the limits of language.

This idea of language and its limits is key to understanding *The Dyzgraph<sup>h</sup>st* and its lyric multitudes. The book’s title alludes to dysgraphia, which impairs the ability to write as well as to create coherence. Lubrin is also alluding to the use of *dysgraphia* by Christina Sharpe, a leading scholar in Black Diaspora thought and cultures, who frames the word within the Black Diaspora as “the inability of language to cohere around the bodies and the suffering of . . . Black people who live and die in the wake [of slavery] and whose everyday acts insist Black life into the wake.” Thus, the book’s wrestling with language can be viewed as a push for presence in the face of Black erasure. And while scholars can wax about the mutability and fluidity of language, there are indeed limits to language’s capabilities when it comes to oppressed and marginalized peoples. These limits are resisted and overcome through the work of artists like Lubrin, but they are acknowledged there, nonetheless.

Lubrin showcases a troubled empathy for an imperiled world as well as for the imperiled self in the following excerpt from later in Act I:

but let I go, given the choice now to speak  
after five hundred years of dysgraphia  
let I approach the witness stand in any chosen language,  
  
let I bend into a touch of the supernatural, let that be all  
you need to know, where the heart is bruised with unfeeling,  
to delay the organ’s devotion to devotion, is not belief, or it is  
  
calling I to walk out of the sea, all of the world hears  
the surf supply applause, hears JeJune swimming in,  
JeJune outlawed in the notes of fifty generations  
  
far from that door of even more (un)openings,  
how to pay for the vocal injury I feels at the end of  
the Gulf of Mexico, the won wrecks, seeds still in jars after  
  
a century, how the sea hacks the compass still  
I feels how far is left to go, Sudan, Abaco, Aleppo, still  
before the self-same notes of dead musicians consider I

more than the pen, and to have never thought of  
the notes as autobio, and to have never built  
a better world to inhabit or break

Here, one can see the ocean drama move from strident agency (“let I approach the witness stand in any chosen language”) to a crisis of conscience (the split between “autobio” and the “better world” not built). Lubrin’s formal choices in individual sections as well as across all seven acts are the result of an ambition that necessarily risks aesthetic difficulty, yet her choice to imbue part of the polyvocal narration with pathos and self-awareness demonstrates the difficulty as an effort to keep meaning from being lost.

The expansive lyricism at work in *The Dyzgraph<sup>x</sup>st* presents words, phrases, lists, narrative threads, and lyric sequences from the perspective of a multibodied voice and lets them hang like so many loose pieces of plastic over us. The result is a discordant polyphony where we marvel, ponder, reflect, and regret, as language that holds up to us—near-simultaneously—what is beautiful and terrible about our inner and outer worlds.