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*Hilltopics* pieces range from the high literary to the traditionally journalistic, from the satirical to the personal. We welcome contributions from all viewpoints, political persuasions, and backgrounds—the most important thing is that all voices are free to contribute, in order to foster a flourishing of free speech at SMU. The paper is not limited to the Honors community; anyone at SMU can write for *Hilltopics*, and we seek to gain readership from all students.

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Lorien Melnick, [lmelnick@smu.edu](mailto:lmelnick@smu.edu)

Nicole Kiser, [nkiser@smu.edu](mailto:nkiser@smu.edu)

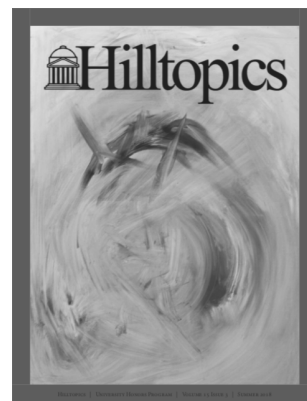
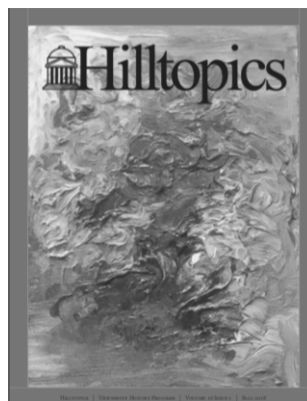
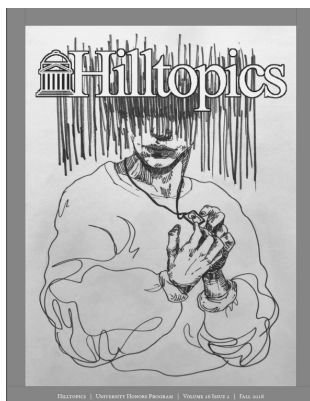
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 **Hilltopics**



# THE DANGERS OF NATIONALISM DURING COVID-19

**Bibiana B. Schindler**

It is difficult to think of anything these days without seeing it in the context of COVID-19. The virus is on everyone's mind this election year, including the international community at large, and for good reason. It is a pandemic in the age of globalization.

The world is so interconnected that all the virus had to do was remain undetected in a

person long enough for them to get on a plane and end up in America. This interconnected, international community could not be contained or isolated in a short enough time period to curb the illness.

Next comes the blame game: Do we label COVID-19 the Chinese virus or "Kung-Flu"? Should we protect our citizens by keeping our borders closed? We have already seen attacks on our Chinese American

population for their supposed "connection" to the virus. This

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**"NATIONALISM CAN DEVELOP INTO ATTACKS ON WHAT THE MAJORITY FEARS TO BE THE 'OTHER.'"**

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crisis will renew a debate on the concepts of nationalism and

identity. These are all examples of how nationalism can develop into attacks on what the majority fears to be the "other." As the next generation of world-changers, we will have to enter this new world prepared to either change or preserve it.

We must be able to see how nationalist rhetoric has the capacity to harm. First, we must define nationalism in this context.

Nationalism and patriotism were originally synonyms, but

since then, their connotations have diverged. Nationalism reflects pride in one's country and identity, yet at the same time, it necessitates the mindset of our country possessing only one "identity." This idea does not intrinsically lend itself to the targeting of ethnic groups, but nationalism can and has led to xenophobia in the past. The primary issue with seeing a country as having only one identity is that it creates "others." This group is comprised of minority groups that for some reason—whether it be race, religion, sexuality—do not "fit." A government can choose whether or not to represent these people. Because the government sees them as non-representative of the nation's ideals, they are often treated poorly and their needs are forgotten. This can leave a minority group with very few options to exist in the country.

Nationalism is not a new concept. This idea has been around as long as countries have, and usually develops as a country does. One notable example to point to is in the Middle East. The Ottoman Empire fell because of World War I, and their territory was divided arbitrarily and made into countries. One such country was Iraq, which was under British occupation and mandate until 1933 when the Kingdom of Iraq was established. Although the region had great diversity, many minority groups were persecuted throughout the 20th century because they failed to live up to the Arab identity that Iraq expected of its subjects. Iraq's main conflict with the Iraqi Jews

rested in the government's belief that one must choose nationalism over all other aspects of one's identity. What they failed to understand is that groups can have loyalty to their country and to their backgrounds, which the majority of the Iraqi Jews possessed. Instead, the Iraqi Jews were perceived as outsiders who could corrupt the values of the country and sought its destruction. Now, almost no Jews remain in the country, driven out by fear of persecution. This cannot, and should never again, continue to any degree in the modern world, especially not fueled by a perspective

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**"WHAT THEY FAILED TO UNDERSTAND IS THAT GROUPS CAN HAVE LOYALTY TO THEIR COUNTRY AND TO THEIR BACKGROUNDS"**

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that nationalism should guide a country.

So, when COVID-19 eventually peaks and finally falls in the United States, we must remember these lessons. It is okay to have pride in our country, or even love our country more than any other. However, it is not acceptable to pick and choose which members of our country make up our nation, because we share one common identity: American. It might do us all some good to remember this fact as we shelter-in-place for the next however-long.

# Coffee Shop Romance

**Casey Glynn**



They were newlyweds, but Lydia was already tired of the monotony that she felt had entered their marriage. Because of this, she convinced Jack to take her to a coffee shop every weekend. After the first couple of weeks trying out different coffee shops, Jack finally stopped trying and continued to take her to the one closest to their apartment. During their Saturday coffee trips, they rarely talked to one another. Lydia would read, or pretend to, while Jack did the payroll for his second job. It was part-time and wasn't something he particularly liked, but he enjoyed the extra income even if they didn't need it. He had quit the job while they were engaged so that he could spend more time with Lydia, but only a month or two after they were married, he took the job back.

Lydia missed Jack. They sat in the same spot doing the same thing, but she missed him. She reached for him, and he held her hand briefly before returning to his work. Her fingertips rested on his arm as he continued typing up expense reports. She told him that she loved him, and he gave his normal response: "I love you more." Some days, she wondered why he said it when it didn't feel true. Today, she wanted it, needed it to be true. Lydia knew that if she distracted Jack from his work too consistently, he would get frustrated, but she was willing to push so long as he didn't get too annoyed. She wanted to feel that his love for her, at least for today, was unconditional.

"Baby, will you get me a blueberry muffin?" Jack sighed.

"I'm kinda in the middle of something right now."

"I know." "Then why don't you get it yourself?"

"Because I don't want to." "And you think I do?"

"No, but I think you love me."

Jack handed her the debit card and told her that she could get it herself. She didn't want this to be his response, but she knew that she had reached her limit with him. She picked at her nails before getting up to order. The barista was cute; he was American but had a European attractiveness about him. She preferred men who were European-attractive rather than American-attractive. It had nothing to do with accents; they just looked different, looked more

well-kept, wise, experienced. He was a barista, but he seemed like he knew what he was doing and where he planned on going. He looked confident and genuinely happy. As she ordered, he smiled, which she understood as part of his job, but his smile seemed real and even a little surprised. He smiled at her in a way that made his entire face more pleasant than it already was. When she paid, she tried to hand the card to him, hoping that for a brief moment their hands would touch, but he directed her to insert the card into the reader in front of her. Something like this typically made her face hot with shame at not knowing better, but the way he spoke to her prevented embarrassment. Not wanting to return to Jack just yet, she waited for her order at the bar.

“You’re here practically every Saturday. Why?” he asked, his lips parted slightly as he smiled, seeming genuinely curious.

She was thrown off by his question, as she had never seen him before. It was Jack who usually interacted with the baristas. Lydia didn’t want to tell him that the man she came with was her husband, and she suspected that he might not care to know, so she avoided mentioning Jack altogether.

“Sometimes it’s nice to get out of the house, even if all you’re doing is reading.”

“You don’t get out of the house for work?”

“I’m figuring things out right now, so I’m kinda in between.” The barista smiled at her.

“Where’s that?” She laughed, fully aware that had Jack said the same thing she wouldn’t have even acknowledged it.

“What did you do beforehand?”

“Copywriting.”

“Why did you stop?”

“I moved and was still too new for them to let me work remotely.” She guessed that he was going to ask her if she enjoyed the work, which was a question she wanted to avoid.

“I’m open to finding another job similar to that, but if I can’t, I’m sure I’ll find something else. How long have you been a barista?”

“I’m more interested in your career, actually.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Did you enjoy it?”

“It’s a great career and it’s fun when you’re working for an agency.”

“But did you enjoy it?” She watched him as he placed the plate in front of her and leaned against the counter, closer to her. She responded,

“I said I was in between right now, didn’t I?”

“Fair enough.”

# The Question of Karma in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*

Fiona Schor

If someone overheard the plot of Thomas Hardy's nineteenth-century novel, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, they would probably say something like, "well, that is karma for you." They would hear of Michael Henchard's cruel treatment toward women and his eventual demise and assume that he got what he deserved. If the same person carefully read Hardy's novel, though, and saw Henchard's eventual remorse, regret, and misery, their reaction would be more complicated and perhaps ambivalent. In essence, the closer one reads Hardy's novel, the fuzzier its moral becomes. A number of mid-twentieth-century scholars practicing what they called "feminist critique" argued that novels such as this reinforce repressive views and images of women. Hardy's novel does reproduce oppressive views of women, but only half-heartedly condemns their oppressor. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* may intend to give ill-used women of the time a voice, yet inadvertently takes it away in its closing pages.

Michael Henchard's behavior is appalling at the novel's start. Overserving himself one night at dinner with his wife Susan and their daughter Elizabeth-Jane, he does the unthinkable. Standing up to a group of strangers, he announces that he will "sell [his wife] for five guineas to any

man that will pay [him] the money and treat her well; and he shall have her for ever, and never hear [from Henchard]" (Hardy, 2008, p. 16). The reader discovers that this is not the first time his wife has received such a threat. Henchard proceeds to kill two birds with one stone, happily giving up his wife and daughter to the same auctioneer. The five guineas he receives for his helpless family members equate to about seven hundred dollars today. He wakes up physically and morally hungover upon realizing the severity of his actions. Still, his ego derails the search effort he attempts to conduct for the two. "The truth was a certain shyness of revealing his conduct prevented Michael Henchard from following up the investigation with the loud hue-and-cry such a pursuit demanded to render it effectual" (Hardy, 2008, p. 23). Here, the reader sees that even after doing something as inhumane as selling his own family, the thought of publicly humiliating himself is worse to Henchard than the thought of losing them to a stranger. Privately, Henchard expresses remorse, vowing to abstain from alcohol for the next twenty-one years. The work initially depicts Henchard as an abominable husband and father.

The book reintroduces Susan and Henchard after eighteen years, and the reader perceives how differently time has affected the two. Though presumably

under the age of fifty, as her husband was twenty-one at the novel's start, Susan is already dying. Her daughter, the second Elizabeth-Jane that Susan mothers after her first baby dies, sees that "her mother's health was not what it had once been... she would not be very sorry to quit a life she was growing thoroughly weary of" (Hardy 2008, p. 33). After being sold by one man and purchased by another just to mourn the death of her child and second husband, it is no surprise to the reader that Susan is losing her will to live. Her declining health highlights the toll taken on the lives of powerless women of that time.

While Susan suffered, Henchard thrived. With no familial obligations, his only focus was himself. The young man moved to a town called Casterbridge, earned himself a fortune, and was eventually elected mayor. Though eighteen years changed his outer appearance, the text suggests that internally, he stayed the same. "There was a temper under the thin bland surface- the temper which, artificially intensified, had banished a wife nearly a score of years before" (Hardy, 2008, p. 43). Henchard's success highlights male liberty of the time and contrasts female subjugation and misery. Believing word that her second husband died at sea, Susan is unable to support her daughter alone. In Mary Childers' article "Thomas Hardy, The Man Who

'Liked' Women," she says that "The situation of women makes them appropriate representations of a powerlessness," a quality portrayed in Susan (Childers, 1981, 333). The helpless woman becomes desperate enough to seek out her first husband, despite his cruelty towards her, in hopes that he will take care of her daughter after her approaching death. When the two meet, though, Susan proves to have a trick or two up her ragged sleeve. She introduces Elizabeth to Henchard as his daughter, knowing that the egotistical man will never question that she is his own. When the two make amends, rather than viewing their rekindling with gratitude or relief, Henchard sees himself as "lowering of his dignity in public opinion

by marrying a comparatively humble woman" (Hardy, 2008, p. 94). In his second marriage to Susan, he treats the ill-used woman kindly, except in his "moments of irritation" with her (Hardy, 2008, p. 131). Had he been genuinely remorseful, Henchard would have put Susan on a pedestal, never uttering a harsh word to her again, but that is not the case. On Susan's dying day, rather than mourning the woman's early demise, Henchard rejoices that "Elizabeth was his at last" (Hardy, 2008, p. 140). Such details as these are clues to the reader that despite his effort, Henchard has not truly changed. Though he keeps his vow of sobriety for twenty-one years, he makes no such promise for life, indicating that sooner or later, he will go back to his old ways. Henchard's selfishness may be subdued, but it is far from gone.

To read the full-length essay, visit our website, <https://hilltopicsmu.wordpress.com/>.

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# The Leaky Sink

Patricia Larsen



Photo by Sasikan Ulevik on Unsplash

“When did this all start?” That was Dr. Holland’s first question. How could Grace forget? It was late August when Ryan had pounded on her door and showed her the screenshots that Darren had sent him. Grace kept saying sorry while he yelled all sorts of things before he ended it. Grace didn’t like to replay the memory because when she did, it throbbed behind her eyes. She had lots of throbbing memories nowadays, ones that were recent and ones from a while ago. A month later, he blocked her on everything, and since then she had barely slept. She told the doctor that it started the day of her breakup, end of the summer, that was it.

“What do you think it looks like?” That was the second question Dr. Holland had asked her. Grace could construct drawings more easily than sentences, so she had asked for a notepad. Closing her eyes, she put herself in her bedroom and began to flick the pen across the page. With each stroke, her blood raced faster and faster. The sound filled her head, but it was muffled, as if she had covered her ears, a pitter-patter of liquid spilling. Her throat tightened. Her lungs dried up. The air in the room turned cold. The chill forced her eyes open, and she gasped for breath. The image of her bedroom melted away, back into the white, sterile office. She looked down at the drawing on the notepad, fumbling with the pen in her hand. Her strokes were fast and desperate, far from the usual precision that characterized her work. Long, spidery fingers took up most of the page, clawing at the margins. They flayed out from an inky palm. The only detail she made sure to add was droplets of water falling from the fingertips, filling them in completely black.

Dr. Holland studied the picture for a few minutes, quickly glanced up at Grace, and then slipped the drawing into her file. She proceeded to hand Grace a thick packet with multicolored section markers. The cover looked like a stock photo of a night sky. Among the glossy stars, bright yellow letters spelled out, “Changing Your Relationship with Sleep.”



Grace bit down on her tongue to keep a chuckle from escaping. The typography felt condescending. She heard the letters mocking her inability to do such a simple thing. She slipped it into her bag, struggling to meet the doctor's curious eyes.

"I'm really glad you came in today. Why don't you stop by the front desk and schedule a second session for next week? The packet talks about some great habits and techniques you can try before we formulate a treatment plan," Dr. Holland said, scribbling a few extra notes onto her yellow pad. Grace thanked her with a small smile, shook her hand, and walked out. Her manager would not be happy that Grace was leaving work early again, so she scheduled the appointment for Tuesday. That was the day he left early to pick up his daughter from school.

On the way out, she noticed that next to the reception desk was a small shelf of supplements and remedies for sale. A purple cap caught her eye. Melatonin. Her skin bristled. She definitely would not be trying that again. Outside, the pavement glistened from the misty rain that had been falling when she arrived at the office. Plump, gray clouds hung in the sky, waiting for another moment to squeeze themselves free of a few more drops. The gray used to comfort Grace; she liked wearing jeans, flannel shirts, and Bean boots. Now she wished for warmer weather. When she got into her car, she rested her head on the steering wheel. Maybe she should have said more, but something about the doctor had stopped her. Dr. Holland was meticulous; she jotted down nearly every word that left Grace's mouth. At first, the doctor seemed intent to help her, but her eyebrows betrayed her. When Dr. Holland first saw Grace's drawing, the arch of her eyebrow jumped up. The arch was a signal, telling Grace that the more detail Grace revealed, the more she transformed from patient to specimen. As Grace contemplated whether she would show up for her second appointment, her phone rang.

"How was the doctor, hun? What was her name again?"

"Dr. Holland?"

"Yes! Dr. Holland! Wasn't she just fantastic?"

"Yeah, she was great, Mom," Grace said. She closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose; it was the only habit she had picked up from her mother.

"You'll start sleeping through the night again in no time! My friend Karen said that Dr. Holland really—"

"Mom? Can we talk about this later? I have a deadline next Thursday." Grace and her mother exchanged quick goodbyes, and she started to head home. Usually, she hated driving over the Montlake Cut, but today the rattling jolted her from dozing off. As she drove

across the bridge and out of the city, she could see the trees reaching further into the sky, reflecting on the gray water of Lake Washington. After passing under the toll scanner, the trees' thick needles began to hide the daylight. Grace sucked in a deep breath and turned up the car stereo, hoping the pounding of the music would keep her eyelids from slipping closed. The roads started to slope up and down hills as she traveled home, and she took a sip from her water bottle to calm her nauseous stomach.

Her house was small, only one story. The pale yellow paint looked like it was oozing between the few gaps in the trees. Ryan had painted it in August; he had talked her into the color. November's gray cast made the color look sickly instead of sunny. Little specks and sprays still splattered the driveway from when he had dropped the paint cans. She could never fully clean the yellow smear that his tires had left as he sped away. The driveway looked like a half-assed abstract art project. Each house in the neighborhood had its own miniature forest around its lot. She had liked the scent of fresh pine; it smelled better than any artisan candle she could buy in Belltown. Nowadays, she wished the house had been built with the new wave of homes where they cleared all the trees to make room for more stories and more sunlight. The only reason she lived there was that her grandmother needed to live in the senior living center and refused to sell the little place. Since Grace was on a budget and the commute was only semi-awful to work, she volunteered to look after it. To read the full story, visit our website at <https://hilltopicssmu.wordpress.com/>.

At first, nothing  
rumblings, rumors

some people fearing  
others unhearing

the rumblings grew louder  
and all at once

life as we knew it  
became something else

people were dying  
yet others kept trying

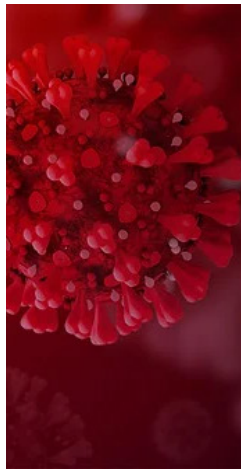
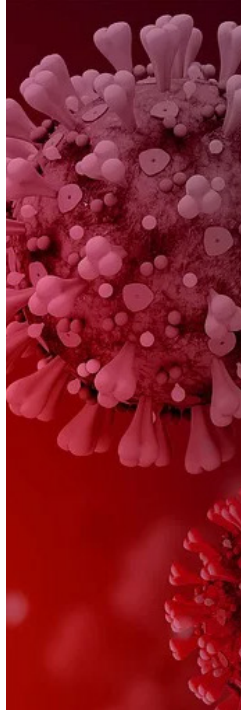
to find a way to survive  
in quarantine of the mind

everything closed  
most of all, minds

as plans that were made  
democracy could not abide

some turned to measures  
too extreme to mention

tell me, which is worse,  
disease or prevention?



# ANOTHER COVID POEM

**Caroline Roman**

# More Bitter Than Sweet:

SECRECY IN TROILUS AND CRISEYDE

*by Chaudhry Hameed*

In Geoffrey Chaucer's fourteenth-century epic, *Troilus and Criseyde*, secrecy fulfills the double purpose of heightening the experience of love and protecting reputation. The issue of reputation is a major theme of the poem that actually arises at the work's very onset. In the proem to Book I, the unloved narrator, who describes himself as the servant of the servants of the God of Love (I.15), asks his audience, "ye loveres" (I.22), to pray "for hem that falsly ben apeired/ [t]horugh wikked tonges, be it he or she" (I.38-9). The affair of *Troilus and Criseyde* nevertheless demonstrates how secrecy and privacy can not only intersect and work together to preserve a public reading of name, honor, and reputation but also increase the intensity of love in the courtly tradition. According to Allen J. Frantzen in *Troilus and Criseyde: the Poem and the Frame*, secrecy is a requirement for the code of courtly love "set forth by Andreas Capellanus: 'When made public love rarely endures'" (65-66). To adhere to the tenet of secrecy and also to save each other's reputations, the lovers must rely on Pandarus, a go-between, "to arrange their meetings and...to manufacture pretenses to avoid attracting attention" (Frantzen 66). In *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: Troilus and Criseyde*, Barry Windeatt argues that secrecy "becomes one of the most important parts of [Troilus's] 'observaunce' and 'service' as [Criseyde's] lover" (242). Secrecy is necessary to Troilus to maintain the courtly aspect of his love and to ensure his lady's honor, which a knight like himself ought to regard higher than his own life (IV.569-71). Secrecy is motivational in the sense that it encourages Troilus and Criseyde to realize the fin'amors ideal, and is simultaneously practical because it keeps the lovers out of scandal while they attempt to attain that selfsame standard of perfection. However, the compulsion for secrecy ultimately leads to the affair's downfall. Though secrecy is the strength of the affair, it is also its weakness and vulnerability (Windeatt 243). In fact, it is the fatal flaw, or, to use an expression apt to the Trojan War, the Achilles heel, of the relationship. As Criseyde discovers in the Greek encampment, the immediate need for pragmatic self-preservation in a martial society that does not afford women honor and reputation in their own right and cannot foster love in a courtly light demands her betrayal of Troilus and her renunciation and sacrifice of secrecy in a new affair with Diomedes.

In the introduction to his translation of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Barry Windeatt shares that Chaucer gives his Criseyde “a much higher social status than her prototypes: she is mistress of a palatial household, and enjoys the grandest social connections” (XXX). Her elevated “estat” necessarily comes with “a keen concern for what society will say of her, for her honour and good name” (Windeatt XXX). Criseyde considers potential social repercussions before she commits actions, such as entering into her affair with Troilus. However, before that, at the beginning of the poem, “hevenyssh perfit” (I.104) Criseyde finds herself and her reputation in a perilous situation, for her father, the soothsayer Calkas, has deserted both her and Troy to help the Greeks. With no male authority left to protect her — she is already widowed (I.97) — Criseyde’s position in Troy’s patriarchal society is compromised. To add to this problem, it does not help that her father is a traitor, a maddening reality that she is constantly reminded of (I.106-8). Although she has been “unwist of [hire fadres] false and wikked dede” (I.93), the mob wishes to burn her alive (I.90-1), and she is “ful sore in drede” for her life (I.95). Having friends in high places, however, she is able to personally beg Prince Hector for mercy (I.112), who has pity on her guiltless predicament (I.113-4). In “Troilus’ Swoon,” Jill Mann argues that Criseyde needs Hector’s protection “in order to maintain any position in Trojan society at all” (320), for his status as heir to King Priam and military commander of Troy carries immense political weight. Hector permits her to remain safely in Troy, and he guarantees her honor (I.117-23). In return, Criseyde lives quietly and holds “hir stille” (I.126). With Hector’s intervention, Criseyde hence maintains not only her privileged station in life (I.127-30) but also her reputation: Criseyde is “both of yonge and olde/ [f]ul wel biloved, and wel men of hir [tellen]” (I.130-1).

In spite of the larger frame of war, the Trojans do not forgo their customs (I.148-50), and their society remains more or less stable. For instance, Trojans from of all walks of life (I.167) still observe the traditional festival of Palladium (I.160-1). It is during these annual rites that “fierse and proude” (I.225) Troilus, “[t]hat was the kyng Priamus sone of Troye” (I.2), swaggers about the temple of Palladium with his retinue of fellow young knights, mocking of love and lovers (I.190-205). However, Troilus’s irreverence towards his amorous servants (I.206-10) provokes the God of Love, who consequently makes Troilus “wax sodeynly moost subgit unto love” (I.231) with just one look at Criseyde (I.229). Troilus’s initial pressing need for secrecy in this comical twist of fate is to spare himself from others’ ridicule. As a (forcefully) “converted scorner of love” (Frantzen 59), Troilus knows that if his “hidde sorwe iblowe on brede, / [he] shal byjaped ben a thousand tyme/ [m]ore than that fol of whos folie men ryme” (I.530-2). Thus, his dissimulation starts immediately. Though overwhelmed by the sight of Criseyde (I.274), he sighs quietly “lest men myghte hym here” (I.279) and resumes “his firste pleyng chere” (I.279-80). To help him maintain his previous manner and his desire, he only looks at her occasionally and furtively (I.311-5).

# The Faces of Vickery Meadow

## Lorien Melnick

For the past year, I have lived in a small apartment in a corner of Vickery Meadow, one of Dallas' most diverse neighborhoods. Walking the streets of Vickery Meadow reveals dozens of apartment complexes and ethnic restaurants, signs of the neighborhood's large immigrant community: 33.1% of the population immigrated from another country (U.S. Census Bureau). This semester, in an attempt to learn more about my neighbors, I interviewed three people who help capture what life in Vickery Meadow is like. Here are pieces of their stories.

## Anil Lama Pakhrin's Ticket to Dallas

Anil Lama Pakhrin won the lottery in 2013, and it changed his life.

But Pakhrin hadn't scratched off a lottery ticket from a kiosk or won a million dollars. Instead, he won the Electronic Diversity Visa Lottery in his third year of entering. With his Diversity Visa in hand, Pakhrin immigrated to the United States on June 25th, 2013.

"Nepal is my country," explained Pakhrin. "Kathmandu is my birthplace."

When Pakhrin arrived in northeast Dallas, he met his aunt and uncle to begin his new life. One struggle was the language barrier. Pakhrin spoke

only a little English.

"I could explain, but I was not fluent, and I could speak only the simple words," said Pakhrin, who also speaks Nepali and the Lama language, Tamang.

**"DURING CLASS, LOPEZ ALWAYS HAD AN ANSWER READY. HER ENGLISH TEACHER, STEPHANIE HALEY, CALLED HER A STAR STUDENT.**

**'IF SHE EVER LEAVES, I HAVE TO QUIT,' JOKED HALEY."**

Despite the challenges, he immediately found a job in an Indian restaurant, and four months later, he moved to his current job at Dante's Italian Eatery. Work provided Pakhrin with a community; he made friends with his coworkers, who also came from Nepal.

"Except that, I don't know any people," Pakhrin said. But even though he isn't close with his neighbors, he likes his apartment, which he describes as, "very good, safe, quiet" with "good facilities, amenities, a good park."

Vickery Meadow has been

Pakhrin's home for almost seven years. He lives with his wife and two daughters, and his older daughter attends Dan D. Rogers Elementary School. His younger daughter, an adorable

toddler, hangs onto his hand while Pakhrin explains how one lottery gave him a whole new world of opportunities.

## Ana Lopez: Literacy Achieves' Star Student

Across the street from Ana Lopez's brand-new American apartment, she saw a school. She didn't yet know that she would spend six years learning English there, or how much she would love it.

Lopez and her husband moved from Zacatecas, Mexico to Vickery Meadow in Dallas 13 years ago.

"I moved here because I was looking for better opportunities for jobs, better education for my family," Lopez said. "This is a good country for this."

But when she arrived, she discovered how difficult communication would be. Her husband spoke a little English, but Lopez knew almost nothing.

"It was very, very hard for me," she said, reminiscing

about that time: "We can't communicate, we can't say anything, we can't read anything, we can't express anything."

The school across the street, Literacy Achieves, changed things for Lopez. When she first began attending English-speaking classes, she was placed in Level 1A, the beginner level. Over six years, Lopez has worked her way up to Level 4, the advanced class, and her English rolls off her tongue.

"This is my second home right here," Lopez said, look-

ing around the small classroom from her front-row desk. "I feel fantastic when I am here because all the teachers...they are fantastic. I am glad to stay in this school."

During class, Lopez always had an answer ready. Her English teacher, Stephanie Haley, called her a star student.

"If she ever leaves, I have to quit," joked Haley.

Lopez proudly explained that her sons, who were born in the United States and who now attend Sam Tasby Middle School, are also bilingual. The family now speaks both Spanish and English, and laughing, Lopez recounts trying to convince her husband to attend Literacy Achieves with her. He isn't on board yet, but like countless other students, the school has helped Lopez in indescribable ways.

To read the full article, visit our website, <https://hilltopicsmu.wordpress.com/>.



# [ B R A C K E T S ]

By Ahmed  
Muhammad

Nowadays crime pays like a full-time job;  
dictations of morality, stories of right and wrong and wrong and right  
wrote off untrue, since your mother isn't with you,  
and her prayer beads and mats wear by all the Dust.

dust—accumulating Dust—seething!  
Leering! Dreadfully! ice in your scalp;  
dust Brittle to the touch, but  
remembrance of God wasn't burning much.

It's Friday though!  
Along drowns the weekend, and you hear  
Musicians everywhere ravel about the week's end.  
In every cry of every rapper,  
In every rapper's every cry,  
frozen blood shattered sharper than Glass Parades in the wind.

But most, through the Twilight Dust you hear,  
the vengeance in every artist of war,  
the hope in every mother forevermore,  
Silenced! In the beckoning of Dust, under clear Darke skies.

From which we were created,  
in which we will return,  
from which we will rise again,  
another time, forevermore.

It's Friday though! How could you forget—  
wipe your tears away—grab your apron and glasses,  
and a pen! Very important!  
How could you forget you have to file your taxes?


# ( D A M N . ) ]

<sup>1</sup> See "Brackets" by Jermaine Cole and DAMN by Kendrick Lamar



# *A Restful Fire*

By Ahmed Muhammad



Pomegranate dries in the evening sun.  
Rivers wrap around your throat behind tree stumps so shy to the sight of something as pure as  
Water bestowed from the heavens above—you found this so annoying. you've always found this  
to be the worst thing: Silent Negligence. against all faith, you've always found the smirking eyes  
of snakes nauseating, the consistency of hunger tantalizing, greed inevitable, ruth truthful.  
pomegranate stains your shirt as you take slow bites careful not to stare at the Sun.  
why would you anger It?  
it's just bad luck.  
so when the Moon ignites the air with dissidence and the gusts Howl for acceptance,  
fixate—how heavy your lungs weigh in your heart—until you are stuck struggling in Moonlight,  
and all you may do is



PHOTO BY BENIGNO HOYUELA ON UNSPLASH



# EVENING DRIVE

Leia Hannum

---

To the Q-shaped Pothole on Pacific Blvd,

Sometimes I wish you were still here.  
I know I swore blood when you careened my sacred vehicle,  
but it'd be nice to see a familiar face,  
'specially this time of year.

Last night, I drove a man and a  
boy, who whispered,  
"I could just devour  
those crinkles in the corners  
of your eyes."

I dropped them off at Bubba Gump.

That was after the city stuffed you silly  
with concrete (took 'em long enough).  
cranking down the window now I guess I feel a little sad passing by,  
But no hard feelings, right?

You're not missing much, anyway.  
Recently there's been a kind of stink,  
I think it's coming from underground. Real sweet and rotten,  
bathing the streets and smelling like an unwashed—

—HEY, California asshole!  
Stop your staring,  
it's just a taxi cab.

# HAVE TO PEE

Leia Hannum

---

Boy oh boy oh boy do I wish  
I could buy another bladder  
from the black market or maybe Amazon Prime.  
I might piss my pants (yet again)—  
Four in five economists agree that  
there's a scarcity of space  
in my bladder sac.  
I could buy a diaper,  
but no one would like that.  
Could stop drinking water,  
but I'd die, probably,  
in two or three days.  
Don't want to be called Piss Boy again.  
"Here comes Piss Boy!"  
Here he comes.

# CONVERSATIONS

Leia Hannum

---

Flaming lips,  
They named a street  
Dante's Inferno,  
or was it Flaming Lips Lane?  
Somebody (on the street)  
had Erykah Badu's phone number.

Gonna buy a plant  
and see if I can keep it alive  
this time around.

Can you make soup  
with a two-week old pumpkin?  
If not, can you shellac it  
with glue  
instead?

This man from San Fransisco  
wasn't actually a smoker,  
but every New Year's Eve would say  
that he's a smoker  
and tell the room he was quitting  
for tax purposes.

And the first thing he says is  
"It's not my weed!"

# West Texas

Leia Hannum

---

I rest,

a place pickled in heat.  
Cars pass close and  
make no sound.

Luxury eco yurts—  
ten cents a night.

I take my key from the legless receptionist.

Lover's Landfill—  
a hotspot on Sunday.

Samsung Galaxy windpipes rattle like fluid-filled lungs.

In air cream-thick

past cars glowing nigh,  
tumbleweed on, traveller.

Weed, tumble by.

RACHEL LEWIS

# *The Leftovers*

Grass-blades lap at our calves and hip bones,  
spur us with their dewpoint sweat

.The ghost lights of the air  
fizzle calmly  
from petal to stalk to blade,

the choreography of a faerie suite  
known only to their haunted nova hearts.

Tepid storm-clouds  
descend,  
yearn to suffocate

our tracheas with vapor  
and stroke our spidered veins  
with an electric current.

We are fog-bound,  
adrift in a sea of spun green silk,

astrolabe broken,  
nothing left to guide  
us, the leftovers,

but the mulched earth  
familiar underfoot,

the memory of patchouli smoke  
and sticky acai,

and Polaris  
through the sticky haze  
of a thunderstorm cell.



Photo by Marten Bjork on Unsplash



# six arils

**Rachel Lewis**

shear the calyx  
claw the rind  
plant a prayer  
at her pale feet

the shoot  
sickly drab youth  
reach    desperate roots

snake up her ankles  
graze her shin

grow then wilt  
feed anew  
diminish

nectar and soaked skin  
ambrosia in the crevices  
of molars

plagued by arils  
fresh and gleaming

bloody  
dripping

drip    drip  
dripping

on mosaicked  
glass

purple neon flows through glass  
hisses and fizzes and hums  
along to the jukebox in the mold-besieged corner

scrape scratch  
metal on bone-white ceramic plates  
    stained with eight decades  
    of sunny-side eggs  
    and bacon fat gristle

questionable sticky patches on the Formica laminate  
a minefield of last hour's leftovers  
seeking asylum on exposed wrist-flesh

craters smelted from the heat of plates' bellies  
house grime and . . . is that last week's lunch special?

can I get some cleaner over here?  
thank you for spraying ammonia in my face  
a searing sugar and corn syrup candy coating  
for my esophagus and lungs

flocked glass filters  
    the grand vista—a Ruscha gas station  
    into a deckled edge postcard

truckers rest against the warm grilles of their radiators  
closest they'll get to the warmth of their wives' navels  
    for the next week

they breathe in the mist-clouds  
with fluorescent signage halo phenomena  
offer a half-smoked Camel  
and an eroding Styrofoam cup  
    for a raise  
    for a different occupation  
for their Belle or Margaret or Sherrie

“would you like a refill of stale coffee? it's on the house,  
creeps up your nasal cavity and stays for the night”

my head is not a hostel

a soft crash resigned fuck!  
past the swinging not so stainless-steel traffic doors of the kitchen

the booth's vinyl  
engraved with sweat and skin cells and the pattern of pores  
nips at my bare thighs

something is burning in the kitchen  
spattered grease  
on a blackened to hell burner  
or it could be the fries  
basking in their infernal brimstone

four inches of canola oil  
    at three hundred- and twenty-five-degrees Fahrenheit  
just shy of a book-burning bonfire

“refill?”



# FILLING STATION

Rachel Lewis

# The Shadow of the Sun

by Lawson Lewis

See the leaves as they dance along the branches,  
Circling the wind, but at its will,  
And with the grace of the hummingbirds  
Who hum and hover below;

See the branches as they dance among the tree,  
Crowded friction,  
On a frictionless plane,  
Reveling in their reach towards a ceaseless sun;

See, too, the trees as they dance among the forest,  
The great ballroom of dirt,  
And dirty dancers, all,  
Lost in the love of their own seed;

See the forest, then, as it dances  
In a wind unseen,  
Yet felt by all,  
Lost in the grace of a gentle breeze;

And the wind, too, dances,  
Lost in the ceaseless changes  
Of an unknowable conscience,  
Forces better left unseen for fear of what lies in the dark:  
The heart of God,  
Made flesh in the eternal dance of silence;

And you, dancing too,  
In this world of half illumination,  
With light in inches,  
And darkness in droves.

And I,  
Dancing in the ignorance,  
Of what is and what is yet to come.

And so we dance, dancers all,  
Marionettes pulled by strings in the sky;

But knowing, as the acorn,  
We have our part in this play;

Knowing, as the tree,  
The length of our limbs;

Knowing, as the leaf,  
The warmth of the sun above;

Knowing, as the wind,  
The utter randomness of it all.

And so we dance, dancers all,  
You, me, and the tree,  
Lost in the heat of a sun shadowed by starlight.

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Lawson Lewis

Devon walked with a nail in his skull.  
6 inches long and 5 inches deep,  
He was spinal tapped:  
Scarred to shiver senses  
Which would rather lay unstirred.

On his nail he'd pull and pull,  
"Get out of my fucking head",  
Until the pain was too much,  
"Get out of my fucking head",  
Only his skin seemed to pull with it,  
"Get out of my fucking head",  
So he quit trying.

Occasionally it would ooze,  
Pus from a pus-filled pocket,  
Dripping down his neck to pool  
In the pool behind his knees.

It would tingle,  
Be tugged on by family and friend and doctor  
Without them noticing.  
But Devon noticed,  
Suffering slights that only he could see.

And then one day,  
Devon had had enough.  
He bit the bullet and pulled the plug,  
Yanked out his spinal tap with all his might.  
He might regret it,  
But in that moment,  
he felt bliss.

# Broken Bonds

Nicole Kiser

---

I had a friend.

With eyes like diamonds and skin like leather,  
I thought she was invincible...

I was wrong.

She spent over half her life trying to evade the demons that chased after her;  
When she finally got tired of running,  
She turned to the monsters clawing at her ankle and...

Embraced them.

She let the demons clamp their jaws around her limbs and tug on her joints,  
Shattering her soul in a million different directions  
Until all she wanted was the sweet relief of release...

And she tried everything.

Poetry shaded too dark for her young stature,  
Artwork so tragically beautiful, others wept in its presence,  
Music stained with more melancholy than melody.

And when her pain grew too wild to be expressed even there,  
She turned to more visceral pleasures...

Tilting the world into an uneven blur,  
Softening hard truths with tactile touches,  
Making boundaries just to break them.

Then,  
When it all failed,  
The pills that deadened everything brushing even a piece of her soul.

I had a friend.

Whose eyes had so many facets,  
She could only see herself in fractured shards.

# Bury Me Shallow

Emma Jenevein

---

Bury me shallow, no deeper than the roots  
of the dogwood tree that floods St. Clare's Street  
with lemonade blossoms each spring.

Sew me a shroud all the colors of the dusk  
embroidered with begonia, sweet pea, and rust-  
dyed camellias for warning, farewell, and luck.

Braid my hair with satin ribbons and switchgrass.  
Hang that painted locket round my neck so that I'll  
never forget your tired eyes, your dimpled throat,

your too-high heels, and your rasp of a laugh. Lay  
me down in a cherrywood box with velvet lining  
and iron locks. Hide my fiddle 'neath the churchyard  
gate.

Wade out into the cottonmouth's creek and  
fetch me a skipping stone. Listen to the whispering  
Moon and remember how the bullfrogs used to croon

On those nights when we slipped out the bedroom  
window and down the gutter spout. Tell me a bedtime  
story about the outlaw queen and her maiden fair.  
Tell me you love me, you love me, you love me, my  
dear.

Bury me shallow

Emma Jenevein

---

back in February  
but we've been dragging  
our feet because the cinderblocks tied to our ankles  
won't pass through airport security

and the thought of you

is just so tremendously  
so stupendously  
iron-board heavy  
and oil-spill thick

it is seeping into the walls  
into the flesh  
of my liver (she works too hard)  
and my gallbladder  
who has been awarded employee of the month  
for her quota-wrecking record-breaking production of bile  
until I am permeated  
supersaturated  
the markets of my organs have  
flooded  
and everybody owns a refrigerator

## THE SEAMSTRESS'S DAUGHTER

Emma Jenevein

---

once upon a time a girl  
stood up in her highchair and shouted  
at her mother to look at me!

and that memory

as bacon grease  
from a wrung-out sponge

it oozes out through my pores  
glistening  
it slicks my skin and when I open a door  
shake a hand  
kiss a baby's forehead  
some residue remains  
sticky as blackberry jam on a toddler's cheeks in summertime

I am become a Typhoid Mary  
a blighted vector  
a plague rat

you'll miss me when the microfibers are packing your lungs  
I always dress in linen and I tailor my own clothes

## KATE MULLANY TOLD US TO UNIONIZE

Emma Jenevein

---

Are you still alive then? I've forgotten  
who's stuck around and  
who's feeding the worms  
belowground these days.  
Still too hot in Bywater.  
I walked to the bookstore the other day.  
My face near about melted off,  
and the boy at the register kept  
gnawing on his nails. Took  
too long to get up the stairs, so  
he offered me a hand. I found an  
old copy of that Kinsey book we used  
to love. The cover is a bit worn, but  
there's some gold left on the spine  
and an embossed vine winding  
round the title.

Do you still see Lisbeth at the grocery sometimes?  
She was the one who lent it to me  
back then when the words  
were still new and reading them  
felt like an infraction, a mutiny  
just waiting to happen. The flame of  
revolution burned fierce in my breast  
every time I turned a page or wrote  
a note in the margins.  
Even now, holding this book—  
and it not even the book—I can feel  
Sister Kathy's red nails  
digging into the skin under my collarbone  
as she stomps out my cigarette and  
drags me from the bathroom stall.  
We were a guerrilla force in plaid uniform.

## TO SHIRLEY

Does she still live in that house  
with the mint-green shutters? I'm asking  
because she won't return my letters.  
It's been some time since we last  
spoke, and I imagine I must  
have the wrong address.  
Our war games went too far  
once, but I hope she won't  
hold that against me anymore.  
It's easy to keep a feud going  
after you've lost the memory  
of why it began. But you wouldn't know  
how those small slights fester under  
the skin. You have ever been  
the pacifier, the peacemaker. Please  
send a picture of Ava and Isabel  
in your next letter.  
I have always envied you  
your grandchildren.



# HUMANS

Kevin Wang

*who cut their wrists three times successively unsuccessfully, gave up and were forced to open antique stores where they thought they were growing old and cried*

*I.*

On the bus ride, I played imaginary tic-tac-toe on the glass window between my brother and the outside world that slipped behind us.

I rested my head on his shoulder while leaning in and reaching my arm across to gently trace my “O”

on the edge of the fog that reluctantly formed as he breathed the board to life. I fixed my eyes on it, watching the landscape that entered and escaped.

The road sign—displaying the towns, cities, and doomed destinations which I could not recognize—stayed and baptized my eyes for seconds until the traffic moved again and my brother declared his victory with his “X”

on the top right corner of the faded board juxtaposed with the condescending eagle far across the horizon.

*You said, mama, the ranch would be our destination.*

and I believed you. As the bus advanced, the terrain of the unforgiving journey greeted me and told me that the ranch had changed, not how I thought I knew it.

The eyes of the child sitting in the row behind us met mine between the stained cushions of the seats, and they chastised my smile as I fancied myself winning the imaginary game.

Those eyes, a year or two younger than mine, howled that life was neither a game nor a trip.

The nebulous pupils beckoned me to recognize and understand fear—I would see them every night.

# II.

The door is closing. It is time to leave.  
The bus left us. And we stood still among  
confused souls looking for their final stop.  
Locals, with kids beside them, hurried past  
without allowing a sympathetic glance.  
Mama began to walk, not telling us  
where we would go. The crowds vanished, appeared,  
dispersed, gathered. Familiar faces soon  
faded away and searched for other fates.  
Before I could remember anything,  
we were alone, treading deserted soil  
and rotten country. Muddy water coated  
my feet and bathed me as if spirits would  
descend and ask my mama where she planned  
to take her children, two of them, still young.  
One cried—one walked. One dragged—one stared. Both doomed.

Under thick vegetations, water dripped  
and ran along my cheeks, leaving cold trails  
of grainy aftermath behind before  
another drop would kiss and rape. Across  
the valley, border guards with poker face  
patrolled the artificial boundary of  
realities. We crouched upon the land  
we knew: the only land I knew, I loved, I missed.  
Mama would never tell us why she held  
our hands and took us where we thought we knew.  
The chill, the smell of gasoline, the mud  
seeping through shoes and socks, the pouring rain,  
the fear while waiting for her words, all foreign.  
*The guards are leaving. It is time to go.*

# III.

Human:

I want it out. I will say it again: I want it out. Do you hear me? Touch where my flesh  
and my blood blurs and where my feeling and my numbness kiss. Tell me, that you feel  
what I can't feel. Tell me, that you see my blood dripping, my heart merely pounding,  
and my life ending. Put your hand on me please, let me feel you and let me know that  
I'm real; I'm alive; I'm not a phantom for the past six years; I'm the goddamn loser  
whom I see and I hate.

Fear:

No. I can neither let you feel me nor let me touch you. I watch you, every day after that bus ride, every night that you lay awake and cry, every drop of tear you shed and hold back, every second that you turn your head and hide your eyes, every word that attacks and mutilates you, every face that spits and laughs at you, every blood stain on that knife blade, every wound that heals and heals and heals but never really does. I can only stand back and watch. I will watch you disintegrate, every part of you shattering, dissolving, and forever not remembering.

Human:

I'm tired, let me out. Free me from this cage where I have feelings called numbness, memories called history, family called enemies. Lend me your hand, please. Allow me to feel my pain, to face it, and to let it have me and eat me. Do you know: when I heard these words, I understood, every one of them? People, those I loved and trusted, called me traitor, enemy, foreigner, and loser. Were you watching me? Why did you not step in and release me? Why did you allow my thoughts to overtake me because I did not know how to think? Why did you not tell me that I was feeling you instead of nothing? You were there and destroyed me, but I wanted you. At least, you were the only thing I had.

Fear:

You are wrong, so wrong. I am not your enemy. I had to watch. I had to push you into your deepest regrets, your shame, and your worst reactions. I was there all these time, and you knew it. And I still am. Because I love you, for you are a human who first encountered the real world on that bus ride, was baptized into hell in the muddy rain under the bushes, and was dragged through your adolescence holding back your most animalistic desire to howl and to feel. I cannot speak; I cannot reveal myself; I cannot even whisper what I see in your dreams. But I was there with you, protecting you, because I knew you wanted to feel, to find me and say that you knew me, and to eventually destroy me. I remember you looked me in the eyes on the bus between the stained seats with your innocent grin. Did I not tell you about me, about life, and about your days ahead? I wanted you to know me, to face me, to conquer me, and eventually to accept me because only then could I protect you against the world, the words that hurt, the people that betray, and the hearts that break. Come, you and I, let us go then. The sun is rising. It is time to sleep.

# IV.

Foreign words flooded me. Foreign tongues  
attacked me. I sat  
in the classroom, daydreaming of  
what I used to understand.

Math equations remained unchanged,  
but which textbook taught laws and theorems  
about families and betrayal?

One plus one never equals two—  
I wanted to raise my hand and say it in my native tongue.  
It would be one and one—with two broken hearts,  
some broken children, and one broken world.

The bell rang.

I would hide in the bathroom.



# **STAFF AND CONTRIBUTORS**

## **EDITORS-IN-CHIEF**

Nicole Kiser and Lorien Melnick

## **ONLINE EDITORS**

Alec Masons and Thomas Park with some help from Adam Czarnik

## **LAYOUT EDITORS**

Mena Bahram and Sydney Sagehorn

## **SOCIAL MEDIA COORDINATOR**

Daniel Jacobs

## **LEAD COPYEDITORS**

Clare Ennis and Maria Katsulos

## **COVER ART**

Rachel Lewis