

# BEMIDJI

STATE UNIVERSITY



HONORS PROGRAM

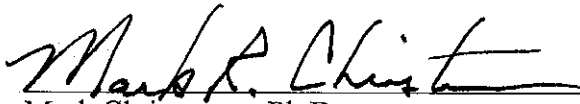
Bemidji State University

Honors Program

Love in the Time of Climate Change

by

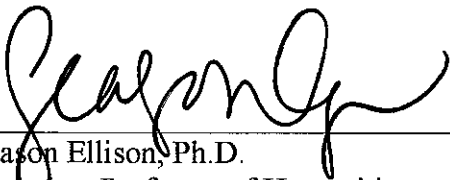
alex goehring



Mark Christensen, Ph.D.  
Professor of English

Date:

11/15/2021



Season Ellison, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Humanities  
Director of Honors and Liberal Education Programs

Date:

11/15/2021



Gary Rees, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of English

Date:

11/12/2021

**Table of Contents:**

Amidst	Page 3
The Holy Ghost	Page 18
Foggy	Page 20
Revolutionary	Page 22
Coincidence	Page 23
Appendix: A Proposal for a Future Pastiche	Page 30

## Amidst

A notification from Amine saying that he is about to arrive. A warm steering wheel, foot off the pedals, finishing a song before getting out of the car.

I look out at the sidewalk near the entrance to Sara's Restaurant wondering if I'll recognize Amine as he walks by.

I have my best outfit on, a soft yellow t-shirt and green chinos.

I've never done this before, so I'm a little nervous.

I try to brush it off by thinking about the song crackling over my busted radio, A World Alone by Lorde. (One of my favorites).

There is the title which suggests that if the whole world is alone, you're not alone in being lonely. Connection from disconnection.

There are recorded conversations embedded throughout that try to cover up Lorde's voice. There is a line progression from "we're biting our nails/ you're biting my lip/I'm biting my tongue" that reminds us of how many different meanings a bite can take on--anxiety, sex, repression--and using that quirk of language to carry the story.

The basic premise of the song is that the singer is alone despite having people around her, but the song itself is not lonely. There is this nonverbal vocalization that she does (you could also describe it as an ooh'ing) that travels through the entire song, progressing from bruised and lonely at the beginning to reflective, almost tranquil at the bridge, to bruised and defiant at the end. It's a subtle change but proves that being alone does not have to be tragic...it can be empowering.

I don't know how to feel about this. Especially in the context of going on a date.

ANYWAYS

I have a date with a boy who will likely be here any minute.

I try to refresh my memory of what I know about him:

- 18, pronouns he/they. Looking for a serious relationship
- Muslim which, according to him, can mean very many different things depending on the person. But for him, it means that he prays five times a day, goes to the mosque with his family on Fridays and usually every other day too, and he stays halal. Celebrates a mix of American, Tunisian, and religious holidays
- Currently a senior. After graduating, he is planning to go to UCLA to study marine biology.
- Moved around a lot. Parents are from Tunis, but he was born in Miami where his mom worked in communications for a big company. Also lived in Queens and Juneau--always near the ocean until now.
- Parents are separated but are on good terms with each other.
- He loves cats, but has trouble connecting with dogs
- Favorite color sky blue
- Favorite flavor: chocolate
- Biggest fear: public speaking.

Hopefully, that is enough to start a conversation.

*Hopefully*

I look at my phone again, no message. Maybe he's already here?

I look through my window at the sidewalk in front of Sara's Restaurant.

Nothing.

Lorde sings about mortality via train crashes. Something to do with fate or fatalism or something. I don't know.

*Are the things I do destined, or could I just end up alone and unhappy?*

I don't know if this relates to the song. I'm having trouble thinking deeply right now.

I see him. Medium height, a little shorter than I had thought, with olive skin and slightly curly, short hair. I notice he's wearing a white button up shirt that looks 2 sizes too big for him. He's cute. I try not to panic and fail miserably.

He walks into the building. I realize I was too enraptured by how he looked to surmise anything about how he was feeling. Was he nervous? Was he calm? From our conversations on Instagram, he seems like the sort of person who would be panicking, but I don't know.

I need to get going so I take a deep breath, turn off the music, then convince my legs to walk smoothly across the lot, and my hands to push open the door.

Inside, there are bright lights and a host's station where a white woman in a hijab can be seen tapping furiously at her phone screen in a pattern that suggests she is playing a game. To her left, there are classy black tables with mismatched chairs and a row of booths by a window. I can't see Amine, though, so I approach the woman. Without looking up from her phone, she says "Give me two seconds, I'm about to beat my high score." I nod, even though she can't see, and observe how intently her gaze holds the phone.

Several moments go by as I begin to feel a deep sense of pre-date dread fill my body. I consider leaving, but before I can, she looks up at me with a nod.

"Did you win?" I ask, figuring it is polite.

"No," she says. "One point away from breaking my high score though, so I will have to try again later." She gives me a wry smile, then looks me up and down. "You're young--

probably in high school--and look so nervous I'm worried I may need to call an ambulance." she trails off, and I look mortified. She laughs, not unkindly. "Do you want to talk about why?"

I shake my head slightly. She reads me, then nods and reaches for a menu. "Table for one?" she asks.

I shake my head again, somewhat uncertain of how to phrase what I need to say without revealing that I am a man who dates men, or that before coming here I practiced having a conversation with myself in my bathroom mirror like an absolute total weirdo.

"No, I'm here to meet someone, a friend actually." Her eyebrow raises slightly when I say the word friend, so I don't know if she believes me. I try to keep my voice steady, convincing. "He should have just come in, but I don't know where he's sitting."

"Amine, yes? He just came in and sat near the window with the best view of the parking lot." She laughs slightly, then brushes it off. "I can take you to him if you like."

She bites her lip, thinking, then continues. "He was wearing the only button up shirt he owns and looked so nervous that I'm surprised he could even walk. Maybe even more nervous than you are," she makes a gesture with her hand at me, then softens her expression. "I understand you may not want to reveal your intentions to a stranger, maybe especially to a woman who is Hijabi. But I know my brother. I know that he does not see you as just a friend or a hookup." She smiles grimly. "If that is your intention, leave now before I have to metaphorically put cyanide in your food, okay?"

I nod in a way that I hope clarifies my intentions. Amine has a sister? He was nervous? For some reason, that makes me feel a bit less terrified. It also makes me feel warm.

"Side note," she says, while walking around the host's station, "check your assumptions about me."

“Sorry,” I say, realizing my mistake. “Won’t happen again.”

She wrinkles her nose at me, and smiles. “Good. Come with me.”

We find Amine sitting in the back corner of a booth, nervously drinking from his water glass. He notices us

“Here he is,” she says, flourishing her hand like a presenter. “Don’t get pregnant,” she says as she looks directly at her brother who looks like he wants to fade into nonexistence. She laughs and then walks away.

I walk over, unsure of how to follow up the focused energy of his sister. Amine looks positively mortified but also, weirdly happy.

“Your sister is an interesting person,” I say, sitting down in the booth across from him.

“I told her to be cool,” he says, not quite meeting my gaze.

“Well,” I say while adjusting myself in the seat, “of all the things your sister seems to be, uncool isn’t one of them.”

Somehow, he manages to raise his eyes to mine. They’re warm and open to the world, though there is a slight anxiety in how the corners of his eyelids crease.

“I expect, then, that you will be disappointed in me,” he says. His tone is somewhere between joking and serious, though his lip has a slight grin.

“Almost certainly,” I say, grinning back. I break our gaze, suddenly nervous. “I should probably look at the menu. You know, before your sister comes back. Of all the things she is, not-scary isn’t one of them. What was her name?”

He laughs at that. “Of all the things you are, syntactically clear isn’t one of them. Her name is Yasmine”



I pause for a second, thinking through my response. “Fine then... Mr. MLA Format of conversation. How would you prefer to talk about things?” I look at him to make sure my sarcasm came across as a joke not a barb. He makes a noncommittal laugh and looks away...not a good sign, but not a bad one either.

“That’s an interesting question you raise,” he says. I notice how quiet his voice is when he’s speaking--you have to lean in to hear. He looks intently somewhere over my shoulder, as if considering his words. “Before we get to that, though, what will you be eating?”

I look down at the menu, suddenly intimately aware of where I am--in a booth at a restaurant I’ve never been before surrounded by people chatting away. I realize the only thing I know on the menu is the hummus. Everything else is just words that I don’t understand with little descriptions underneath. I think he senses my ignorance.

“You can get lablabi but they make their’s really spicy here, so you may not like it. If you like lamb, the lamb patties are good. Wait but, you’re pescatarian right?” I nod. “In that case, if you’re okay with going a little brunchy, either the chakchouka or the brik a l’ouef would probably be good. I mean, unless they both sound horrible to you.”

I read the descriptions,

- *Eggs poached in tomato stew, with onions, garlic, and chili peppers. Served with bread.*
- *Deep fried pastry filled with egg yolk, spices, and potato*

“Absolutely abominable” I say, giving him a wink. At first, he seems nervous, but then I think he gets the joke.

“Sorry, I guess we didn’t have to come here for food. I just chose it because the food here is halal and the atmosphere is nice.”

“And because your sister is here to body slam me to the ground if I turn out to be a psychopath?”

“That too,” he says, smiling slightly and taking a drink of his water. “But really, I should have checked to make sure you would like the food here.” He runs his olive hand through his curly black hair, causing a lock to fall in front of his eyes. “Sorry about that.” He looks somewhere over my shoulder.

“Amine,” I say, “I wanted to come here.” I rest my hand in the center of the table, there to take if he wants. He hesitates for a second, but then his sweaty hand encapsulates mine completely and gives a slight squeeze. A flutter runs through my chest--a mix of nerves, affection, and excitement.

Two men holding hands, in a restaurant.

This man, specifically, holding my hand.

Yasmine comes back to the table with a glass of water for me. Amine doesn't move his hand...based off of how comfortably he turns to his sister to place his order, I don't even think it crossed his mind.

“I'll take the lamb patties.”

“I'll take the chakchouka,” I say, because the other dish sounded like it might be messy.

Yasmine rolls her eyes at us in a joke that only she knows. I get the sense that amidst her witty barbs, her mind is filled with so many thoughts I could never understand. She smiles wryly, and leaves. A couple seconds go by with just him holding my hand as the chatter of ambient conversation surrounds our table like a well. I realize that now we have to actually start a conversation.

“So,” I say, trying not to be awkward. “We’ve ordered food then.” I let out a little awkward laugh.

He smiles expectantly, a little nervous.

I continue, “So... earlier you said something about how we would prefer to talk? What did you mean by that?”

His whole face slowly opens up like a flower. “I mean that,” he takes a couple seconds to gather his thoughts, “You know how art discusses topics?” He pauses to see if I know where he is going--I shake my head gently so he knows to explain further. “Well, like it helps you to visualize an experience or an emotion, a person or a place. It puts you within a world so that you can better understand some part about it.”

I nod slowly; he continues.

“Well, it’s like art is a method of speaking about something. And different art talks about things in different ways, sometimes even when they are discussing the same general topic.

I notice the way his ears poke out from under his hair, giving the impression that they are the largest part of his face, and how his lips look soft.

“So ...it’s just like art is a manner of talking about something, right?”

“More like, a collection of many different ways to talk about something, but yes.”

“I see,” I take a drink of my water. “So, in linguistics terms, it’s more a language family than an individual dialect?”

“Well,” he looks a little sheepish, “I’m not knowledgeable about linguistics. but I think so, yes.”

“Sorry,” I say, “Linguistics is just how my brain works sometimes.”

He nudges me under the table with his foot, “Don’t worry, I am interested even if I don’t understand.”

“Likewise,” I say, and we sit in silence for a brief period that I hope isn’t awkward. Then Yasmine returns to the table with our food.

“One order of Lamb Merguez Sausage Patties for the brother who changed three times this morning before settling on this shirt.” Amine turns bright red as she passes him his food with a mischievous smirk. “And an order of chakchouka for the boy I have previously threatened with poison.” She looks directly into my eyes, searching for something, then gives a slight grimace that may have been a smile, turns away and walks back to the front desk without a word.

After she leaves, Amine and I are both reeling in her wake, trying to comprehend what just happened. The food smells good, and there are smiles on our lips, even if we don’t understand why.

“So,” I say, “in art terms, what would your sister’s language of communication be?”

For a second, he looks taken aback, but then he laughs. “Well, she has a tendency to say something kind of messed up, but in a way you know is harmless.”

“But that still has a threat there,” I suggest. “In the implications.”

“Right, like how saying ‘the boy that I threatened with poison’ isn’t an outright threat itself, but it implies that a threat exists. Good catch,” he says, and I feel warm with the praise.

We both take a couple bites of our food before continuing. I think because we both realized how hungry we were. The chakchouka has an interesting mix of acidity from the tomatoes, warmth from the eggs, and a little bit of spiciness from the harissa. It makes my nose run, but I love it. I wipe discreetly at my nose with my napkin before continuing with our discussion.

“She also lets her words play several different functions. I imagine her mentioning your shirt was partially to tease you.” I pause, checking to see if he still seems ashamed. He listens intently, his eyes open so widely I fear I may drown in them. “But it was also an allusion to earlier when she said I better not be here for a hookup because you’re wearing the only button up you own.”

“Huh, a real artist,” he says seriously before breaking out into soft laughter.

“Yeah,” I say, “reminds me a little of some music I like actually.”

“Sorry to briefly shift the conversation topic,” he says while taking a bite of his lamb burger, his hand trembling slightly. I notice how long his fingers are, like someone would force him into playing the piano if he ever joined a band. He takes his time chewing, then continues, “But...you’re not looking for a hookup, right? I don’t know if we talked about this yet, but, as a fairly traditional Muslim, I don’t want to have sex until marriage.” He tries to hold my gaze, but then looks away.

“Amine,” I say, trying to turn him towards me with my voice, “I don’t mind, promise.” I take a second to let him breathe. Tentatively, I continue, “Are you good with other stuff like handholding and kissing?”

“Yes, I am. Well, I mean I am good with handholding. I don’t know about kissing yet. Is that okay?”

“Yes, of course” I say, and he seems to believe me.

Dinner goes on, us talking about art, future plans, etc while we eat our food and the restaurant slowly fills up with the chatter of arriving patrons. Apparently Amine wants to study sea urchins, says he relates to their slow movements, large geographic habitat, and model

organism status--he always feels like he has to be perfect because his teachers, parents, and friends always believe in him so strongly.

I said I relate to an octopus because I'm always travelling alone and may or may not climb out of my cage to eat shellfish when people aren't paying attention. He laughed at that, albeit kindly.

We go on, he asks me about what year I'm in and what I want to do with my life. I tell him I'm a junior and that I have no ideas other than that I'm terrified. I've been thinking about NAU or maybe going really far away.

He says that it is okay to not know. He says it while staring deeply into my eyes like he is trying to connect. I try to believe him.

After a while, Yasmine comes with the bill which we split. Then, we don't know what to do.

"Do we--do we just go then?" he asks.

I feel like a hole is trying to open up in my chest, like the petals of a flower. I am lonely, but a little less than before. I also feel lost, a little adrift in a way that I don't know how to explain, much less solve.

"I don't know," I say. Then, on a whim, I ask "Would you enjoy the library?"

"The library?" he asks, taken aback. He hesitates. "Sure," he says, not quite as genuinely as I may have liked, but still honest. "When would you like to go?"

"Come on," I say. "Let's go now." I grab his thin hand in mine, and his fingers hesitate, but then encapsulate me completely.

"Sure," he says.

Neither of us are confident in our ability to navigate, so he consults google maps while leaning against his car, a hand me down Prius with a save the whales bumper sticker and photograph of RBG.

“Should I take my car there as well?”

He looks up from his phone, “No, don’t worry about it, I’ll drive you there and back.”

“You sure?” I say.

“Yeah, yeah.” He gives a shy smile without looking up, “I want to show off my driving.” He goes back to tapping the screen and I am left to process that this man is comfortable enough with me to show off. I no longer see the dusty asphalt or feel the hot sun --hotter than ever, another record broken just this year, beating down--I just see him, standing with his feet close together and shoulders hunched over his phone. I imagine that maybe the thought of other people seeing him standing awkwardly in a parking lot makes him anxious, so he is trying to disappear. Maybe that’s me projecting myself onto him, I don’t know. There is so much we can’t know about other people. It’s both captivating and terrifying.

“It looks like the closest one is Peoria public library, which is just 2 minutes from here.”

He says, clearly nervous. “Does that sound good to you?”

I say sure and smile in a way that I hope is reassuring. He doesn’t have the courage to look.

While he drives, I rest my hand in his free hand as he stares out at the road in front of him, smoothly maneuvering the vehicle with the sort of grace one expects from a taxi driver or a chauffeur. He feels confident, assured. Two things I didn’t know he could be.

We arrive and get awkwardly out of the car. He locks it. He looks at me like he means to ask if I'm sure about this, but then he looks away. I understand. I didn't know how to frame the question he was about to ask either.

Once again, I give a smile that I hope is reassuring, and we walk in.

Inside, we enter a lobby before the main floor of the library. There is white tile flooring, a display case with Strawberry Shortcake memorabilia, some chairs that look like they would (comfortably) eat you alive, and, across the room, the people sized scanners that are meant to go off when you try to steal a book.

I did that. I'm not proud of it. Kept running so they wouldn't catch me, then kept the stolen copy of *The House on Mango Street* under my bed so that I didn't have to look at it and feel guilty. Hopefully, the library staff don't remember me.

We walk through, my fingertips brushing discretely against his. We look around, unsure of where to go. For a second, we think that the woman reading *Vogue* notices us, so our hands separate. She turns the page. We lock eyes with each other, then breathe.

I hover my hand close enough to his that he can feel it, even if we aren't touching, then lead him up the grand staircase to our left. Since it's a library, we try to step quietly up every single step.

At the top, we look around. There is a row of computers that lead to the manga-filled teen section. There is a now-empty desk inset into the wall where a librarian can sit. Behind us there is a door to an outside patio and strangely cloudy sky, and behind that, rows of shelves. The only people on the floor are us, and Amine is silent, awkward...but I don't know why. I sidle up close to him, trying to draw him out of himself through the warmth of my body. Maybe coming here was a bad idea.



“What types of things do you like to read?” I ask Amine, trying to sound nonchalant.

“Are you more into manga, nonfiction, horror...cheesy romance?” He blushes at that last one--a good sign.

He turns to me with his warm brown eyes...I realize how impossibly wide and open they are, with little flecks of darker color sprinkled throughout. He stares, then he looks away, shy.

“I like lots of things,” he says. “I’ve read a little Haruki Murakami and liked that. He has a consistent theme of serendipity which I’m really drawn to, and it’s interesting how he ties the magic of his stories into his world. I also really like Abu Nuwas, even if I sometimes get anxious reading his work. When I’m feeling political, I’ll sometimes look up English translations of Aboul-Qacem Echebbi poems or listen to Maude Latour. I also really like Ali Smith.”

Someone else, a man in a thick brown coat and scarf that looks out of place in an Arizona summer, begins walking up the stairs, so I lead Amine down the aisles of adult nonfiction to a couple chairs beside a window looking over the children’s section of the library. Back here, it’s quiet other than the muffled sounds of a child screaming, and the heaviness of library silence. I notice that even the A.C is uncharacteristically quiet, as if it doesn’t want to intrude.

“Those are a lot of artists,” I say, hoping that I said it in a way that doesn’t make him think that I mind. “Is there something that, generally, you like to see in art? Something that connects all those disparate voices you mentioned?”

He lowers his eyes in thought. “I think, maybe, the motif of hope in how it relates to love, revolution, and magic.”

I nod, taking in his words slowly.

“I just, I love all the sincerity of it, you know?”

“I agree,” I say, “Cynicism is overrated.” He smiles at that, and I feel warm. I don’t know what to say so I look away. The date is going well. I feel good. This is scary.

“Do you want to sit down?” he asks, motioning to the chairs tucked away in this back corner. I realize now that we had been standing like you do when you’re waiting and don’t know where to go.

“Yes, let’s.” I say, immediately cringing at how formal that sounded.

We sit down and he reaches over to grab my hand in his. He seems to be feeling more confident now--his hand is barely sweaty.

“What types of things do you like to read?” he asks, his voice nearly a whisper, even quieter than usual. I think because he remembered we were in a library, but it feels romantic.

“Lots of different things,” I say. “I like Barbara Kingsolver, especially *The Lacuna*.” I stop to think for a bit and Amine looks at me with his impossibly wide eyes. “She defines a lacuna as like a gap. Like in the historical record--as in, like queer representation or women who don’t just exist for men.” Amine’s eyes light up when I say that. “There can also be a gap in what you know about someone, or some gap where your needs aren’t being fulfilled. A gap in a story too.”

“It’s weird to think about how much of our world is built on an absence,” Amine says, his brow furrowed in thought.

“Yeah, I agree completely.” I say, and Amine and I lock eyes. A flutter like a breeze through a chandelier rattles through my chest.

“I also really really love Lorde and Sandra Cisneros.” I say. “They are both so good at articulating what they need out of life, or I guess, pointing out the flaws in the things that don’t

work for them. From Sally in *The House on Mango Street* to the isolation and meaninglessness of the world Lorde finds herself in.”

“Do you find your world meaningless?” Amine asks.

“Do you?” I reply, dodging the question.

He thinks for a while before responding. “I... don’t think so. I have my faith, yes. That certainly gives meaning. And there is so much beauty, so much kindness in this world for it all to be pointless.” He squeezes my hand warmly.

He hesitates, as if thinking through something, then puts on a mask with a knowing grin. He imitates my voice, “Now come on *Mr. Linguistics*” he gives me a wink, then continues in his own voice, “if both the words ‘meaningless’ and ‘world’ can be found in the dictionary, surely we have the power to choose what they mean?”

I laugh and he smiles, the mask broken. “Cynicism is overrated, right?” I say.

“Yeah, yeah it is,” he says, and sits back in his chair, the most earnest boy in the world.

## **The Holy Ghost**

Unbeknownst to the librarians of Peoria Public Library,

Unbeknownst to the children who chase their friends through the shelves, laughing quietly for fear of upsetting the silence that hangs over everything like dust,

Unbeknownst to Amine, or to my best friend, even,

There is a story I hid amongst the shelves, placed between *The Rise of the Accounting Profession 1937-1969* and *Called to Account*, two book titles I thought sounded sufficiently boring, but funny enough to amuse me, to serve as bookends. I wanted books to surround it that

made the story feel like a real thing that belonged in a real place on a library shelf where anyone could read it and understand what it is that it is saying.

The story wasn't actively planned. There was no hunched form over a book binding machine in the middle of the night. No melted candle wax.

The words just poured out of me and next thing I knew they were on the page, stapled together, and placed in an old class folder. I know from writing other stories that this is not what is supposed to happen, but it is what happened this time.

So, cut to me, in the past, finding a place for them.

It was the day of the library's annual charity bake sale when I knew all the librarians would be busy--the librarian aide's almond fudge was *very* popular. I slipped through the metal detectors and ran up the stairs, story blowing like a meadow in my hand.

My palms were sweaty, and my feet felt like they were going somewhere they were not allowed, uncharted walking, I had to stop my arms from holding themselves.

At the top, I met Leonora Carrington's ghost who was wearing the top of an umbrella as a hat. She told me:

"Yes, the Fantomat is an automatic Fantomator. There are a lot of them, chainwise, as we get nearer and nearer to Hell"

I felt a dread inside of me as I thought of my father who left and my inability to know what I wanted out of life.

She gave me a jar filled with water, then I nodded, put my story on the shelf, and left.

## Foggy

The morning after another date with Amine, this time to an arcade, I wake up somewhere between happy and sad. It's a feeling like emptiness I think, but I don't know.

I walk across my bedroom to look out the second story window (I live in an aggressively squat two-story house that contains all the interest of a syrup-less pancake, or maybe a box used to transport printer ink). There isn't a cloud in the sky and the flat suburbia is as flat and suburban as ever. Nothing has changed, yet I feel like everything has.

I'm left remembering when Amine drove me back to my house so that my mom could see him from the window and see who I was dating.

He held my hand the whole time. When we got out, we hugged, and it was nice. I don't have any other words to describe it.

He was smiling. I think it shocked him because he kept trying to not smile. I told him it was cute which made him smile even more--I almost felt bad. Then we hugged again, and he walked back to his car because he wanted to go to the mosque to pray with his mom and sister.

I check the time, 7:45 am, no new notifications.

Is something wrong?

It's still early.

I open the door to my room. I have the whole floor to myself, so I don't have to be quiet when I walk to the shower, though I'm quiet anyways.

I forgot to unplug the wax warmer last night--I was on too much of a high to brush my teeth, much less unplug the electronics. So now the wax is all gone, and my breath is bad. The

room smells vaguely of citrus, like someone thought really hard about oranges from the other room.

I feel like there's something in the air I can almost, but not quite, grasp.

I take off my clothes, turn on the shower and let the cold water pulse across my skin. I get out, put on my clothes, and walk back to my room. I look at my phone--no new notifications. I don't know if I should text him or just wait, so I decide to wait. It feels safer.

I grab a poptart from the upstairs kitchen--blueberry, one of my favorite flavors, then I slide the door open to our balcony on the second floor. It's just a small concrete shelf with a metal gate surrounding it, but it's my favorite spot in the whole house--I think because of how solitary it feels.

I open up my package of poptarts as I lean back against the metal gate, my bare feet in front of me, butt on the ground. I look out at the sky, cloudy and deep blue. It's strangely cool, though perhaps that's just because it's morning.

I'm still trying to understand how I feel.

A song I love, "Flamin' Hot Cheetos" by Clairo has this chorus in the middle of the song where she just repeats the phrase "I'm feeling something right," 5 or 6 times. I've always been captivated by how vague the song's word choices are. I think it lets the singer exist in this always shifting middle-ground, where they're caught between two emotions they can't quite put the words to.

Right now, I relate to that song.

I take another bite of my poptart. It's sweet in a cloying sort of way and tastes vaguely of blueberries. To me, there is something comforting in a flavor that holds you and doesn't let go.

I think back to the art I discussed with Amine on our first date and remember a name, Maude Latour. I pull my phone out of my pocket and decide to search for her on Spotify. It says her latest EP was called Starsick; I press play on the first song on the track.

I let the song wash over me, hoping that the sounds or the words will give me something concrete to believe in. I'm captivated by the solemnity of the opening--like it's a hymn at the church I don't go to.

The song goes on and Maude sings about how everyone's boring except for one particular person. Then there's a part where she repeats her claim that everyone's boring except for one person, but when she repeats it, there is an emotion to her voice I'm unable to put words to. It's close to longing, I think, but not quite.

The song goes on and Maude begins singing about rewriting the constitution with this bouncy joy, like anything and everything is possible to be achieved--like there is no separation between a political revolution, a love song, and a spiritual manifesto.

The song then slips back into its hymn-like quality where Maude sings about how she always feels captivated and overwhelmed with the world and with the freedom growing up has given her.

Listening to the song gives me energy so I decide to eat the rest of my popart while I walk.

## **Revolutionary**

*Who dictates what a revolution should be?*

These are the sorts of questions one asks when walking through the suburban annals of McMansions and Arizona Rock+Grass Lawns that are devoid of anything interesting other than

seeing who paid for landscapers to shape their hedges and who paid to have them pulled out of the ground.

*A revolution should, by rights, be inclusive of everyone, but who can shape a revolution without a voice, without hands?*

I step on a crack, inadvertently breaking my mother's back. It's already pushing 100 out, sweat beads on the crook of my neck like a beetle. I don't think I can be here for much longer.

*Who gatekeepers a revolution? Are there rules in place that prevent us from seeing a way out?*

I begin to see my destination, a park with acres of grass that likely costs a fortune to water, let alone maintain. There is a giant slide I used to slide down when I was a kid, a sand volleyball net that kids would use as a hammock, and the tree where I kissed my first girlfriend.

*Is cynicism a rule or a reality?*

A revolution implies a circle. A thing of which everything, everyone is a part.

## **Coincidence**

I'm sitting on a pointy rock midway up a mountain in the middle of the ocean. The waves a few hundred feet beneath me look like a pack of wolves taking bites out of the side of the mountain. Perhaps this mountain will topple.

A scary thought.

The air feels empty and free, like I can breathe for the first time in my life.

I came here because after a year of late nights studying for a test in Principles of Accounting 1, or worrying about who does and doesn't love me, I just felt like I needed to get away.



When I told my mom, my friends, and my professors that I was going somewhere I did not know how to pronounce, they had nodded kindly with the blank eyes of someone who didn't understand.

But I needed it even if no one understood why I did, so I came.

A week before my flight, I had texted Amine--I think because I was desperate for connection with someone, *anyone*--but I never heard back. A part of me is still in love with him, even though we haven't talked in months.

The gravel rolls underneath me as I absentmindedly move my foot.

I remember the smell of his eucalyptus shampoo as we cuddled on the couch during our last date before he went off to college. He had smiled and told me that everything was going to be alright, and I had never felt so comforted or so seen.

From my bag, I hear a ringing which is not something that I expected because I did not bring my phone on this trip.

I scramble in the backpack I filled solely with useless things--a tangled up slinky, a phonebook from 1967, an empty jar of peanut butter, and a lighter that's run out of gas. Finally, after 4 or 5 rings, I find an old Nokia flip phone at the bottom of my bag--from where it came, I don't know.

I answer.

Hello?

A pause, then a quiet voice I can barely hear answers, Yes, hello. Then stops

Who is this?

The call drops.

Strange.

The voice sounded familiar, but I couldn't quite place it. I shift my body slightly, the rough rock digging into my butt. I feel something crumbling away inside me. It feels like my chest is opening up.

The waves below continue to crash, so loudly that I can hear them all the way up here. I decide to keep climbing.

The mountain I'm on is dense with a thick carpet of mossy green grass and little multicolored flowers that look as if they come from a children's cartoon. Since I have already hiked a fair ways up, there are puffy white clouds that almost seem to touch the ground around me. I know they're not supposed to feel like much of anything other than damp, but for some reason when I touch them, it feels strangely like I'm being held. I don't know how to explain it.

There is not much of a path to follow, just a slight line of damp earth meandering through the green, sometimes disappearing entirely where the grass has become overgrown, only to reappear a few feet along. My Goodwill boots trod along the path, getting closer and closer to the top. I can almost see it through the clouds.

I'm thinking again about Amine.

Our breakup...was a hard one. He had just finished his first semester of college and was back in town for winter break. We went to the movies to watch *Lady Bird* in theatres and were both struck by how quickly the story moved through her life, how everything felt like it was just slipping away. Afterwards, we drove to the library where we had continued our first date so long ago. We stood outside in the cold. I turned into a robot as I spoke, and his face shattered into little crystals on the pavement. I can't remember what was said or how I got home. All I knew was that I had to protect myself from someone who could leave me.

Months went by and all I could think of was him.

I went off to a school out of state where the weather was cold and I didn't know anybody. After another week of talking to no one, I found a copy of *Lady Bird* at the local Target and watched it on my laptop with my headphones on in a corner of the fourth floor of the school library. I paused the screen on the letter the mom writes to Lady Bird at the end of the movie and cried so hard I thought I might never stop.

Then I came here, I think, to make a change.

The dirt beneath me is wet from all the clouds passing by. A bedraggled bird pecks at something in the grass, then stops to look at me. Her gaze feels sharp, so I run away.

I keep running until eventually I'm immersed in a giant cloud that's so thick I can't see two feet in front of me. Suddenly I hear another ringing from my bag. I pull it off my back, reach in, and hit the screen where I assume it says "answer."

Hello, I say

\*Silence

The call drops.

The crumbling and the filling of my chest continues. I look out around me, but my eyes can't see anything. It's like the whole mountain has been enveloped in a cloud. I keep walking, getting higher, I think.

The ground beneath me is turning to mud. Sometimes I sink to my thigh; sometimes I don't sink at all. I can still hear the waves underneath, crashing.

I keep walking and now I hear a bird singing, the same bird from earlier. Its voice is like a rusty car, but the tune it sings haunts me. Haunts me to the core.

I keep walking and now I hear a ringing. I take it out of the bag and hold it in my hand, but I decide I need to get to the top before answering--something something phone connection, I think.

I start to run, but running makes me sink deeper into the mud with every footfall, so I go back to walking. The phone keeps ringing, making my fingers feel all tingly from the vibrations.

Visibility is so bad that I'm not sure if I'd even know when I hit the top. I find myself walking downwards, so I turn around. I keep going and to my surprise, the phone keeps ringing.

I wonder briefly if the moisture of the cloud might damage the Nokia, but then I decide that it's probably fine. The waves keep crashing below, but I ignore them. I keep walking, and the phone keeps ringing, until eventually it stops. And the air is filled with nothing but the battle between silence and the waves.

About half an hour goes by of me trudging away with a dew-covered phone in my hand. I'm not sure how much progress I've made, though I think I'm a little higher than what I was.

I stop walking for a bit to catch my breath. I'm knee deep in mud that I can't see, and the rest of my body feels strangely like it's floating--like the cloud is lifting me up. As I steady my labored breathing, I am struck with a memory.

I was little, four or five maybe. My mom and I had just finished a protest outside the school board's office where we carried signs written in English and Spanish, and were eating ice cream at a local shop owned by my mom's old college friend Requiem: according to my mom, one of the kindest people she knew who had a gift for mixing ice cream flavors in a way that made you see everything in a new way. My mom had thick black eyeliner on and a black armband with a peace symbol on it. A man with a Vietnam Veteran hat walked in who looked like he was about to die or maybe just collapse like you see on those medical shows. But he

didn't collapse. He just asked for a glass of water and a spicy coconut shrimp sundae while trying desperately to catch his breath. His legs looked like they could give out at any second, I remember. He had to lean on the counter to stay upright. He had holey blue jeans and skin that was pink from sunburn. I don't remember who made him that sundae--a high schooler with a summer job probably. But I remember that after he sat down and ate it, my mom offered him a ride to wherever he was going, to which he agreed.

I fall out of my reverie to find tears filling my eyes. I am struck by another memory.

In the middle of what would later become known as the hottest summer on record in Phoenix (until 2 years later when it was even hotter) my mom had gotten this idea in her head that she was going to plant snowdrops. She planted 50 or so in our dry, clay-like soil. She brought out buckets upon buckets of water that she recycled from our dishwasher, organic fertilizer, and even a little shade canopy to keep the plants cool. By all rights, they should have died as soon as she put them out, but they didn't.

For the next week straight, it snowed. Most businesses closed down; the Spanish classes I was taking at the local language school were cancelled. People bought and shipped snow pants from Vermont even though it was only an inch or so and was barely thirty degrees. I don't even think people knew what snow pants were before the storm.

My mom's snowdrops thrived; they were the talk of the town with their droopy white bulbs--shaped like rockets that were about to take off. She was so happy.

Our old cactus died though, and I didn't want to tell her. When I eventually knocked on her door, with my eyes downcast out of respect, and voice low, she said "One of the consequences of hope," with a bittersweet look in her eyes and turned away to look out the

window. She said nothing else, but she tended her snowdrops even more dutifully than before for the next several weeks until we moved across town to be closer to the hospital.

The sound of crashing waves pulls me out of my reverie, and I feel as if the hole in my chest is overflowing with water like a spring. I know what I have to do.

I open up the Nokia that's now moist and sticky in my hand. I can't see the buttons, but I know the number of who I'm trying to reach. I take a deep breath, preparing myself for what has to come.

The phone rings once and I hear Amine say hello.

"I love you," I say. And then the conversation continues.

## Appendix

### Proposal for a Future Pastiche

Art is a technical, personal, and political dialogue between different artists with each other, and with the broader world. My own art, especially my writing, is profoundly affected by the art I have seen and by the world that I live in. This proposal will first explain a little more of what I mean when I say that all art is dialogue, before going more into the details of my thesis, which will deal with the art and cultural backing that my writing is in dialogue with.

Now, while sometimes artists don't overtly say what art or cultural attitudes inspired them, it would be wrong to say that art exists in a void. Artists copy styles and techniques that they like, then change them to match their own, personal style. Sometimes too, an artist will come across a piece/style of art that they *don't* like and thereby be inspired to create work that intentionally distinguishes itself from that other, unliked art. Cultural events also play a role. The massive industrialization and horror of the WW1 period, for instance, led to a whole new style of writing known as Modernism that helped writers to express the more cynical sentiments of the time. The point is, art is a conversation.

So, what does this "conversation" look like in other people's art pieces? There is the example of Pauline Boty, who in her piece *Scandal '53* juxtaposes the heads of British politicians with the picture of Christine Keeler "sitting on a backwards-turned chair with no clothes on," surrounded by "red paint and...black smudges through the red, that look... like *nuclear fallout*," (Smith 83).

The painting provides a statement on the political power of female sexuality that is firmly rooted in the political events (in this case, the 1963 British Profumo scandal) and fears of the Cold-War-era Britain that Boty lived in. Intrinsic to this conversation, Boty asks the viewer to question what broader narrative is being constructed by popular figures and the images we construct of them. It also asks how that narrative might be changed by a mere reshaping of that conversation, or through the addition of a powerful artistic vision.

This conversation of Boty's then spurs another artist, in this case, the novelist Ali Smith, to describe Boty's ideas in Smith's novel, *Autumn*. In this novel, (which is the first book in a seasonal quartet) Smith compares the art and brief life of Pauline Boty to the idea of resistance against insurmountable odds—where the resistance that is offered eventually, like Boty herself, dies and is largely forgotten. However, instead of dealing with the Profumo scandal like Boty does, Smith's work focuses more on the political events of Smith's own time, namely, Brexit and Britain's immigrant detention facilities. In Smith's mentioning of Pauline Boty's work, she is getting the reader to view Boty's work through a different historical angle, and thereby, to bring Boty into the forefront of the modern political conversation. Effectively, Smith is *restructuring* the conversation by changing whose images (in this case, the picture of Christine Keeler and pictures of Boty's artwork) easily come to a viewer's mind when thinking about modern issues. Therefore, art can be both a conversation on technique/style as well as artistic/political ideas. My thesis will attempt to illustrate these several aspects of artistic conversation through writing a story in which the characters and the form of the story itself will directly interrogate different artistic techniques and the larger world while telling the story of my main characters. As this is a creative project, some (if not most) of the details will have to remain hazy until I start writing. However, the basic (tentative) idea is that there will be two friends talking about the meaning of



several art pieces and the techniques that artists use to create that art as a way for my characters to get at the individual issues that they and their world face. One of the characters will be so deeply in love with someone or something that it will permeate everything that they say, do, and believe; while the other person, I think, will be lost more than anything. The purpose of this project is to demonstrate my overall fluency with the works of the artists who inspire me as well as my ability to join in their conversation.

As far as I am aware, nothing exactly like this has been tried before, although Ali Smith's book *Artful*, which mixes essays on art with the story of a woman haunted by a former lover comes somewhere close to what I am trying to accomplish. Additionally, while most art may not spell out the nature of art as dialogue as explicitly as my work or Smith's, since all art is inherently a dialogue with other art/culture/ideas/etc, my proposal, while distinct from other works, is not that far outside of the artistic norm.

My deadlines are as follows:

1. First 5 Pages of Thesis Submitted to Dr. Christensen: August 25, 2021  
 Ø The purpose of this is not for detailed edits, but just to make sure everything seems to be moving in the right direction
2. Feedback Received: August 30, 2021
3. Rough Draft of Thesis Submitted to Dr. Christensen: September 20, 2021
4. Feedback Received: October 4, 2021
5. Second Rough Draft Submitted to Dr. Ellison: October 11, 2021
6. Feedback Received: October 25, 2021
7. Final Draft Submitted: November 1, 2021

It is difficult to say definitively which artists and artwork my piece will bring up, although the following will briefly explain some of my ideas.

- Clairó in her song “I Wouldn’t Ask You,” shows conflicting emotions by pairing apparently contradictory lines one after another in a song. For example, she switches between lines where she says she will “tell you how I feel” and lines that say, effectively, that she won’t (Oh, boy, no, it’s all for me”). This shows the narrator’s conflicting emotions over what they should and shouldn’t say or do. This ambiguity is heightened by the song’s unusual use of tensing. Rather than saying something more direct like “I won’t ask you,” the song’s chorus remains firmly in the hypothetical with “wouldn’t.” This creates a greater distance between the singer and any action that could be taken, which, paired with the song’s other ambiguities, allows the singer to conceal—if not fully mask--her true emotions. Through repetition and occasional direct admissions that don’t entirely solve the song’s ambiguity, the listener is able to briefly glimpse the question the song is posing—if not the answer.

- The song “Flamin’ Hot Cheetos by Clairó is about “a struggle between one side” that is trying to move on from a past partner, and another side that remembers the relationship as being better than it actually was and wants to “go back,” (Cottrill, Flamin’ Hot Cheetos). As the title of the song suggests, the Clairó song “Flamin’ Hot Cheetos” is lyrically unusual. The song begins, not with traditional lyrics, but with a mix of ‘tu’s and ‘ru’s. While these aren’t words per se, they do begin to establish a basic rhythm and, due to the tone of Clairó’s vocals, convey a certain...apathy, for lack of a better word.

The rest of the song uses words that can be found in a dictionary, but the way that she uses them makes their meaning only a little more clear than the ‘tu’s. For example, there’s the line “it’s

easy just to pretend/ that we don't have something real," and the bridge where Clairo repeats that she's "feeling something right." (Cottrill, Flamin' Hot Cheetos). What that *something* is, is never fully clarified. She uses the word "something" 8 times in the song, as well as other similar words like "sometimes," "anything" and "everything," (Cottrill, Flamin' Hot Cheetos). This intentional vagueness gets at an integral part of her romanticisation of the past: it's not built upon any concrete language, memories, or reality, but rather the narrator's *assertion* that they have "something [emphasis added] real" (i.e. valuable) (Cottrill, Flamin' Hot Cheetos). In other words, through not providing the concrete substance to back up the narrator's claims, you can see how substanceless those claims really are.

In the song's bridge, the ambiguity of the aforementioned phrase "I'm feeling something right," also allows the narrator to subtly entertain two conflicting perspectives at the same time (Cottrill, Flamin' Hot Cheetos). On one side of things, there's the girl who insists in the pre-chorus that her and her past partner *did* have "something real," even if it's easy to pretend otherwise, and on the other, we have the girl who knows that she "never remember[s] how things really happen," (Cottrill, Flamin' Hot Cheetos). What that "something" means, is very different depending on which of these girls is the ones singing the lines. When I listen to the song, I usually (though not always) feel like the first couple repetitions of the line signify that she has real romantic feelings towards her past partner, whereas the later lines where her voice becomes more intense--like she's getting closer to the truth of the line she's singing-- are saying that those supposed feelings are not how she *really* feels about her past partner and the relationship. There's a conflict here, or more accurately, a duality, that can only exist in the inherent ambiguity of a line and a song such as this.

Other techniques I might touch on include:

- How Haruki Murakami makes the strange world of his novel *Kafka on the Shore* believable by focusing on, amongst other things, the basic bodily functions of his characters. In terms of ideas, I might also discuss how his characters having to, for example, drink water, relates to the idea that their actions are preordained/prophesied.
- How Ali Smith and Leonora Carrington use humor to help make readers accept the strangeness of their world.
- How Ali Smith uses powerful, concrete images to build her stories around an idea
- Loosely building off of Gayatri Spivak's writing to interrogate who *isn't* given a voice by society. My writing will attempt to give the subaltern a voice, in the same vein that Ali Smith advocates for in her novel *Autumn*, while also acknowledging the difficulty of writers giving the subaltern a voice, as Smith does in the short story "The Hanging Girl"
- The ability of surrealism to fight personal and political problems. This might involve a quote from Ali Smith where she is quoting someone she can't remember: "Creativity is cultural not because it is derivative of it, but because it aims to heal culture. Art saturated with the unconscious acts like a compensatory dream in the individual: it tries to rebalance and address deep-rooted problems." One question I might particularly interrogate is what if you saturate a work with the subconscious of a culture.

- The effect of Leonora Carrington inserting unusual words into her writing.  
The effect of the body language of characters not matching the tone of their dialogue.
- Writing techniques I have learned from my creative writing courses, especially focusing on concrete details and the relationship between my two characters

Of course, the actual proposal may not use all of these ideas/techniques, or may choose to focus more heavily on a piece of art that isn't mentioned here. The idea in listing all of these techniques isn't so much meant to tie down my writing to a specific subject matter, but more to give a general sense of what sorts of things my writing will discuss. The intention of this proposal and of the thesis itself is to demonstrate that I have an understanding of the artistic/political/cultural dialogue of our world and am able to contribute, in whatever feeble way that an individual may.

Cottrill, Clairo. "I Wouldn't Ask You." 2 Aug. 2019,  
[genius.com/Clairo-i-wouldnt-ask-you-lyrics](https://genius.com/Clairo-i-wouldnt-ask-you-lyrics)

Cottrill, Clairo. "Flamin' Hot Cheetos." 13 June 2017,  
[genius.com/Clairo-flamin-hot-cheetos-lyrics](https://genius.com/Clairo-flamin-hot-cheetos-lyrics)

Smith, Ali. *Autumn*. Anchor Books, 2016.