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# TANGENTS

THE JOURNAL OF THE  
MASTER OF LIBERAL ARTS PROGRAM  
AT STANFORD UNIVERSITY

VOLUME 25

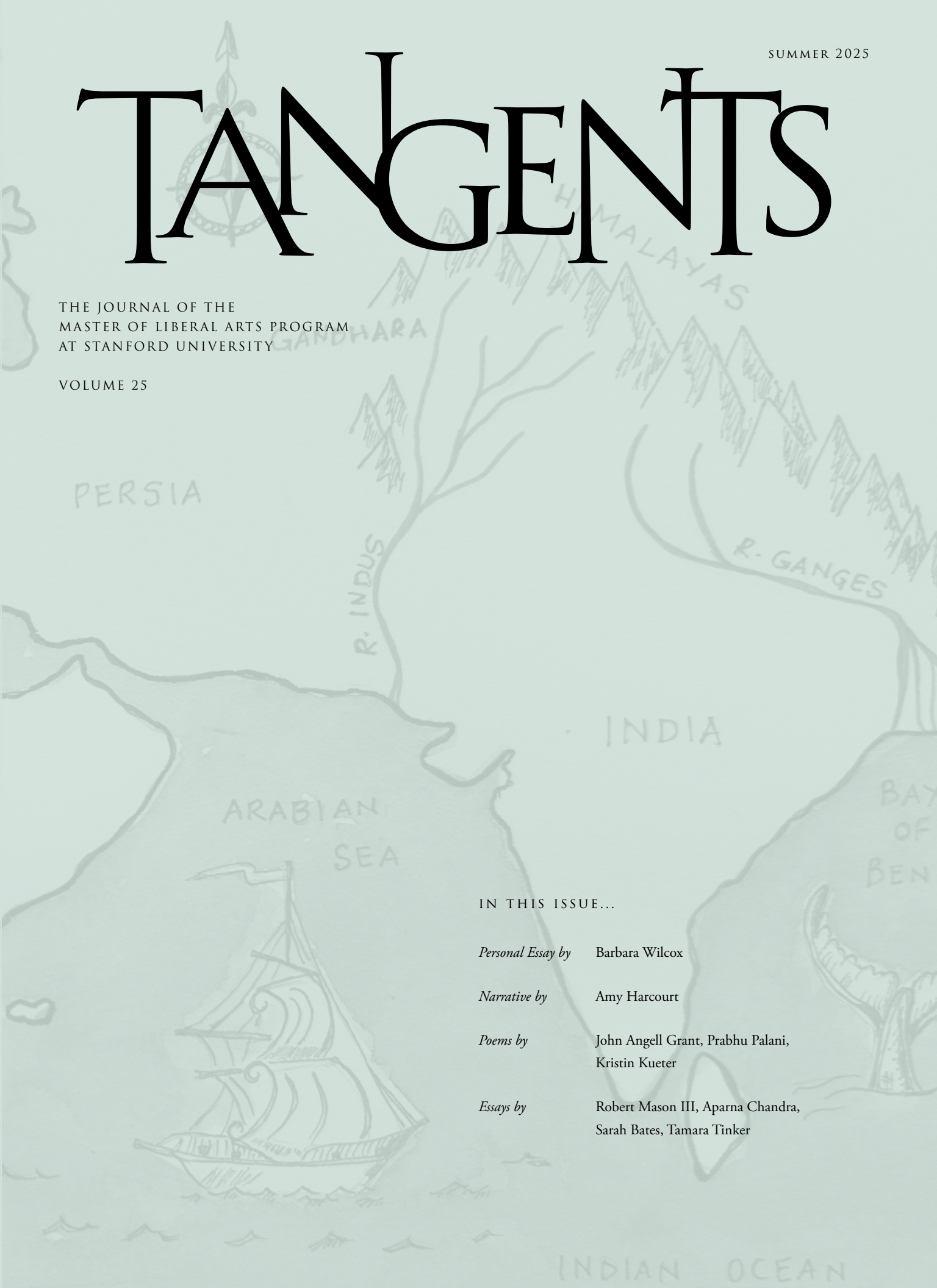
IN THIS ISSUE...

*Personal Essay by* Barbara Wilcox

*Narrative by* Amy Harcourt

*Poems by* John Angell Grant, Prabhu Palani,  
Kristin Kueter

*Essays by* Robert Mason III, Aparna Chandra,  
Sarah Bates, Tamara Tinker



## PUBLISHING NOTES

This publication features the works of students and alumni of the Master of Liberal Program at Stanford University.

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## LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

We are pleased to present this issue of *Tangents*, the Journal of the Stanford Master of Liberal Arts Program. For this the 25th volume, we have chosen a diverse group of works by students and alumni, including:

- ◆ three poems (“Resistance,” “A blind man dreams...”, “Grief”);
- ◆ a journalist explores her dissociative disorder through the lens of her journeys through book clubs;
- ◆ an analysis of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s short lyric poem, “Mutability”;
- ◆ a narrative of a brief encounter on the Golden Gate Bridge;
- ◆ an analysis of the writer’s experiences reading—and re-reading—Proust’s *Swann’s Way*;
- ◆ a consideration of how Buddhist monks may have influenced Christian monasticism; and
- ◆ a legal analysis of how Generative Artificial Intelligence has the potential to make court judgments less biased and more just.



Be sure to learn about this issue’s contributors, highlighted on the last pages.



We hope that our choices will provide enjoyable reading and inspire future contributions!



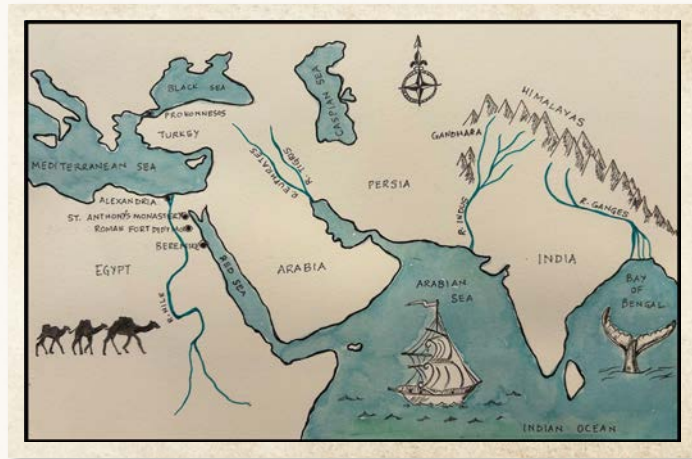
This is our seventh year of service as editors for *Tangents*, and we welcome feedback. The dedication and generosity of alumni and supporters of the MLA program continue to make our annual publication possible. Thank you!



Candy Carter, MLA ’14, editor  
Teri Hessel, MLA ’13, associate editor

# WESTERN EXTENT OF INDIC RELIGIONS IN THE FIRST CENTURY CE:

## *Buddhist and Hindu Deities in Berenike, Egypt*



*by Aparna Chandra, MLA '24*

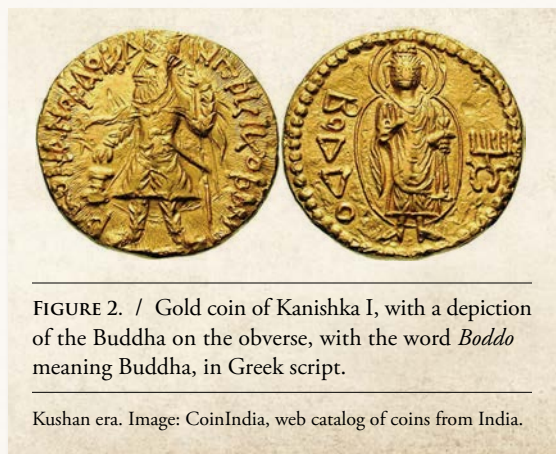
*Beginning in 2018*, archeologists exploring the ancient port of Berenike on the coast of Red Sea began to discover Buddhist and Hindu artifacts in an Isis temple and its surrounding area dating from the first century CE. These finds are remarkable because they extend the scope of Indic religious ideas much further west than previously thought. While Indian spiritual, philosophical and religious thought had far-reaching influence in the regions east of India—reaching throughout Southeast Asia and East Asia—the same could not be said about the regions west of India, where mathematical and scientific ideas spread more than religious ones. Religious influence on the regions west of India was thought to be limited to present day Afghanistan because no religious artifacts had been found further west than Gandhara (present day Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan). But the discoveries in Berenike call for a reexamination of this idea. This paper closely examines the Indian religious artifacts found at Berenike<sup>1</sup> and argues that just as the material artifacts have blended Indo-Greco-Roman elements, religious ideas might have also been exchanged between Indian religions and Christianity when they came in close contact with each other in the Middle East. As an example

of a religious idea, the paper will briefly consider whether it is plausible that Christian monasticism developed under the influence of Buddhist monks.

Berenike is located on the coast of the Red Sea in Egypt (fig. 1) It was an active port between 3rd century BCE to 6th century CE, but it is now an uninhabited ruin. It was founded by the Ptolemies to acquire war elephants and became an important trade hub between Africa, Europe, and South Asia during the Roman era. The port was abandoned in the 6th century, and was forgotten until Belzoni<sup>2</sup>, an Italian archeologist, rediscovered the site in 1818 (Sidebotham “2019” 13). Interest in Berenike was revived in the 1990s when a team of archeologists first excavated the area in 1994 (Sidebotham “2019” 13). The excavation continued, and in 2019 a stone statue of Buddha with a missing head, a smaller Buddha head, and some relief sculptures of Hindu gods, all made of locally procured gypsum, were discovered (Sidebotham “2019” 14).

FIGURE 1. (above) / Map showing the location of Berenike.

The headless torso is 15.8 cm tall and resembles another such headless body excavated earlier in 2018, which was life-sized and made of marble, and for which a head was found later in 2022 (the marble statue will be discussed later). The small gypsum torso is coarse-looking and is missing hands and feet. Since the statue lacks a head, a reasonable question is, how can it be identified as Buddha? The answer lies in comparanda, i.e. objects which come from the same place, time, use similar materials or are stylistically similar, and thus help piece together information about newer finds. Using comparanda, the archeologists can identify the torso as Buddha because its thick, heavy robe resembles that of the Buddha image found on coins minted by the Kushan emperor Kanishka I, who ruled a vast empire from Central Asia to the Gangetic Plains in Northern India from 127 to 151 CE. He minted a variety of coins where his image is paired not only with Buddha, but also with other Hellenistic, Iranian and Hindu deities on the obverse side of the coins. These coins provide a rich source to study early religious iconography, since it is around this time that anthropomorphic representations of Buddha and early depictions of Hindu gods came into existence (Lee 66). In addition, the figures on the coins are labeled—for instance, Buddha is identified with the word ‘BODDO’ i.e. Buddha in Greek in the coin shown in figure two—leaving no doubt about who is represented on the coin.



The robe of the torso resembles the robe of Buddha on the coin, and the left hand of the sculpture, although missing, would have probably held the robe just like it does on the coin. Who commissioned these Buddha sculptures—and why—is unknown, but a stela inscribed with dedication found in 2023, discussed later in the paper, suggests that the purpose of such a sculpture had to do with thanksgiving for safe travel, and prayers for the well-being of family and the world.

The second artifact found in 2019 was a small stone head of Buddha, 9.3 cm in size. It was found in the area adjacent to the Isis temple on the excavation site and is identifiable because of the presence of a well-known attribute of Buddhahood—the *ushnisha*, a bump or a topknot on the head of Buddha indicating his wisdom. Figural representations of Buddha started many centuries after his death in 483 BCE and by the first century CE, iconographic elements of his anthropomorphic form were being established. Of the thirty-two signs depicting his perfection, three were most commonly portrayed: elongated earlobes indicating his royal birth, *ushnisha*, and *urna* (an auspicious mark indicated by a small dot or a tuft of hair between the eyebrows of Buddha) (Lee 68). The small stone head has a flat *ushnisha*, although neither the *urna* nor the long earlobes are present. If the ears were sculpted, they probably disintegrated, and if they were painted, the paint might have deteriorated. The hair is demarcated with crude ridges. The eyes are wide open like that of the Mathura Buddha from early 2nd century CE (Lee 67), indicating that it is an early Buddha image and the iconography is not fixed yet. The later Buddha images, starting approximately from the third century CE, almost invariably have inward-looking, half-closed meditative eyes. Because the statue was produced locally, it can be inferred that at least some knowledge of iconography of Buddha existed (Sidebotham “2019” 18).

Interestingly, the eyes and the mouth of some other sculpted heads found lying close to the small Buddha head, are similar in size and style. A head of Isis, half of a female head, and a warrior’s head were found in the same area as the Buddha head. Since a Greco-Roman, an Egyptian and an

*The presence of three multicultural figures also indicates that the religious environment of Berenike was swirling with a multitude of faiths.*

Indian figure were all found together, and resemble each other, it seems reasonable to conclude that they were produced for the same purpose—to be used as offerings. Perhaps a local workshop was mass-producing a variety of small mediocre-quality figures, which could be used as offerings (18-19, Sidebotham 2020). The presence of three multicultural figures also indicates that the religious environment of Berenike was swirling with a multitude of faiths.

The third item found in 2019 in the same area as the Buddhist artifacts was a stela carved with a triad of early prototypes of Hindu deities (Sidebotham “2019” 18). These were identified as Balarama (with a plough), Ekanamsa, and Vasudeva (with a wheel and club) (Marchant). These three deities together are known as the Vrishni triad and can be identified because figures with similar attributes can be found on coins struck by Agathocles of Bactria dating from 180 BCE, where they are identified by their names. Vasudeva later came to be popularly known as Krishna, and the wheel is his weapon—the discus *Sudarshan Chakra*. The relief sculpture was carved locally and is syncretic with Greek styles because the figures occupy a lunette shape held up by voluted ionic columns. Dalrymple, in his book *The Golden Road*, provides compelling evidence of the presence of a sizable Indian merchant population in the Middle East (65). The stela indicates that Hindu merchants were also present in the area, alongside the Buddhist traders and sailors, and were making offerings of objects that were locally made for them.

Then in 2022, the archeologists discovered a life-sized marble Buddha head and a halo in the temple of Isis and realized that these belonged to the marble body discovered earlier in 2018 (Sidebotham “2022” 23-25). The well-rounded youthful face, though damaged, is still identifiable as Buddha because of the presence of *ushnisha*, elongated earlobes, and a halo. An *urna* might be present, but cannot be clearly identified on the damaged face. The hair, the halo and the robes, however, have a distinct Greco-Roman flavor. The robe is heavy with folds as is commonly seen in Greek sculptures. The right arm is broken, and the left holds the robe as it does in the Kanishka coin and seems to do so in

the smaller gypsum torso discovered in 2019. A lotus flower—another symbol associated with Buddha—is carved beside the body.

The halo of this life-sized marble Buddha is unusual because it is shaped like a sun with its triangular rays carved in bas relief. In his article “Garum Masala,” Dalrymple says that this halo transforms the Buddha into a “solar deity like Sol or Mithras.” Similarly, Marchant observes that this “is more in keeping with the Mediterranean sun god traditions, than with conventional Buddhas.” What both of the authors are saying is that faced with the task of carving an Eastern deity, the sculptors drew upon their western classical sculpting heritage. In fact, this halo can be compared to the sunburst halo of a small seated bronze Buddha from Gandhara dating to the first century CE, located at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. According to the museum blurb, this Buddha looks more Greco-Roman than any other surviving Gandhara bronze (fig. 3). It’s

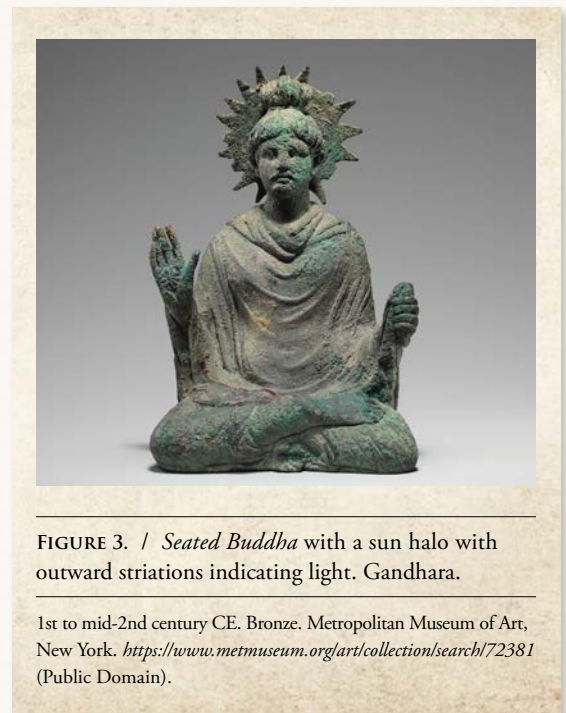


FIGURE 3. / *Seated Buddha* with a sun halo with outward striations indicating light. Gandhara.

1st to mid-2nd century CE. Bronze. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/72381> (Public Domain).

possible that the patron of the Berenike Buddha instructed the sculptors to make a halo to indicate Buddha's divine aura, and the artisans incorporated the sunburst motif from their pre-existing carving designs repertoire.

The hair of the marble Buddha from Berenike, designed like snail-shell curls, provides further evidence of Greco-Roman syncretism. Such curls were the prevailing design in Roman sculptures at the time, but the sculptor of the Buddha added an additional drill-hole to each curl. This was a special stylistic element modeled on hair style prevalent among elite Roman women between c. 90-140 CE (Sidebotham "2023" 25, see fig 4 for an example of the drill-holes hairstyle). Since such drill-holes exist in the statuary from a distinct period in history, their existence is helpful in dating the Buddha sculpture and suggests that it was produced locally in the Mediterranean area by someone who was familiar with current trends in sculpting as well as fashion.

While the design elements for the sculpture—the hair style, the halo and the robes—were borrowed from Greco-Roman design forms, the figure that was being carved was ultimately Indian. The fact that the sculptor could carve this statue implies that either he had prior knowledge of iconography of Buddha, or worked from an earlier prototype, or the patron had provided the artisans a sample, perhaps a portable sculpture or even a Kushan gold coin, like the one discussed earlier, as a model for the sculpture. Additional verbal instructions might have also been given to convey the overall design of the statue, and the iconography of Buddha.

The coming together of vast geographic distances is not limited to the design elements of the statue but is also evident in its material production. While the statue was found in Berenike, its making has a larger geographic footprint. Egypt does not have marble quarries of its own, so the marble for the sculpture had to be brought from the quarries on the island of Prokonnesos (today known as Marmara) in Turkey. Then the block of marble was probably carved in a workshop in Alexandria before it was transported to Berenike (Dalrymple "Garum Masala"). Clearly, someone incurred a huge expense to get this statue made and shipped to Berenike.

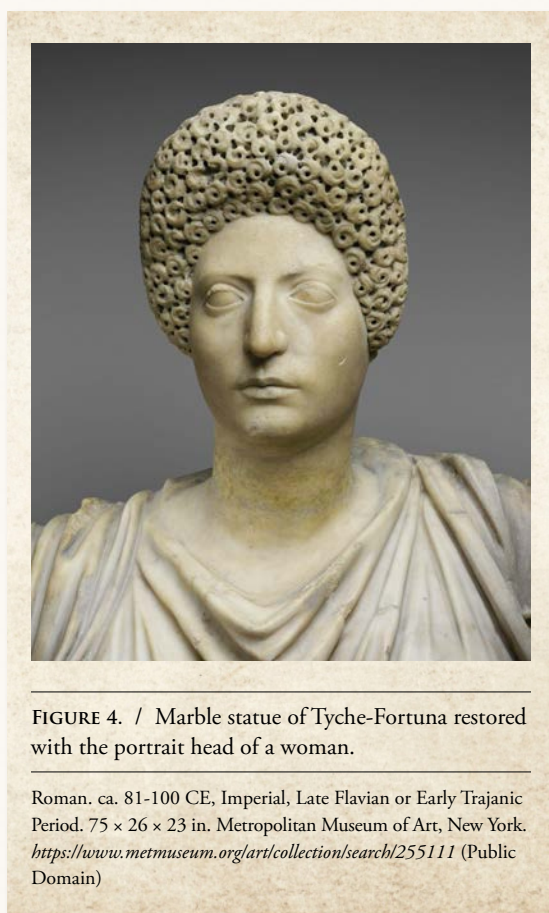


FIGURE 4. / Marble statue of Tyche-Fortuna restored with the portrait head of a woman.

Roman. ca. 81-100 CE, Imperial, Late Flavian or Early Trajanic Period. 75 × 26 × 23 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/255111> (Public Domain)

According to Sidebotham, it was “commissioned by a wealthy Buddhist sea captain in thanks for safe arrival in the Roman Empire.” That such a web of different geographic zones was involved in the production of the sculpture is astonishing and shows that there was familiarity with Indic religious ideas much further west than has been traditionally believed.

In the same rubble heap where the archeologists found the head and halo of the marble Buddha, they also found a slab of anhydritic gypsum on which were inscribed three lines of Brahmi<sup>4</sup> script, but in Sanskrit, and a line of Greek. This slab was dated to 248-49 CE, and measured 83 cm x

*And from the presence of Buddhist and Hindu sculptures in a Temple of Isis, it is also clear that they could express their religious beliefs, even if their deities were visualized through a Greco-Roman eye.*

54 cm x 175 cm in size (Sidebotham “2022” 20-21). The Sanskrit text can be described as a dedication, likely to Buddha, made by a Hindu merchant named Vasula, ‘on this day’ (details mostly lost) for the well-being and welfare of everyone including his father and mother. The stela was most likely placed next to a sculpture that Vasula might have dedicated. The stela clarifies the presence of so many Buddha sculptures and heads: they were made as offerings. The patron was either praying for the well-being of his family, or for safe travel if he happened to be a seafaring merchant or a captain, who had to brave sailing the Indian Ocean to reach back home. The artisans who carved such stelae might have had some working knowledge of what they were inscribing, or they might have been working from a written sample that was provided to them. In either case, what is more remarkable is that a religious figure belonging to a foreign religion would be dedicated in a temple of Isis indicating a mutual acceptance and coming together of diverse religious ideas in one place.

Having examined the figural representation of deities, the paper now turns its attention to the aniconic<sup>5</sup> representations of deities and symbols of religious nature. A large oversized sculpted footprint representing Sarapis in negative relief was found in the Isis temple courtyard during the 2022 digging season. Sarapis (Serapis in Latin) is a syncretic Greco-Roman deity, deliberately popularized by the Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt as a way to bring the Greeks and Egyptians together. As the cult spread, Sarapis replaced Osiris as the consort of Isis in temples on the outskirts of Egypt. It is therefore not surprising that artifacts relating to Sarapis were found in Berenike, but the footprint-representation is curious considering that the Egyptians as well as Greeks had always made figural sculptures of their deities. From this distance in history, it is impossible to be sure, but it can be conjectured that it might have been influenced by the Buddhist way of representing Buddha through symbols. Buddha was not represented anthropomorphically for five or six centuries after his death. He was shown through symbols such as a parasol, the Bodhi tree, his footprints, an empty throne, and the wheel of law that he had set in motion

(Bentley 53-54). It is only towards the end of the first century CE (as mentioned earlier) that figural representations of Buddha started appearing in sculptures, murals, and reliefs. This was the result of contact with the Greeks who had moved into Gandhara following Alexander the Great’s conquests. The Buddha head and the standing Buddha found in Berenike belong to the first century CE, which was the time this change was underway and iconic and aniconic traditions overlapped. It is thus possible that the Buddhist ideal of representing divinity by symbols influenced the making of the Sarapis footprint. Many more Sarapis figures as well as footprints have been found, indicating a possible adoption of South Asian ideas about aniconic representations in the Mediterranean religious world where exuberant figural representation already existed in the Greek, Roman, and Egyptian traditions.

Another artifact that the archeologists found in 2023 was a sherd with the auspicious Hindu symbol, *swastika*, which is surrounded by some characters that might be Greek letters or numbers but are yet unidentified. The symbol itself dates at least as early as 500 BCE, the time of the historical Buddha, and in East Asia it stands for ‘ten thousand,’ signifying abundance (Lee 128). It is a “traditional good luck symbol in ancient India, and was widespread in the Mediterranean world during the Greek Dark Ages (Sidebotham “2023” 9).” Its presence indicates that someone was looking for good fortune, either as a merchant or a sailor, or perhaps someone was praying for good health. The sherd was found in a heap of ceramic pieces that have been dated to mid-6th century based on the presence of one dateable sherd in the lot, but it does not mean that everything in the heap is from that era. A similar 3rd century CE sherd with a drawing of a soldier with two *swastikas* on his armor<sup>6</sup> was found in the nearby Roman fort of Didymoi (Sidebotham “2023” 9). Perhaps the *swastika* had been adopted as a good luck charm by people—merchants, sailors and soldiers—according to their needs.

The finds at Berenike have generated considerable interest among historians. The Institute for the Study of the Ancient World at New York University, held an online conference

*The answer lies in comparanda, i.e. objects which come from the same place, time, use similar materials or are stylistically similar, and thus help piece together information about newer finds.*

in 2022 on the topic—Indian Ocean Figures that Sailed Away. The sessions discussed the Indian objects that were found in the Mediterranean world and their significance. They not only considered the material and portability of the objects, which contextually were foreign to the region, yet were produced locally, but also how these objects were perceived by the local people: were they items of personal nature or something that contributed to the religio-cultural milieu of Berenike? Historian William Dalrymple tells us that there was vast trade between the Roman Empire and India during the first century CE, and that there was a thriving Indian merchant community in the Mediterranean world (“Garum Masala” and *The Golden Road*). And from the presence of Buddhist and Hindu sculptures in a Temple of Isis, it is also clear that they could express their religious beliefs, even if their deities were visualized through a Greco-Roman eye. The Temple of Isis seems to have allowed a multitude of faiths to co-exist—one can conjecture that perhaps a few foreign divinities made no difference in the Greco-Roman-Egyptian world teeming with pantheons of their own. The question then is, did their presence have any influence on the development of Christianity?

During the nineteenth century, as western scholars translated religious texts from native Indian languages to English and other European languages, they began to see parallels between Buddhism and Christianity and boldly proposed that eastern ideas influenced at least some elements of Christianity. Scholars, such as Richard Garbe (*India and Christendom*) and Jean Sedlar (*India and the Greek World*) argued for such an influence. But historian Jerry Bentley, in his 1994 book *Old World Encounters*, disagreed (47). Now the finds at Berenike have reignited a scholarly interest in the debate. While a discussion of the myriad ideas and stories that appear to be similar in the two religions is beyond the scope of this paper, one element of Christianity—monasticism—which could have been inspired by Buddhist monastic culture, is briefly discussed next.

Monasticism was an established Buddhist practice from the pre-Christian era. The concept of a monastic community

called *Sangha*<sup>7</sup> originated when Buddha’s disciples, who had renounced worldly life and wandered around with him listening to his teachings, continued to live the peripatetic monastic life after he died. The monks were also responsible for spreading the faith in new places. The only time they settled down in one place was during the monsoon rains. This led to the development of the first settled monasteries, such as the Bhaja rock-cut cave monasteries dating to early second century BCE (Dalrymple, *Golden Road* 42-43). Since there were communities of Buddhist merchants in Berenike, it is likely that Buddhist monks also came along with them to proselytize because Buddhism, like Christianity, is also a missionary religion. Consequently, it is not altogether improbable that the first forays into monasticism were made by Christian devotees when they encountered Buddhist monks (Dalrymple, *Golden Road* 69). This idea is further bolstered by the fact that the earliest Christian monasteries were established in the Middle East. For example, the monastery of St. Anthony (established towards the end of the third or early fourth century CE), considered to be the first Christian monastery, is also located in Egypt by the Red Sea, and is approximately 500 miles north of Berenike. If we look at the map in figure one, the proximity of the monastery to Berenike becomes evident, and makes a case for Buddhist influence.

According to Sidebotham, “Representations of Indian religious scenes or figures are very rare in the wider ancient classical Greco-Roman world. Their discovery at Berenike is, therefore, note-worthy” (Sidebotham “2019” 18). This is because they challenge the prevalent opinion that South Asian religious ideas did not travel past Gandhara. While the syncretic nature of the material artifacts from Berenike are concrete examples of exchange of artistic ideas, they simultaneously provoke the question whether spiritual and philosophical ideas might have also been exchanged alongside the artistic ones. It will be interesting to read Sidebotham’s forthcoming paper (see footnote 1), and since the excavations are still ongoing in Berenike, newer discoveries may tell us more.

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- . "Results of Winter 2023 Excavation Season at Berenike (Red Sea Coast), Egypt." *Thetis*, Vol 28, 2024, pp. 7-16. Accessed: Oct 22, 2024. [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu). [https://www.academia.edu/116757429/Results\\_of\\_the\\_Winter\\_2023\\_Excavation\\_Season\\_at\\_Berenike\\_Red\\_Sea\\_Coast\\_Egypt\\_Thetis\\_28\\_2023\\_2024\\_](https://www.academia.edu/116757429/Results_of_the_Winter_2023_Excavation_Season_at_Berenike_Red_Sea_Coast_Egypt_Thetis_28_2023_2024_).

## END NOTES

- 1 The images of the excavated artifacts could not be reproduced because the archeologists will be publishing a paper discussing these finds later in 2025: S.E. Sidebotham, R. Ast, M. Bergmann, J.K. Rądkowska, S. Bhandare, I. Strauch, S. Popławski and M. Castro, "Indians in Roman Berenike," *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts*. The images can be found in the reports on the excavations listed in the bibliography.
- 2 Giovanni Battista Belzoni (1778-1823) is famous for having discovered the tomb of Sety I and opening the pyramid of Khafre. *British Museum*. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIOG53085>
- 3 The details of the coin can be found here: <https://coinindia.com/galleries-kanishka.html>
- 4 *Brahmi* – It is the ancient Indian script and is the ancestral writing system for all Indian languages, except Kharosthi. "Among the many descendant scripts of Brahmi are those of the Indo-Gangetic Plain, such as Devanagari (used for Sanskrit, Hindi, and other regional languages) and the Bengali and Gujarati scripts; those of the Deccan region, including the scripts for Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and Kannada; the script for Sinhala in Sri Lanka; that of Tibetan in the Tibetan Highlands; and several alphabets in Southeast Asia, including those for Thai and Khmer" (Encyclopedia Britannica). After the decimal system was devised by Indian mathematicians, the Hindu numerals from Brahmi script spread throughout the world. Brahmi was fully developed by 3rd century BCE, as evidenced by rock edicts of Ashoka (reigned c. 265–238 BCE). <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Brahmi>
- 5 The term aniconic means a symbolic or suggestive representation of religious figures in visual culture as opposed to creating their likeness or images.
- 6 The sherd found at Didymoi can be seen here: <https://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/publications/fifao67/?id=477>
- 7 *Sangha*: A community of celibate monks and nuns who follow strict discipline and teach the Dharma to fellow Buddhists. [https://hwpi.harvard.edu/files/pluralism/files/the\\_sangha-the\\_buddhist\\_community\\_1.pdf](https://hwpi.harvard.edu/files/pluralism/files/the_sangha-the_buddhist_community_1.pdf)

# MUTUAL ASCENT

*By Amy Harcourt*

At 75 miles per hour, her body hit the water.

Her camera lens shattered on impact, as did her collarbone.

Jackson was new to the job. After a string of pointless gigs, he landed this one in hopes that it would be different. When he spotted her, he momentarily forgot why he was there.

She walked with purpose, on strong legs. He'd noticed the flex of her quads, announcing themselves with each strike, right through the pattern of her fishnet stockings. Swimmer? Sprinter? He'd always liked women with muscle. Not the ones at the gym who tried to distract him, but those who used their strength to focus on more important shit than him.

There she stood, in wild patterned stockings, super-short cutoffs, and well-worn boots. Her platinum hair caught the wind and the morning light, just rising over Oakland, set it on fire. With her face turned to the sun, a long shaft of darkness fell behind her. He wondered how someone so small could cast such an oversized shadow.

He knew he needed to talk to her, to follow Bridge protocol, but as he approached, his mouth went dry.

She hadn't slept in three days. She was bone-tired yet crackling with energy.

She knew to walk 382 paces to the spot. She knew just how far she'd have to hoist her leg to clear the railing. She knew she'd hit the water in four seconds. She even knew to watch for him. What she didn't know, could never have known, is that he'd have pale green eyes and café latte skin. Her body sent off a spark, and she snapped a shot of him.

"Good morning," he said, mock modeling for the camera, flipping non-existent hair from his shoulders. He was good at using humor to cover for shyness. Had been this way since he was a kid.

"Morning!" she said brightly. "The lens likes you."

"The light's good this morning. Amazingly, no fog. What brings you out here so early?"

"Taking photos," she said, with the slightest catch in her voice.

"Yeah, it's the single-most photographed landmark in the country. A real magnet."

His phone rang and startled them both. He silenced it as he took it from his pocket.

"Uh-huh," she said quietly. "I usually photograph people. People like you," she practically whispered, wondering what he looked like under those government-issued clothes.

Was she flirting with him? After so many months on steroids, the tightening in his pants surprised him. He shifted slightly, not sure what to do.

She looked at him with her large sapphire eyes, through small cat-eye glasses. The sight of her collarbone through the open neckline of her polka dot blouse caught him off guard. He wondered if she had a cat, like Oscar, who nuzzled into that triangular pool just above her clavicle. In the early morning light, her delicate skin was iridescent.

Taking in a slow breath, she smiled the smile of a woman who understands her effect.

“Hey, let’s do a selfie!” she said as she grabbed his phone and pulled him to her side. She tucked her head into the crook of his neck and struck a pose at her outstretched arm.

She was so close. He took in her scent. Shampoo, sweat, and something he didn’t recognize. He felt dizzy with the heat of her. He needed to pull away.

After a few deft swipes at his phone, she handed it back to him.

He took it, lingering over the feel of her fingers and tucked it back into his pocket. He thanked her for the photos and joked that he hoped she was going to make him famous. Then he said a quick, awkward goodbye and walked away.

He felt something lift deep inside. A feeling he hadn’t had in years. He was thinking about how he would regain his cool and talk to her when he left the bridge. With that thought to buoy him, he turned back for one more look.

But she was gone.

In life, four seconds is barely noticeable. In death, it’s an eternity. As her hands left the railing, she felt her life release, like steam spreading its fingers upward, as gravity pulled her to its source. Every feeling that had once weighed her down now set her aloft. Despair, sorrow, fear, and regret turned to vapor, twirling in the morning air. As she broke the surface of the water, she saw herself, in the light of his green eyes.

Jackson dropped his keys onto the table by his door and slumped deeply into his favorite chair. Oscar jumped onto his lap and pushed his head up under his chin.

After hours of searching, the Coast Guard found her bag, but no body. Bridge Patrol questioned him all afternoon. Why had he not followed protocol? Why did he believe her when she said she was there to take photos?

Now, in the quiet of his apartment, he remembered her red-rimmed eyes and how he had learned in training that suicidal resolve can look like calm. Even happiness. And then, with the weight of deep knowing, he recognized her scent. Under all that beauty and confidence, was the unmistakable smell of fear.

Why had he not known this then?

Because as she stood there in the morning light, smiling at him, he was filled with the hope of her.

He stretched his long fingers through Oscar’s fur, thinking back over a day that would forever change him. Oscar purred deeply. A tear fell onto his thick coat. Then another.

His phone rang, startling Oscar onto the floor. Jackson fished it from his pocket with shaking hands. When he finally raised it to his face to say hello, there she was, smiling at him. Through a watery haze.

BUT SHE WAS GONE.

# Can Generative Artificial Intelligence Algorithms Administer Justice Impartially?

by Robert M. Mason III, MLA '13

**I**F you ask, most responders will claim that they don't harbor any biases based on race, gender, religion, or sexual predisposition and will, instead, assert in all honesty, that they judge people impartially. It is only natural for people to believe that they treat others fairly and hope that others will do the same for them. Such a belief is the natural outgrowth of a teaching that has been handed down for generations and has its genesis in *The Bible*: "Do to others as you would have them do to you."

Studies have demonstrated, however, that all humans, including judges who have pledged per the canons of judicial ethics to administer justice impartially, to some degree or another unknowingly harbor what psychologists call "implicit biases" which can adversely impact defendants of color appearing in criminal courts for bail and sentencing determinations. To confront this racial inequity, the Conference of Chief Justices adopted a resolution that encouraged courts to consider utilizing programs that promote public safety while reducing recidivism (i.e., the capacity for a defendant to re-offend). As a result, the American Bar Association urged states to consider utilizing Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) technologies that adopt risk assessment tools provided the algorithms are used transparently, and the results are unbiased.

Creators of GAI systems believe that they have come up with a technological solution to eliminate implicit bias from the bail and sentencing phases of the criminal justice system. By using machine learning models known as generative

adversarial networks and transformers, along with large language models, the creators can now equip GAI systems with what are called risk assessment algorithms. GAI proponents claim that their algorithms can objectively evaluate a defendant's risk capacity to re-offend which can then inform bail and sentencing determinations without regard to a defendant's race. As computer thinking is purportedly free from human preconceived opinions about people and their criminal proclivities because of their race, advocates claim there is a minimal chance that the algorithms will fall prey to the implicit biases that have plagued the administration of criminal justice since its inception. Because of these optimistic predictions, GAI has been seen as a welcome development that comes on the heels of the legal system's recognition that implicit bias is a problem that cannot be eliminated without technological assistance.

But are GAI risk assessment algorithms the panacea that they purport to be? While risk assessment algorithms hold great promise in helping to instill race-neutral decision-making into the judicial sentencing process, they can unknowingly contain implicit biases that mimic human biases. Until these computer-based biases are eliminated, and legal challenges to the admissibility of the algorithm's conclusions are overcome, the courts and the public should be skeptical about the ability of risk assessment algorithms to administer justice in a racially neutral manner that is superior to humans and, instead, should rely on such algorithms sparingly and with protective legal guardrails in place.

Before engaging in an in-depth analysis of GAI-created risk algorithms and their claimed accuracy, it will be helpful to examine the problem that the algorithms have been tasked to solve. Implicit bias, a term first coined by psychology professors Mahzarin Banaji and Anthony Greenwald in 1995, is defined as “unconscious favoritism towards or prejudice against people of a particular ethnicity, gender, or social group that influences one’s actions or perceptions” that are “shaped by experience and based on learned associations between particular qualities and social categories” Implicit bias can take on various forms: confirmation bias (giving credence to information that coincides with preexisting beliefs and devalues other information); blind spot bias (thinking others may be biased, but not yourself); overconfidence bias (attributing too much importance to one’s own beliefs and expertise); affinity bias (favoring people with similar backgrounds, characteristics, and interests); anchoring bias (relying too much on first impressions); and hindsight bias (perceiving past events as more obvious in retrospect).

Confirmation bias is one of the forms of implicit bias that can become evident when race is factored into evaluating a person’s abilities. In 2014, a study was conducted in which 60 partners of various races from 22 different law firms were given the same research memo that contained identical typographical and substantive errors from a hypothetical third-year associate. Half the partners were told that the associate was African American. The other half were told that the associate was White. On average, the memo purportedly written by the African American associate received a significantly lower score and more critical comments regarding writing ability. More of the planted errors were detected in the memo supposedly authored by the African American associate. The data confirmed the researchers’ hypothesis that “there are commonly held racially-based perceptions about writing ability that unconsciously impact our ability to objectively evaluate a lawyer’s writing. Most of the perceptions uncovered in research thus far indicate that commonly held perceptions are biased against African Americans and in favor of Caucasians.” The result of this study led to California passing Assembly Bill 242 (Kamlager-Dove) which requires all attorneys in California to undergo implicit bias training.

What causes humans to engage in implicit bias? Surprisingly, the answer stems from certain brain functions that have a beneficial nonracial purpose. First, our brains function

by looking for patterns. While we may not realize it, our brains have a natural tendency to look for patterns and associations in the world. Social cognition, which is our ability to store and process information, is dependent on this ability to form associations. Second, our brains like to try to simplify the world. Because the brain is constantly inundated with more information than it can conceivably process, employing mental shortcuts makes it faster and easier for the brain to sort through all the data. Thus, the brain is continuously looking for patterns and shortcuts when evaluating other people based on race, gender, sexual predisposition, socio-economic status, and physical appearance.

### BY USING MACHINE LEARNING MODELS KNOWN AS GENERATIVE ADVERSARIAL NETWORKS AND TRANSFORMERS, ALONG WITH LARGE LANGUAGE MODELS, THE CREATORS CAN NOW EQUIP GAI SYSTEMS WITH WHAT ARE CALLED RISK ASSESSMENT ALGORITHMS.

While the purpose of this brain function may appear to be racially benign, as applied it can have a direct and negative racial impact on how people are perceived and treated in the workplace, healthcare settings, and in legal proceedings. For example, in criminal proceedings, the assigned judge must use his/her discretion in making determinations of a defendant’s capacity for recidivism in deciding whether to grant bail or to make a sentencing decision. This is a grave responsibility entrusted to judges because the lives and liberty of criminally charged defendants hang in the balance. An estimated half a million people in the United States are held in pre-trial detention, with Black and Brown defendants being detained more often than White defendants charged with similar crimes. When the higher rate of incarceration is combined with the economic disparities based on race, Black and Brown defendants have greater difficulty in making cash bail, which can worsen case outcomes and lead to “job losses, housing disruptions, family problems or other damages.”

Being able to take consideration of a defendant's race out of a bail or sentencing recommendation is where GAI proponents claim that their algorithms are superior to human thinking. Risk assessment algorithms evaluate a defendant's risk of rearrest before trial or failure to appear in court by assigning a defendant a risk score ranging from low to high that judges use when making release or bail decisions. The beneficial theory behind these algorithms is they can reduce the burden of work for the courts and reduce the introduction of biases among judges and court officials, resulting in more expeditious, accurate, and objective predictions about a defendant's recidivism risk.

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GAI advocates' claim of algorithmic race neutrality was put to the test with the development and use of COMPAS (Correctional Offender Management Profiling for Alternative Solutions). Developed by Northpointe (now known as Equivant) and has been used to assess more than 1 million offenders, COMPAS is a risk and need assessment instrument for the criminal justice system that informs decisions regarding the placement, supervision, and case management of offenders by focusing on predictors known to affect recidivism. COMPAS provides the defendant with a 137-item questionnaire (none of the questions ask a defendant's race) that covers the following topics: current charges; criminal history; non-compliance with legal obligations; family criminality; peers; substance abuse; residence/stability; social environment; education; vocation (work); leisure/recreation; social isolation; criminal personality; anger; and criminal attitudes. COMPAS analyzes the responses and conducts its research through publicly available data on the internet and assigns a risk score to those with a similar

history of offending who are either less likely or more likely to commit another crime following release from custody. Notably, the COMPAS risk assessment does not predict the specific likelihood that an individual offender will re-offend. Instead, it provides a prediction based on a comparison of information about the individual to a similar data group. Equivant claims that statistically based risk/need assessments have become accepted as established and valid methods for organizing critical data and that research studies have concluded that objective statistical assessments are superior to human judgment.

COMPAS' ability to effectively eliminate human implicit bias in the sentencing determination phase of a trial was challenged in the case of *State of Wisconsin v. Loomis* (881 N.W.2d 749 [2016].) Eric Loomis was charged with 5 criminal counts for allegedly participating as the driver in a drive-by shooting. He denied involvement in the shooting but ultimately accepted a guilty plea to two lesser charges. The court ordered a pre-sentence investigation with a COMPAS-prepared risk assessment that evaluated Loomis' pretrial recidivism risk, general recidivism risk, and violent recidivism risk. Based on these scores along with other sentencing factors, Loomis was denied probation and was sentenced to six years in prison followed by 5 years of extended supervision.

On appeal, Mr. Loomis challenged the use of COMPAS at sentencing, in part, because the results were not an accurate determiner of a defendant's risk. Loomis pointed to, and the Court acknowledged, that there were accusations from the scientific literature that risk assessment algorithms like COMPAS disproportionately classify minority offenders as higher risk, often due to factors that may be outside their control, such as familial background and education. A study of COMPAS's recidivism scores based on data from 10,000 criminal defendants in Broward County, Florida, concluded that Black defendants were far more likely than white defendants to be incorrectly judged to be at a higher risk of recidivism. Likewise, White defendants were more likely than Black defendants to be incorrectly flagged as low risk.

In response, Equivant disputed the analysis and there are published studies that appear to support the algorithm's accuracy. Equivant also claimed that COMPAS has an overall accuracy rate of 65% and that its accuracy percentage

is the same for Black and White defendants. However, the Wisconsin Supreme Court did not have to decide which side of the scientific debate was right. Instead, *Loomis* said these studies raise legitimate concerns regarding how a COMPAS assessment's risk factors correlate with a defendant's race and that going forward COMPAS must inform the sentencing court about the cautions raised regarding its risk assessment's accuracy. With that and other guard rails in place, the Wisconsin Supreme Court affirmed Mr. Loomis' sentence. Mr. Loomis asked the United States Supreme Court to accept review via a writ of *certiorari*, but the Court declined.

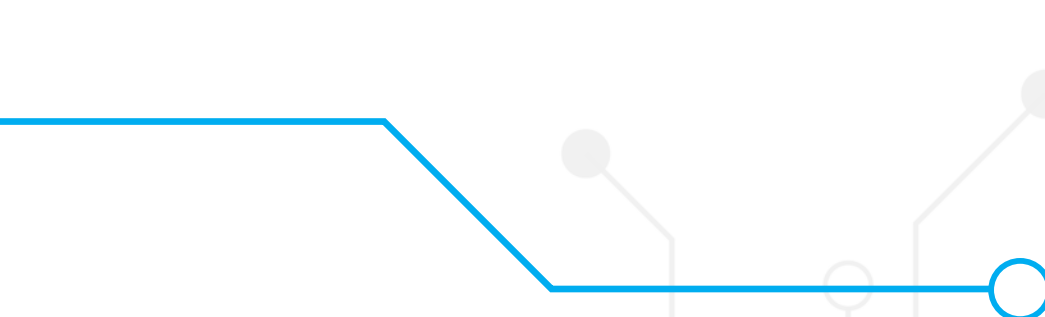
Since the *Loomis* decision, the debate has continued in the scientific community about the accuracy and fairness of risk assessment algorithms, with studies coming down on opposite sides of the controversy. One study suggested that because of the presence of computerized implicit bias in algorithms, some judges are using the algorithm's conclusions to justify the decisions they already want to make. It is doubtful that the developers of risk assessment algorithms would have intended the courts to use the algorithms' conclusion as a judicial rationale for engaging in confirmation bias. Yet until we can be certain that such algorithms are free of implicit bias, there is the potential that these algorithms may perpetuate the very biases that they were designed to eliminate. We must remember, however, that COMPAS is not a static algorithm and that, over time, the developers hope that they will be able to improve COMPAS' accuracy rate. Thus, time will tell if a later iteration alleviates the concerns about the algorithm's current propensity to mirror implicit bias.

In the meantime, the scientific studies referenced in *Loomis* and elsewhere merit closer scrutiny because they underscore the concern of whether risk assessment algorithms eliminate or perpetuate implicit bias. Detractors say no and as proof point to three sources that can contribute to causing risk assessment algorithms to harbor implicit biases. First, algorithms may use race proxies in their questioning. While COMPAS and other risk assessment algorithms claim their questions do not explicitly ask about race, questions are asked that can be considered as proxies for race (*e.g.* ability to pay a fine or prior arrests are questions that can be synonymous with race). For example, the ACLU argued that data like a defendant's age, substance use, family relations, and community ties can serve, alone and together, as race proxies. Second, training data may include instances of

implicit bias. Training data through which the AI learns about the world and how to make predictions about recidivism can include stereotyped biases from textual data that reflect everyday human culture. Thus, by using criminal justice data to train algorithms, developers may be unintentionally creating racist AI thinking. Additionally, the training process may create feedback loops that ultimately classify people based on race and ethnicity. In the criminal justice context, poor minority groups are more likely to score higher in risk assessment predictions because the tools have large amounts of their data, which puts them at risk of more policing and indictments, ultimately reinforcing the system's biases towards those groups, meaning that the outcomes of predictions may unjustly influence future predictions.

**THE BENEFICIAL THEORY BEHIND THESE ALGORITHMS IS THEY CAN REDUCE THE BURDEN OF WORK FOR THE COURTS AND REDUCE THE INTRODUCTION OF BIASES AMONG JUDGES AND COURT OFFICIALS, RESULTING IN MORE EXPEDITIOUS, ACCURATE, AND OBJECTIVE PREDICTIONS ABOUT A DEFENDANT'S RECIDIVISM RISK.**

Third, human bias can be transferred to computer systems from data scientists and programmers who create and train the algorithms. Studies have raised concerns that human bias from data scientists creating and training algorithms may also intentionally or unintentionally encroach into the data. For example, if a scientist makes a series of choices when designing the formulas to be used by the algorithm, that scientist might be motivated by either an expressed or implicit animosity toward a racial group, or else a prior belief that race correlates with criminality and then design the algorithm on that basis.



How, then, can we assess the accuracy of risk assessment algorithms to ensure that they are free of the very implicit biases that they were created to avoid? Unfortunately, there is a fundamental roadblock standing in the way of evaluating the accuracy of risk assessment algorithms — the claim of trade secrecy. As was seen in *Loomis*, the methodology behind how it works is considered a confidential trade secret not to be publicly disseminated. As such, courts cannot evaluate how the risk scores are determined or how the risk factors are weighed. This was a problem that the *Loomis* Court was confronted with, but the advancement of the trade secret claim did not stop the Court from considering COMPAS' risk-score conclusions because there was other public evidence in the record that reached similar conclusions. Nonetheless, there have been other instances where prosecutors have refused, on trade secret grounds, to disclose to the defendant and the court how the risk assessment algorithm works, causing courts to engage in creative balancing tests that allow defendants access to how the algorithm works while still protecting the claims of trade secrecy.

Although *Loomis* was able to finesse the trade secret issue, a closer look at the trade secret claim is in order because it raises important due process considerations when a court is asked to base its decisions on the algorithm's recommendations but is not given access to how the algorithm uses information to calculate a defendant's risk score. California Civil Code section 3426.1 (d) defines a trade secret as information, including a formula, pattern, compilation, program, device, method, technique, or process, that: "(1) Derives independent economic value, actual or potential, from not being generally known to the public or to other persons who can obtain economic value from its disclosure or use; and (2) Is the subject of efforts that are reasonable under the circumstances to maintain its secrecy." (Cal. Civ. Code, § 3426.1, subd. (d).) A review of the available case law reveals that GAI developers continue to make their trade secret claims by asserting that they allow district attorney offices access to the algorithm for a fee by way of a confidentiality agreement. The developer receives compensation from the county's use of the algorithm, which is not shared publicly, thus preventing a business competitor from gaining access to the algorithm to understand and replicate its secret functionality.

But the establishment of a trade secret claim does not end the legal inquiry. A trade secret claim is not an absolute

**YET UNTIL WE CAN BE CERTAIN THAT SUCH ALGORITHMS ARE FREE OF IMPLICIT BIAS, THERE IS THE POTENTIAL THAT THESE ALGORITHMS MAY PERPETUATE THE VERY BIASES THAT THEY WERE DESIGNED TO ELIMINATE.**

privilege like the attorney-client privilege so California courts must conduct a balancing test to weigh the need to protect the sanctity of the privilege versus the public's and the defendant's interest in requiring the information's disclosure. Resolving the balancing test requires a consideration of due process that is in the United States and California Constitutions. Due process is defined as notice and the opportunity to be heard and can be found in the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: "No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws." Due process has two components: notice and the opportunity to be heard. Yet if a court is asked to rely on an algorithm for determining risk or in making a sentencing recommendation, shouldn't the defendant and the court be allowed to see how the algorithm made its determination? How does one confront and cross-examine an algorithm without knowing how it works? Do the programming data scientists have to come to court and explain how the algorithm works? As noted above, these due process concerns were raised in *Loomis* but the Court agreed with the state that COMPAS' risk scores were based largely on static information (criminal history) with limited use of some dynamic variables (criminal associates, substance abuse) so it was not a situation in which portions of the COMPAS report were considered by the court but not released to the defendant.

But the Court's analysis in *Loomis* overlooks the fact that COMPAS and other risk assessment algorithms may create an inequitable dependency on their conclusions. Since the

algorithms do not disclose how they use gathered information to calculate the risk scores, a court may be unduly swayed by their conclusions as computerized thinking comes with a heightened imprimatur of accuracy even if there is other potentially corroborative or contradictory evidence in the record. This practice of giving greater credence to the truthfulness of algorithms without understanding how they work is similar to the Black-Box Algorithm syndrome where known data is input (the input data) into the Black-Box Algorithm which then evaluates the input data and then presents its recommendations (the output data). Without access to how the Black-Box Algorithm assesses the input data, there is no way to know how much weight the algorithm is giving data that may be racially suspect, and a judge may default to accepting the algorithm's conclusions without truly comprehending their accuracy. Such an outcome would deprive the defendant of his/her due process right to confront testimony that has been offered in court.

Next, if the trade secret and due process objections can be overcome, there are procedural and evidentiary matters that must also be addressed. How should GAI information be classified for use in the court proceeding? Is it a form of expert witness testimony? To answer this question, we must consider the rules for determining if the evidence is expert witness testimony. Evidence Code Section 720 provides: "(a) A person is qualified to testify as an expert if he has special knowledge, skill, experience, training, or education sufficient to qualify him as an expert on the subject to which his testimony relates. Against the objection of a party, such special knowledge, skill, experience, training, or education must be shown before the witness may testify as an expert. (b) A witness' special knowledge, skill, experience, training, or education may be shown by any otherwise admissible evidence, including his own testimony." A court will have to grapple with whether a risk assessment algorithm is a person or a witness.

Even if one were to establish that the conclusions of a risk assessment algorithm constitute expert witness testimony, a court must next consider the appropriate standard to use to determine its admissibility. California follows the *Frye* test for the admissibility of scientific expert witness testimony. A California court using the *Kelly-Frye* standard must decide whether the methodologies used by the expert witness follow the generally accepted practices of specialists

in that field through a two-step process. The first step analyzes the "reliability of the method" of testing used by the expert, which is established by expert testimony. The second step requires the expert to provide testimony sufficient to show that the expert is "qualified as an expert to give an opinion on the subject." Furthermore, the party offering the expert witness must "demonstrate that correct scientific procedures were used" by the expert. Courts will look at other cases where experts used the same technique or procedure, and if said procedure was accepted in other cases, the technique is deemed to be generally accepted. The party offering the algorithm as scientific evidence must satisfy all of the *Kelly-Frye* criteria before it can be admitted into evidence.

**EVEN IF ONE WERE TO ESTABLISH THAT THE CONCLUSIONS OF A RISK ASSESSMENT ALGORITHM CONSTITUTE EXPERT WITNESS TESTIMONY, A COURT MUST NEXT CONSIDER THE APPROPRIATE STANDARD TO USE TO DETERMINE ITS ADMISSIBILITY.**

In conclusion, despite the scientific and scholarly debate regarding the accuracy of risk assessment algorithms and the potential legal admissibility hurdles, it appears that risk assessment algorithms are here to stay as they do have a potential for good in aiding the judicial system by releasing defendants pretrial who do not pose a risk to society, thus eliminating prison overcrowding and giving all defendants, regardless of race, an equal and robust opportunity to defend themselves. But any court being asked to rely on such evidence must ensure that its uses are transparent and reliable. Despite their technological advances, computers are not yet perfect so we must be mindful of both their advantages and potential shortcomings in deciding the weight that judges should give their conclusions. In the end, while risk assessment algorithms have the potential to eliminate human implicit bias, it will be ironic if human beings suffer in the long run if the algorithms replicate the very human biases that they were created to eliminate.

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- 29 (*Frye v. U.S.* (D.C. Cir. 1923) 293 F. 1013); cited in *People v. Kelly* 17 Cal.3d 24 (1976.)
- 30 *Id.*
- 31 *Id.*
- 32 Keith Brannon, "AI sentencing cut jail time for low-risk offenders, but study finds racial bias persisted," *Tulane University* (January 23, 2024). [View PDF](#)
- 33 Alexandra "Mac" Taylor, "AI Prediction Tools Claim to Alleviate an Overcrowded American Justice System... But Should they be Used?" *Stanford Politics* (September 13, 2020). [AI Prediction Tools Claim to Alleviate an Overcrowded American Justice System... But Should they be Used? - Stanford Politics](#)



# RESISTANCE

*By Kristin Kueter, MLA '16*

The man's house  
stuck out  
in a field of asphalt.

Worn bare, scabbed over,  
it listed slightly in the middle of  
the JCPenney's parking lot  
of my suburban hometown.

Shoppers parked daily  
where his dad had worked on  
his cedar-striped canoe.

A Westfalia camper van  
pulled into the shadows of  
his mother's weeping willows.

A Pontiac station wagon,  
reeking of hairspray  
and off-gassing  
vinyl-slicked miniskirts,

unloaded teenagers  
into the side yard  
where he had learned to walk.

A Fiat convertible  
careened to a stop  
where his sister skinned her knee  
one blustery afternoon long ago.

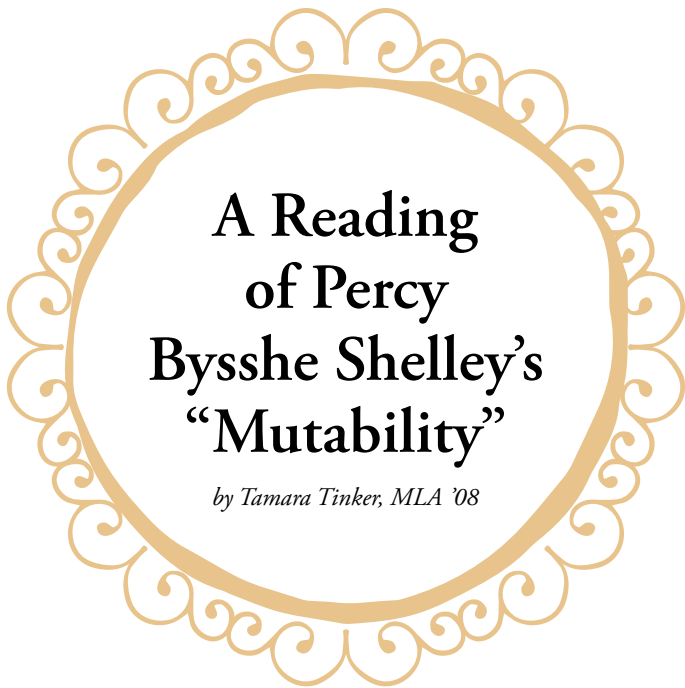
She had refused treatment  
until mother returned,  
racking her with guilt  
about leaving in the first place.

I parked near his front porch once,  
while my dad's rusted Volvo sedan  
knocked and rocked to a stop

and caught a glimpse  
of a middle-aged boy  
sitting in remembrances

as others drove  
over his life,  
burying it beneath

macadam and indifference,  
while he alone  
resisted.




# A Reading of Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Mutability"

by Tamara Tinker, MLA '08

"Mutability," a short lyric poem written by English Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, appeared in print for the first time in 1816 in a chapbook published when Shelley was in his mid-twenties and in mid-career. Although the loss of Shelley's manuscript has created confusion about the date of "Mutability," the poem involves themes, motifs, and vocabulary like those found in the thin volume's title poem, "Alastor"—believed to have been written in 1815. It is reasonable, therefore, to suppose that "Mutability" was written shortly before its publication.


"Mutability" is comprised of four quatrains. The ends of the first and third and second and fourth lines of each quatrain rhyme in the following pattern, *abab, cdcd, efef*, and *ghgh*. Rhymed quatrains typify poems (such as ballads and hymns) that are meant to be sung. But the internal metrical scheme of "Mutability" is irregular, giving it a meandering contemplative feel, with the exception that the third line of each quatrain uses consonance (a series of words that begin with consonants) to inject a breathless staccato into the poem that is appropriate to its subject matter—ineluctable change. In sum, the form of "Mutability" employs both the disciplines of traditional English verse and the liberties of modernity.

The first two stanzas of "Mutability" showcase its metrical characteristics and present a potential for confusion:



We are as clouds that veil the midnight moon;  
How restlessly they speed, and gleam, and quiver,  
    Streaking the darkness radiantly!—yet soon  
Night closes round, and they are lost for ever:

Or like forgotten lyres, whose dissonant strings  
    Give various response to each varying blast,  
To whose frail frame no second motion brings  
    One mood or modulation like the last.



Shelley casts himself upon the horns of a dilemma: are “we” like “clouds” (part of nature) “or” are “we” like “lyres” (part of art)? Ruminations made in the first, second, and fourth lines of the stanzas are counterbalanced by remonstrations in the third lines, as if to say that nature is powerful, but its phenomena are ephemeral; and art is sophisticated, but its products are tame. (Such ruminations and remonstrations will be repeated in the third and fourth stanzas except that in those last two stanzas Shelley abandons his search for similes in favor of a narrative that defines in literal terms who “we” are.)

The phrase, “Or like forgotten lyres...”, in the first line of the second stanza can give the reader pause: who or what is like forgotten lyres? The first stanza begins by comparing “we” to “clouds.” The first line of the second stanza begins by comparing “we,” elliptically, to “lyres.” The line should be read as meaning, “Or are we like forgotten lyres....” Shelley assumes that an attentive reader familiar with the economy of English verse understands that “or like” reconstructs the “are as” of the first stanza using a new simile.

Shelley’s “forgotten lyres” are Aeolian harps, stringed instruments set in open air and played by the breezes. (In the twenty-first century such devices are commonly made of percussive materials, such as bamboo or metal, and are called *wind chimes*.) Shelley, a philhellene, was thinking in “Mutability” not only of the Aeolian harp’s nineteenth-century applications but also of its ancient (hence “forgotten”) origins and its mythic aura, which he memorializes explicitly in *Queen Mab* when he assigns the unpredictable crescendos and decrescendos chanted by the instrument to the whims of protective spirits: “...Of that strange lyre whose strings/The genii of the breezes sweep...” (*QM*, I, 52-53)

Shelley’s regard for the Aeolian harp, however, was equivocal, as becomes apparent in “Alastor,” where the motif of the lyre appears twice, first in the frame story as a representation of the unnamed narrator, and again near the end of the poem as a representation of the unnamed “Poet” who is the subject of the narrative.

At the beginning of “Alastor,” the narrator implores the “Mother of this unfathomable world!” (line 18) for the inspiration to tell the tale of a solitary man who lives and dies miserably in the wild. (Puzzling that the narrator would have Mother Nature produce a poem about an unhappy life *in* Nature unless one concurs with the narrator, as suggested by the poem’s subtitle, “The Spirit of Solitude,” and the eulogy in line 60 of the frame story that solitude, not natural forces, destroys the Poet.) To become a fit mediator of his aspiration to write about solitude in nature, the first-person narrator imagines himself to be an ancient Aeolian harp, “...a long-forgotten lyre/ Suspended in the solitary dome/ Of some mysterious and deserted fane [temple]...”

where the lyre personified awaits,



thy breath, Great Parent, [in order] that my strain  
May modulate with murmurs of the air,  
And motions of the forests and the sea,  
And voice of living beings, and woven hymns  
Of night and day, and the deep heart of man. (“Alastor,” lines 42-49)



The body of the poem is thereafter taken up with the narrator’s sympathetic portrayal of the Poet’s disappointments as he wanders mostly alone in Central Asia and the Near East. As an ancient Aeolian lyre, the narrator successfully mediates a harmonious relationship between life and art in that he composes a tour de force of exquisite depictions of sublime natural phenomena while simultaneously following with tender regard the demise of a man whose “deep heart” succumbs to despair.

The narrator in “Alastor” also equates the Poet, who is his subject, with an Aeolian lyre, a very different sort of Aeolian lyre than he assigns to himself; rather, it predicts the “dissonant” lyre described in “Mutability.” The Poet’s “dark fate” (line 59) has the properties of a lyre that are emblematic of passivity that sinks into morbidity and finally succumbs to death:



A fragile lute, on whose harmonious strings  
 The breath of heaven did wander—a bright stream  
 Once fed with many-voiced waves—a dream  
 Of youth, which night and time have quenched for ever,

Still, dark, and dry, and unremembered now” (“Alastor,” lines 667-71)



“Mutability” essentially resolves the cognitive dissonance between the two discordant lyres associated with two disparate states of being—breathing and stillness—in “Alastor.” The etherealized lyre of the narrator and the exhausted lyre of the poet in “Alastor” are replaced in “Mutability” by a lyre that is an assemblage of “dissonant strings” capable of “One mood or modulation...” a thing that is neither an edification of nature nor a worthless artifact. Rather, it is a manufactured product made of natural materials that have a limited range of potentials. The lyre remains an emblem of actual and veritable experience, of life and art, in both “Alastor” and “Mutability,” but it ceases to represent matter and spirit in “Mutability”; instead, it represents matter and spiritlessness.

In the third and fourth stanzas of “Mutability,” Shelley abruptly abandons the quest for comparisons that preoccupies the first two. It is as if “clouds” and “lyres” become the discarded scaffolding of a building that can stand now on its own. Shelley who had been the devoted student of Wordsworth’s idealized pastoralism becomes instead the student of his own idealized activism, and the prolific writer who had felt profoundly alone among England’s complacent gentry discovers that he is not alone among other committed activists. Thus, the final two stanzas of the poem take up a literalistic narrative driven by hard facts that arrive at blunt conclusions about who “we” are.



We rest. —A dream has power to poison sleep;  
 We rise. —One wandering thought pollutes the day;  
 We feel, conceive or reason, laugh or weep;  
 Embrace fond woe, or cast our cares away:  
 It is the same! —For, be it joy or sorrow,  
 The path of its departure still is free:  
 Man’s yesterday may ne’er be like his morrow;  
 Nought may endure but Mutability.



## END NOTES

Shelley would not live to celebrate his thirtieth birthday. He drowned while sailing off the west coast of Italy near where he had lived with his family during the final months of his life.

Reiman places “Mutability” after “Alastor” in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, which suggests that he believes, as I do, for reasons explained in this paper, that “Mutability” is chronologically the latter of the two poems.

Reiman, Donald H., and Neil Fraistat, eds. “Mutability.” *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2002. 91. Print.

Published in 1813, three years before “Mutability,” *Queen Mab* is generally considered to mark the end of Shelley’s juvenilia and the beginning of his mature canon. An encyclopedic work, it lays a foundation of themes, motifs, and vocabulary that “Alastor” and “Mutability” build on.

“Alastor,” title poem of a verse narrative of 720 lines, was first published in the same thin volume as “Mutability” and might be regarded as asking questions about identity that “Mutability” answers. I have added bracketed words to citations in order to clarify for contemporary readers the grammar of Shelley’s nineteenth-century diction.

Op. cit. 75.

Op. cit. 89.

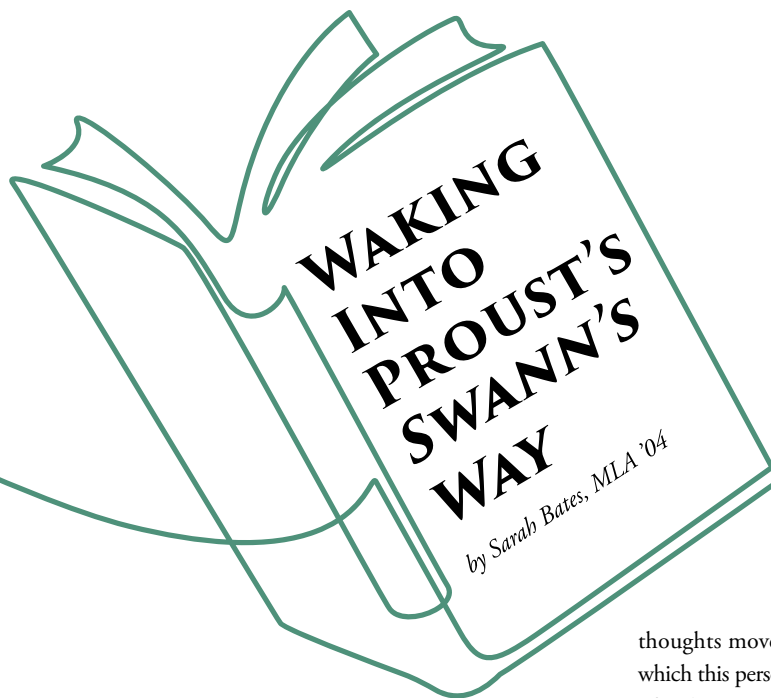
Shelley’s sonnet, “To Wordsworth” (Reiman 92), denounces Wordsworth’s increasingly conservative politics in that it portrays Wordsworth as having died to the ideals of “truth and liberty.” When Shelley’s announcing the political death of Wordsworth appeared in the same volume as “Alastor” and “Mutability,” the older Romantic was alive and publishing, would become England’s poet laureate, and would outlive his young critic by almost three decades.



## **grief**

*by Prabhu Palani,  
MLA '09*

Unexpected  
Thy gnarly hands  
Suffocate  
A heaving chest  
Of sadness  
Never to escape  
The cries are loud  
And yet lips sealed  
Of agony and fury  
A storm contained  
In every breath  
Grief knocks  
A gentle tap  
Pebbles moved  
In the cosmos  
A whole world  
Collapses inside  
The Book said  
In the midst of life  
We're in death  
Grief is the mirror  
Of a soul  
That has once known  
Joy



**MEMORY IS UNRELIABLE**, and I suspect mine is especially so. I recall the moment thirty years ago when I first heard of Marcel Proust and *In Search of Lost Time* from a stranger on an airplane, but I am not confident that any of the details that I think I recall are not embellishments. I suspect Proust would suggest that the inventions of memory are truer to

my experience than a strict recounting of facts. But I am new to Proust, and I find myself guessing and reforming hypotheses around his ideas as I read, including his suggestions are offerings for inquiry and not firmly held beliefs.

This year Professor Carolyn Sinsky guided a curious group through the first 120 pages of *Swann's Way* in LIT 178: Reading Proust for Pleasure. By assigning only twenty pages per week, she gave us the opportunity — the permission — to read and reread, to write out excerpts, to savor the rhythms of the language, and to ponder stylistic choices. We were invited to linger over words, sentences and paragraphs and to observe not just the text but what it evoked in us uniquely, specific to our own memories. We were asked to journal daily in response to the text. This prompted me to reflect on how I was understanding and engaging with the reading. At the start of any book, readers experience a period of orientation. What I found in the early passages of this multi-volume series is that Proust has placed a tutorial of sorts to guide us forward, priming us with some philosophical proposals for on-going scrutiny. Reading slowly made the mechanisms of this tutorial more evident.

For example, the opening passages of *Swann's Way* take the fledgling reader into the mind of someone on the verge of waking up. At this border between sleep and waking,

thoughts move fluidly through different bedrooms in which this person has slept while he reflects on the sensations of waking. Following these meandering recollections is akin to the struggle to wake from sleep and make sense of where one is, when one is, and remember who one is. Readers ask “who is speaking?” and “from what place and time?” Proust takes the experience of waking up and expands it to nine pages. It is both a description of the narrator’s internal journey during the waking process as well as an evocation of the experience internally for the reader. These nine pages prepare us for what is ahead, for how to read and experience the text, and for what the author is about to do across the series of books. As he will do repeatedly, the narrator articulates explicitly the path forward where he will be, “recalling our life in the old days at Combray . . . , at Balbec, Paris, Doncières, Venice, and the rest; remembering again all the places and people I had known, what I had actually seen of them, and what others had told me”(9). It will take nine pages for the narrator to fully awake, and over the course of these pages, we are challenged, provoked, implicated, and ultimately given tools to read the larger work.

In these passages, the narrator reflects on the process of waking, attaching it to the sense of a body on the bed, the perception of the physical objects in the bedroom, to the lingering emotions from dreams, and to other locales and times in life in which the narrator has awoken. The impressions that these normally fleeting associations make on the narrator’s mind is the topic under scrutiny right from the beginning and remains the topic for page after page. A sliver of time (the moment of waking) is expanded and meticulously expounded. This is unusual enough to be unsettling: we ask ourselves if we are reading correctly and following the intended series of thoughts; have we associated the pronouns with the right noun? And so we double back in the text, reread and revisit an earlier moment, another sliver of time,

for clarity. This state of confusion and retracing is mirrored by the state of confusion on waking and interpreting the surrounding objects, which the narrator describes explicitly: “I would be astonished to find myself in a state of darkness, pleasant and restful...for my mind...to which it [the darkness] appeared incomprehensible”(1). We already feel a parallel sense of the disorientation and so are already transcending the space between reading about an experience and participating in it. In addition, Proust describes the state as “pleasant and restful,” so that even while unsettled by the meandering text, we also experience an assuring sense of being guided. The description of this state of waking when the mind is prone to wander is described so well that we recognize and find comfort in that familiarity. The way in which Proust creates the shared experience and then describes it explicitly demonstrates a recurring tug between confusion and clarity. And thus we learn that the text will challenge and then reassure us. The message that this reading journey will regularly reward and provide “pleasant and restful” respites if we have the faith to embrace the struggle through that which “appear[s] incomprehensible.”

The associations that are rampant in these early pages are not always memories, but also creations, where characters or events are invented or imagined, emphasizing aspects of an experience: “I would lay my cheeks gently against the comfortable cheeks of my pillow, as plump and fresh as the cheeks of childhood. I would strike a match to look at my watch. Nearly midnight. The hour when an invalid, who has been obliged to set out on a journey and to sleep in a strange hotel, [is] awakened by a sudden spasm...”(2). Who is this invalid out on a journey? Why was he obliged to go on a journey? Is this a new person being introduced? Or is this the narrator’s mind wandering through the folds of memory and associations, creating a character in which to invest them. Are we the poor invalid, compelled on a reading journey and discovering ourselves in the dark? But the grammar provides the scaffolding, and we can assure ourselves that this is, as far as we are able to know, a simple (though

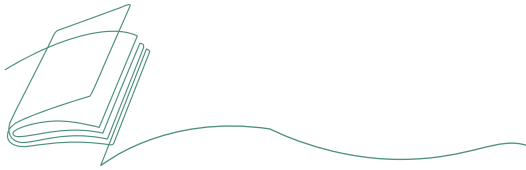
elaborate and slightly odd) analogy. But why introduce suffering into the paragraph that started gaily with “plump and fresh” pillows? Why is it that the invalid “must lie all night suffering without remedy”(2)?

There is something more here. A fictional character is being used to thread a contrasting emotion through the seemingly contented narrator with his head on the pillow. Is the invalid the future narrator, more wizened by life’s challenges and so coloring the pleasant memory with a tinge of struggle, sadness and sense of tragedy since he knows what is to come? Otherwise, why is this association here? And so, on page two, we are getting a sense of how to speculate about the role of these analogies, holding them in mind with faith that more will reveal itself. This reading will require a tolerance for losing one’s way and a willingness to conjure, reflect, inquire, imagine and have faith. The analogy to the invalid tells much about the narrator (though exactly the identity is still nebulous) and also much about the book. There is a richness on just page two of the text where nothing has happened; the narrator has yet to awaken, but we have traveled across time and bedrooms and into a strange inn and joined a stranger in suffering on a journey, just as we are starting our own.

Having begun to reckon with the detailed analogy about the invalid, the narrator prepares us for the way the text slips through analogies, across periods of time, and between perspectives of both his young and old versions. Instead of events that are sequential in time and consistently from a narrator of a given age, the narrative sequence is prompted by associations to the sense of waking into a body in a particular shape in a particular bed: “The memory of a new [bodily] position would spring up, and the wall would slide away...I was in my room in Mme de Saint-Loup’s house... I [had] come in from my walk with Mme de Saint-Loup... many years have now elapsed since the Combray days...[and] coming in from the longest latest walks...It is a very different kind of life that one leads at Tansonville...and a different kind of pleasure that I derive from taking walks...”(6). We have moved from Mme de Saint-Loup’s house, through Combray and Tansonville, always waking or walking, always returning home. There is this echo in the sense of waking, in the sense of returning home from a walk, and in the sense of home itself that ties these impressions together as well as contrasts them: “it is a very different kind of life that one leads,” reminding us that we cannot really, through memory, recapture our past without it being informed by the knowledge of what came next. And, here, we feel the presence of that invalid creeping back into the reflection of putting one’s head down on plump pillows. The past becomes laced with



*A fictional character is being used to thread a contrasting emotion through the seemingly contented narrator with his head on the pillow.*



*It will take nine pages for the narrator to fully awake, and over the course of these pages, we are challenged, provoked, implicated, and ultimately given tools to read the larger work.*

what came after it when visited from the mind invested with all those future memories. We are increasingly aware of the narration describing not just the events of any particular moment, but of how those events are understood from the perspective of a future narrator that is overlaying early memories with later ones.

By introducing this idea that a recalled event is colored by events that follow it, Proust is guiding us to participate—not just as readers but as fellow inquirers—into the nature of memory and recounted events. We participate in philosophizing, trying on ideas, and may notice ourselves overlaying the narrative with our own personal associations. The particulars of the narrator’s experience are generalized into a thesis about how memories and stories are experienced. We might imagine ourselves speaking when the narrator reports, “It seemed to me that I myself was the immediate subject of my book...Then it would begin to seem unintelligible, as the thoughts of a previous existence must... The subject of my book would separate itself from me, leaving me free to apply myself to it or not”(1). Yes, we are free to apply the ideas investigated in the text or not, but what is clear is that this isn’t just the story of an individual but an exploration of what it is to be—and to be conscious. Again, this abstraction is described explicitly: “I could not even be sure at first who I was; I had only the most rudimentary sense of existence, such as may lurk and flicker in the depths of an animal’s consciousness” (4). The boundary between reader and narrator collapses, and we join the narrator in a sensorial and reflective experience that becomes inquiring and philosophical about the nature of consciousness. We re-evaluate the interplay of memory with physical and temporal boundaries in the unusually impermeable state between sleep and wakefulness. And at this point we may now be conjecturing that the journey through these books will meander through this transcendent state periodically, like returning home.

This dreamlike permeability that brought us into the text withdraws and on page nine a more traditional storytelling


returns when the narrator tells us that he is awake, commenting, “Certainly I was now well awake...and the good angel of certainty had made all the surrounding objects stand still...”(9). And directly after announcing this wakefulness, he provides another signpost for the reader to help understand the mission of this multi-volume work, “recalling our life in the old days at Combray with my great-aunt, at Balbec, Paris, Doncières, Venice, and the rest; remembering again all the places and people I had known, what I had actually seen of them, and what others had told me”(9). But the same paragraph also suggests that the fidelity may not be to the physical reality of what happened but instead to the interpreted reality viewed through the prism of time and memory, including the memory of others’ reports. The retelling will be no more faithful to physics than the view of his room on waking, “the good angel of certainty...had fixed, approximately in their right places in the uncertain light, my chest of drawers, my writing-table, my fireplace, the window...”(9). The qualifiers “approximately” and “uncertain light” dismiss the importance of a strict physical accuracy. And by now, we may already trust that an interpreted accounting hews closer to internalized experiences than a strict, sequential accounting of physical things and occurrences.

In this project of recapturing lost time, Proust is elevating and emphasizing the experience of the mind over any faithful accounting of events. The mind does not strictly isolate locations, periods or episodes, nor honor the boundaries of objects, ideas and people. The mind analogizes, associates, creates and imagines. This is possibly most evident to any individual on the verge of waking, when we are least aware of ourselves as a human in the boundary of their body but still meandering through their sleeping mindscape, unconcerned with where one thing ends and another begins. This is perhaps when our uncontained experience is at its most distilled essence of what it is like to be a conscious being. It is therefore not surprising then that in endeavoring to create a faithful account of his life, the narrator leverages this common experience of waking up to train us to participate in his plan to recount “the rooms in which I had slept during my life... revisit them all in the long course of my waking dream”(7).

## END NOTES

Notes refer to page numbers in:

Proust, Marcel. *In Search of Lost Time, Volume 1: Swann’s Way*. Trans. C.K.Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin. Rev. D.J. Enright. New York: The Modern Library, 2003.



*A blind man  
dreams that he has  
recovered his sight*

*by John Angell Grant, MLA '13*

A blind man dreams that he has recovered his sight.  
He can see the village square in front of him,  
As he sips his blackberry tea  
At a table  
Outside a café.  
The morning is sunny,  
The weather fair,  
The women beautiful.  
His spirits soar.

Down the street a tortoiseshell cat  
Chases a dead leaf.

Can it always be like this, he wonders.

The man pays his bill, rises  
And walks to the river.  
Two boys are skipping stones.

Soon he treks back to his cottage,  
And sits down again,  
This time in an armchair on his front porch.  
He falls asleep; and when he awakens  
He can no longer see.  
He is blind again.

# In Search of Lost Time

## *How I learned to survive book club*

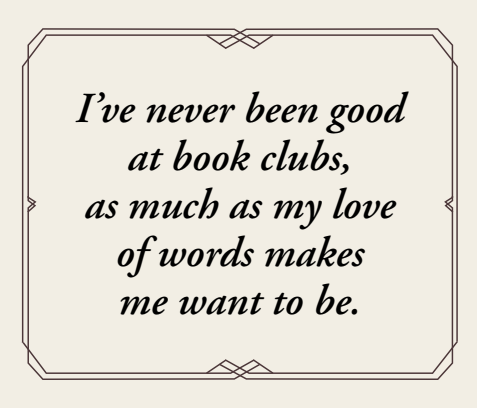
*by Barbara Wilcox, MLA '15*

**In** my late thirties I latched onto a book about exploring on foot the remnants of vanished Los Angeles, such as the beachfront neighborhood displaced by LAX and the widening of Sepulveda Boulevard, a principal north-south thoroughfare. I liked the idea of looking at one's past through an archaeological lens, and my past it was, for I grew up very near these places and watched their slow homogenization. I didn't understand, for I had not yet gotten a psychiatric diagnosis and treatment, how literally I would come to archaeologize my own life; how I'd spend years digging through piles of dissociated memory to find out what really happened, what my life has really been. The book resonated to me strongly, long before I knew why.

I brought the book to a book club I'd read about in a newspaper, possibly the *Sierra Club* newsletter, maybe the *East Bay Express* or the *Berkeley Monthly*. It was an Ecology Book Club. We met at a café on College Avenue in Rockridge, north Oakland. It was sparsely furnished with scarred wood tables and many, many coats of paint on the old crown moldings giving them a chewing-gum look.

The five or so members were all years older than I. They wore artsy, diaphanous clothes of the previous decade—not flashy or costly, but bohemian. Full long skirts, unsuited to office work because they would have caught under the castors of office chairs. Dangling earrings, scarves. An awful lot of fabric, no stretch.

I've never been good at book clubs, as much as my love of words makes me want to be. I read different stuff. Few bestsellers, unless they are quick reading or really nerdy. I would have liked to have been invited to a club I once heard of that went through biographies of all the U.S. presidents and then, when that was done, started in on all the vice presidents. That would have been right up my alley. But I don't read much fiction. It's that novels have cathartic moments with which I find it hard to empathize. Well past the point in my life I'm describing, I had rarely had one. To have catharsis, you have to have memory to catharsize, to transform from bad to good. I knew, at some level, that I was deficient in narrative. I disliked anything I could not unconditionally accept as "true" or "real."



*I've never been good  
at book clubs,  
as much as my love  
of words makes  
me want to be.*

I have what is called a dissociative disorder. You lose unbearable memories, or, more precisely, shunt them to another part of your brain. Trauma starts it; repeated trauma makes it worse. You walk around and have conversations that you later don't recall—or recall much later, suddenly and disturbingly. Think of losing your car in a parking lot, something that many people do. You don't remember your steps from the car to the mall, fixated instead on the lovely shopping within. Somehow folks always find their cars when the shopping is done, led by some fleeting memory or visual cue. Except that for those of us for whom dissociation is a problem, we push from mind not what's not important, but what is.

It's a terrible feeling. Other people know more about your life than you do. I felt ashamed. As my condition worsened, I'd go out on stories and come back to the newsroom with a blank notebook and no memory of what had been said. Eventually, I gave up a career I had worked for all my life, dogged by the shame of not knowing why I had to give it up, where my failing lay.

For I was a newswoman, dealing, ironically, in words and in facts. People told me extraordinary things. The Zimbabwean teenager who made a lesbian advance, then told me her life goal was to meet her mother, who had gone to South Africa in search of work and never returned. The Zimbabwean 9-year-old who asked me if "Do not rape" was in the Ten Commandments. My superior said, "They unburden these things on someone they think they'll never see again." I, however, wanted desperately to be seen again. I wanted to belong, not to be a depository of pain, either other people's or my own.

So here I was in the shabby café, clutching my beloved book—a high-stakes move, for words are my life—literally asking to be one of the club.

The women introduced themselves. I only remember one, a dark brunette. I'll call her Joan. Thin, with a pinched face. Her surname was unusual. She shared it with a well-known musician in town.

Merely to make conversation, I asked if they were related. Not his mother, I thought, but maybe an aunt.

She paused. "I was married to him."

I must have stared dumbly, incomprehensibly, trying to bridge the distance of age and time. This gentleman lived in my ribbon-candy memory eternally beautiful and young. He had worked at the record store on the corner of my street. He rang up my purchases and made rather aggressive proposals that I always immediately forgot turning down, triggered by his beauty weighed against his edge and his being much older, a parent, and married. Then he went home at night, evidently to this woman who sat before me, or else played in local clubs. After much effort he knocked out a hit, then another, and moved out of the neighborhood.

“Why?” Joan asked. “Do you know him?”

“No,” I shrugged. “Just his music.” This of course was not at all true. It just felt that way.

She eyed me stonily. “Are you sure? You look like him.”

*I, however, wanted desperately to be seen again. I wanted to belong, not to be a depository of pain, either other people's or my own.*

I extended my arms in a gesture of helplessness.

“You dress like him. Down to the striped shirt.”

I had nothing to say to this. Women have been wearing pants in public for quite a while now. Bateau-neck striped T-shirt, which I thought disguised my chest; narrow black pants; ankle-high black equestrian boots: that was my uniform. It conferred freedom, ease, mobility. If I got in trouble, I could run.

“I just want to make sure you're not anyone I have to worry about,” Joan said.

I told her my name. I perceived her trying to recall it. In those days, any connoisseur of traffic accidents could read my byline in Bay Area newspapers. Surely, though, she was rifling through the files of her ex's romantic past. I'm trying to capture her manner: dismissive, crisp.

“No, you're not,” she decided. “You're not anyone I have to worry about.”

I was annoyed, felt trivialized, offended. I said, “Maybe you should.”

All the heads in the group snapped around to look at her.

“Do you want to stay here?” Joan asked me.

I said yes, though I wasn't at all sure. They seemed very unlikeable people.

“Then behave.” And: “I'll tell him we met.” I thought little of this at the time. Except: Why are you so involved with your ex? The women did, however, accept my suggestion of the book to read for the next month's meeting—the book on LA and walking along its past. They hated it. Joan didn't like that it took place in LA. They all hated LA. I never went back to that book club. I immediately forgot, and much later remembered, that memory too.

Today, being older myself, I sympathize with Joan more deeply. Then, as a journalist, however impaired, who had made my own way for nearly 20 years, I thought, “For God's sake, let it go. Live your own life. Change your name back to Smith or whatever, and then no one will bring up your ex-husband, and you won't want to interrogate the sexual life of every woman on every fucking street. Get a job like everyone else. But if you want to live off popular culture, in the form of Mr. Pop Star's royalties, then maybe don't hate its economic nexus quite so much.”

Of course, it's not so easy. She had children to raise, largely as a single mother. Of course she needed his money.

Back then, I felt only the burning shame that I had failed again—failed to connect, failed to belong, and worst of all failed to understand why.

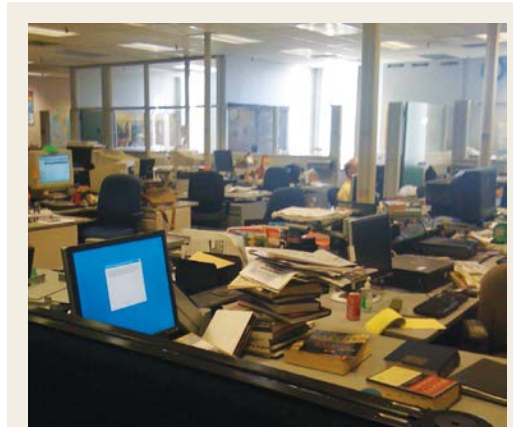
For I was the confidant of all kinds of people, both on and off the clock. I was asked to cover a ghastly run of Native American child suicides. One boy, three and a half, had hung himself at his home in a far suburb of Sacramento. I'd been astonished that someone so young could conceive of such a thing, let alone do it. That he had not only such a depth of pain to discharge but also the theory of mind to conceive of his life of his to end. I had been driving to the Sacramento airport to pick up my boyfriend but en route got the call and took the story. We would have liked to go home and make love, but we heard the details, Jon and I, and we just looked at each other and I turned the car around. I gathered the facts from the boy's mother, writing that he had hung himself from a light fixture after standing on a chair.

The next morning the bereaved mother called me to scream. “You said there was a chair,” she wailed. “There was not no chair. There was not no chair.”

My editor stood in her glass doorway and listened serenely while the mother let fly. “You did very well,” my editor said. “You handled it very well.”

That’s what they always said. I handled it well. Just a flush, when my executive function returned, a small headache, and I would go to the ladies’ room to see how flaming-red my face must be but saw nothing unusual. The pain stayed in my body and it never left. It might have discharged in the form of rage, of acting out, of substance abuse, but none of that ever happened. It stayed within me, and I re-traumatized myself again and again.

The subscriber who wanted to blackmail her assemblyman. The assemblyman. Who tracked me down in my neighborhood café and explained that my source had already blackmailed him once, and that to attempt to do so twice was unseemly. It wasn’t done, under unspoken rules of legislative engagement and a long tradition of state politics that went all the way back to the era of Boss Ruff, the king of Sacramento lobbyists, and didn’t I agree? He wiped his aviator sunglasses on the hem of his polo shirt.



*San Jose Mercury News* newsroom, 2009. Photo courtesy of photographer Tom Mangan.

The café had a photo of the proprietor’s daughter, corkscrew-curl, dusky, swinging on a jungle gym. He had sued to get her into mainstream classes. Some of the neighbors gossiped about this, seeing in his action a delusion that his child would someday be “normal.” Jon and I loved this little girl. We dreamed, before we drifted apart amid my mental absences, that we would one day have a child that cute. She never spoke except once when we were sitting outside with coffees and she tapped a Band-Aid on my skinned knee and said, “Boo-boo. Boo-boo.” I blurted to her, “It will get better. The next time you see me, it will be better.” And it was, and the girl saw it, but she never mentioned it or even looked me in the eye again. It was as if a window, briefly raised, had shut.

What triggered my own disturbances? Conflict. Being told something was fine when it was not—especially being told this in public, where I felt outnumbered. Initially, acute trauma—in my case a rape, a stalking, a stabbing, all within roughly eight years in my twenties. Eventually, conflict of all kinds. Conflict, of course, is what fuels journalism: The news is rarely made by groups of opposing people clasping hands and singing “Kumbaya.” It is rarely made by someone saying “No,” without repercussions, and having their resistance indubitably stick. All this time I often felt hollow or numb, as if something had charred inside, but also often quite happy. The price of that calm was losing awareness of my power to proclaim my own innocence, as if that lifesaving power were tightly held by some nearly always inaccessible part of me.

One day a couple of years after that book club, however, I was so disturbed by an intrusive memory that I did what I should have done years earlier. I wrote it down.

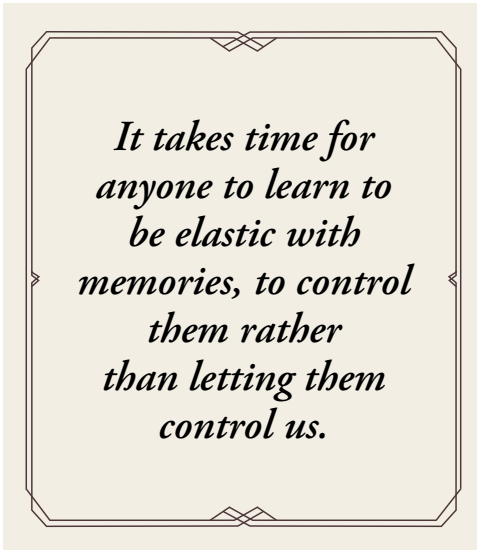
The words came fast. I wrote the losses of time, their content and their context on a sheet of notebook paper. As they spooled toward the present I taped on another sheet, then another, to form a timeline. I wrote in red Sharpie. If you do many presentations, whiteboard many stories, your black and blue pens run out first. Red was what I had left. So when I was done I had a terrifying red timeline, red with failure, red with blood, a clear and decisive timeline of lost time. When I saw the pattern written down, I was horrified. But I had, at last, a way to describe my situation. I phoned an author, a psychologist who lived nearby. I had nicked her book, randomly but providentially, from one of the review-book tables at the newspaper I worked for. I will never forget her sharp intake of breath when I described my symptoms.

“What you have is called a dissociative disorder. It’s very rare.”

“Can it be fixed?”

“Yes, although I don’t treat it.” It was outside her specialty, but she gave me some names.

I wanted to be fixed right away, in that moment. Instead, it took years. These were years of talk therapy, of false starts, of silly excruciating assignments like replicating my rape outfit and wearing it around the neighborhood. I hated a lot of it, but it worked. I learned, painfully, to retain my executive function, to live without disappearing inside myself.



*It takes time for  
anyone to learn to  
be elastic with  
memories, to control  
them rather  
than letting them  
control us.*

After the pandemic, many Bay Area people moved away to cheaper climes. I was, once again, desperate for friends, though I had learned to make more deliberate associations. So once more into the breach I went, to book club. I searched for the best book—best in the sense of a calling card, a piece of evidence of my life—that I could find.

This event was put on by the Redwood City Woman’s Club, which I had recently joined. I tried much harder to impress these women, who seemed much more like me. We wore the same socks: sturdy wool, Farm to Feet, with an entirely American supply chain. We drove the same antlike hybrid cars. I was conscious, looking around my living room, that I still had no books to recommend. Most were nerdy history books about World War I or ancient Egypt, some of the latter with heavy quotations in the original Egyptian. None spoke well of me as someone relatable, someone you’d value knowing.

I ended up bringing a copy of a book I wrote—my last copy, an author copy with a defective cover whose laminate was peeling off. It’s also nerdy, but at 144 pages mercifully brief. Better yet, it has pictures. I had whiteboarded its text on giant pads, plopping down facts in great chrysanthemum-shaped globs on newsprint and then striving to draw connections between them, just I had done in therapy with my own fragmented life. Not linear narrative at first—I’m still not good at that—but something that I could make heard at less than unbearable cost to myself.

I sat at that book club with the widow of one of my *Mercury News* colleagues and with the partner of the late Jacques Littlefield, an heir to Bechtel money who collected World War I and II tanks. For a Merc story, Jacques had showed me around his Tank Museum, at his home atop a hill in Portola Valley. Jacques had worked hard to propitiate the neighbors inconvenienced whenever he blocked Portola Valley’s narrow roads to haul a new acquisition to the Tank Museum. In expiation, every Fourth of July Jacques would throw a party at his house. For each party he’d buy a Toyota, very like the ones my clubwomen drive, and crush it flat with one of his tanks. All the kids in the neighborhood got to ride in the tank while he was doing this. Not one of them died. Jacques’ partner and the Merc widow and I sat and drank artisan soda at book club and bonded over the Merc and Jacques and his tanks.

It was a clinic in how to negotiate memory. Jacques’ eccentricity, possibly as challenging to live with as a pop star’s vagaries, was now a distant glow in which we from our myriad vantage points could all bask. These women were OK not only with history in the abstract but also with their own. That’s not so easy, to come to terms with loss. It takes time for anyone to learn to be elastic with memories, to control them rather than letting them control us. The clubwomen liked history. They liked my book. I was OK. I’d done the archaeology. I’d made the connections and come back with a result that acquitted me well.

I miss, with all my heart, the feeling of idling in a café with my lover and feeling young and desired. I miss the press of a future hanging above me like the hot California sky. I wish I had kept in conscious mind my capacity to say “No” in matters large and small, rather than needing at all cost to be the complaisant clever girl that so many people expect young women to be. I learned, painfully and at last, what and when to remember and what, like used-up gum, to let go.

**SARAH BATES** is a 2004 graduate of the Stanford MLA program for which she wrote a thesis on Martha Graham's myth-based works. She holds a bachelor's degree from Princeton where she majored in electrical engineering and completed a certificate program in modern dance. She also completed her master's in electrical engineering at Caltech and has been working as a hardware engineer in Silicon Valley. She is continuing with the close reading of Proust's full work *In Search of Lost Time*.

**APARNA CHANDRA** is a physician by training but is a lifelong student of the liberal arts. A 2024 graduate of the Stanford MLA program, she loves visiting art museums, painting watercolors, and enjoys *Hindustani* classical singing.

Bay Area writer **JOHN ANGELL GRANT** authored *The Green Notebook*, a collection of poems published by EPE press in San Francisco. He also wrote *Women and Religion in the Modern Drawing Room*, a scholarly study of poet T.S. Eliot's late plays. Grant's short films "How to Make Amends," "Two Stoners" and "1958" have won multiple awards. Grant is also the author of 12 fully produced stage plays. He worked in video production, where he produced a television series on the Holocaust. Grant has written for *American Theater* magazine and many other publications. He has a B.A. in Comp Literature from Columbia, and an MLA from Stanford. For more information, visit [www.johnangellgrant.com](http://www.johnangellgrant.com)

**AMY HARCOURT** is a fourth-year MLA candidate who delights in a well-told story. Especially if it's sad. She is writing her thesis on Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise* and their connective thread. "Mutual Ascent" is Amy's first work of fiction, written after a young friend (who was a Stanford graduate) jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge.

**KRISTIN KUETER** is a SAG-AFTRA actor, musician, editor, and poet based in Woodside, California. She is currently studying poetry under the poet Caroline Goodwin, a former Stanford Wallace Stegner Fellow. Kristin's work investigates themes of interpersonal relationships, suburban Americana, and magical realism. She received her MLA from Stanford in 2016 and has a BA in History from Tufts University. Kristin is a classical pianist and violinist who has performed at Carnegie Recital Hall in New York City. She has also studied stage and film acting at the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco and has performed in independent and feature productions. She plans to publish a poetry chapbook later this year.

**ROBERT M. MASON III** is a Senior Administrative Law Judge at the California Public Utilities Commission. He specializes in regulating app-based and Autonomous Vehicle modes of public transportation provided by Uber, Lyft, Waymo, and Zoox. Judge Mason is also a member of the Administrative Law Judge's Division's subcommittee on the admissibility and use of Generative Artificial Intelligence evidence. Judge Mason received his Bachelor of Arts Degree in English from the University of Santa Clara, his Juris Doctor from the University of California, Davis, and his Master's Degree in Liberal Arts from Stanford University in 2013.

**PRABHU PALANI** is the Chief Investment Officer of the San Jose Retirement System. A graduate of the MLA program in 2009, he continues to dabble in his true interests—poetry, colonial history, and sufi music. After a year of grief caused by the passing away of near and dear, he looks forward to a more joyful 2025.

**TAMARA TINKER** graduated from the MLA program in 2008. She wrote her thesis on the topic of the Wandering Jew as the character appears in two of Percy Bysshe Shelley's major works, which bookended Shelley's literary career—"Queen Mab" and "Hellas." Tamara continued to read Shelley in the succeeding years because his work employs a fascinating array of themes and metrical schemes. His penchant for protest influenced modernist poets such as Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. Tamara's essay that appears in this issue of *Tangents* is a brief study of a short lyric entitled "Mutability," which appeared in a volume entitled *Alastor*, Shelley's first effort to publish his own work under his own name. *Alastor* represents Shelley's coming of age in mid-career as a major English poet.

**BARBARA WILCOX**, is a journalist and author living in northern California. She has been a staff writer and editor for publications including the *San Jose Mercury News*, the *Sacramento Bee*, and *PlanetOut*. In 2016, History Press brought out her first book, a social history of World War I in the San Francisco Bay Area that was based on her MLA thesis. Her *Tangents* piece, "In Search of Lost Time, or How I Survived Book Club," is part of a book-length memoir in progress on her dissociative years and how she emerged from them.

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