

# UC Merced

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# THE VERNAL POOL

ISSUE ONE  
FALL 2014



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# THE VERNAL POOL ISSUE ONE

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**RAVEN MARCHELL MORELLE  
IMAGINE**



**THE VERNAL POOL**

**ISSUE ONE, FALL 2014**

## MY IMAGINATION; RUNNING AWAY FROM ME

While playing Barbie dolls I lost my imagination. It fell from my head beside my bed and crawled like a baby tyrannosaurus on the floor. It opened the yellow door and braved the rainy outdoors just to go out and explore. It climbed a tree and whistled at me through the rainy downpour. My sight lost what happened next, but I pray it will come back to play in my head and never get lost again. Since it has left, I guess I could watch some TV instead. But the TV that my dad tried to fix is dead so videogames on the laptop it is, and that is if I can find my charger. The one with the yellow top and bent-up knot. The one underneath my twin bed with red covers hanging next to the pencil who lost his shaved head. The pencil who once drew pictures of tyrannosauruses wearing leaf hats because they were afraid of showers—meteorites—imagination in their heads.

## SEVEN O' CLOCK

At seven o'clock on a Tuesday the TV talks about the weather; the couch cuddles with me because it's scared, and the remote kisses my hand because it cheated on me with my sister. The blanket screams for my hugs because it's jealous, and the carpet whines for my touch and not the cat's rough scruffs. The fridge so desperate for some attention exposes all of its goods like the whore she is, and the microwave winks its eyes at me for my love and affection. In complete lust my body listens to the TV in boredom, snuggles with the couch for the last time, and my hand massages the remote in exchange for channels. I give the blanket a huge hug so it can shut up and tease the carpet with my feet's touch. I consume the refrigerator's goods in earnest and flirt with the microwave's number for personal touch. How can I ever leave the things in my house that treat me so good?



## THE CONCERT

The crowd at the Madison Square Garden in New York City explodes and the beat of a thousand drums drop. My favorite rapper of all time, Drake, makes time stop, and my heart takes a plummet and goes rickety rock. The movement in my body jumps and skips to the repeated tick tock of the clickety clock. Yet the rhythm of the song is slowing down my mindset against the boom bop; it is causing my eardrum to climb my veins to Mount Everest in retrospect. Intense is my intensity that strikes up the courage to ask the hairs on my forearms to stand up and brave the nerve-shaking thrill of the concert. My eyes bloodshot as the red tomato in excitement, and my mouth yelling out every word. *Started from the bottom now we here!*

## MY NATURAL HAIR

Coils and spirals collided in a pattern and sprouted from my head. It had a general meeting and decided to soak every moisture known to man. It balances on top just to keep its appearance. And it dodged everything I wanted it to do like stay flat when it's supposed to. I told it to do as I say or I will tie it in a knot. My threat didn't budge it. My hair is a champion, a rebel, and narcissistic ruler. It takes no shit, and looks like shit when I'm in ruins.

**BRITTNEY STEPHANNIE KNAUF**  
**THE WALK ON FIFTH STREET**



**THE VERNAL POOL**

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It has been a few years since Jillian has been to the ice cream shop on Fifth Street, the street where her mother took her for walks when she was a child. She remembers getting the bubble gum flavor, and having to, instructed by her mother each time, spit out the small pink squares into the corner of the paper cup. These trips with her mother often lasted hours, and it was in these memories that she recalls her mother most vividly. The slight wind that blew the colorful leaves across the pebble walkway had caused her mother to wear the fall sweaters that Jillian had admired, knitted cables that fell perfectly to the line of the jeans. They matched the warm tone of the leaves, the same colors they were then as they are now. Her mother always wore sneakers and oftentimes the sneakers were of various colors that did not match her clothing. As a young child she was unaware of the fashion fault until she developed a fashion sense of her own.

Today, John's Ice Cream is slow, and she is the only one in the shop at 3:00 p.m. The parlor is smaller than she remembers, the place cramped, the red tables and matching chairs too close together. The black and white checkered tile walls look clichéd. Jillian decides that the façade is tacky, something that had not registered as a young child. She used to be fascinated by the pattern on the walls, always searching for a fault in the repetition of the black and white but failing each time to find one. She walks up to the counter and admires the array of flavors offered. Normally, a coffee ice cream is her preference but because this trip is for memories Jillian orders a small bubble gum flavor. The old man moves his gaze from the small TV

hanging on the opposite wall.

“It’s going to be two sixty-nine with tax,” he tells her without having to ring it up. He takes a scoop from a pitcher of water and puts her pink ice cream in a paper cup. She notices him look at her periodically, furrow his eyebrows slightly. She slips her leather purse from her shoulder and rests it on the counter. She unzips it and extracts her wallet, pulls a five from the front. She waits for him to finish scooping her order and tries to follow the men on television playing baseball.

“You grew up to look just like your mother.”

Jillian looks back at the man. “You knew my mom?”

“You two used to come in here,” he tells her. “Saturdays. You always got this kind.”

He gives her the familiar cup of ice cream in exchange for her money.

“How is she?”

Jillian smiles slightly and shakes her head as he figures her change.

“Oh,” he says, first slipping the coins into her palm and placing the two ones on top. “I’m sorry to hear that. You should bring your little one in here, keep tradition.” He winks at her and she smiles and slips the change into the Styrofoam cup with the word “tips” written on it in bright colors. She says “I will,” thanks the man, and exits. The door makes a ding sound from a bell at the top that she had not noticed when she had walked in.

She sits across the pathway from the ice cream shop, the same bench she had sat on with her mother. She begins to

eat her ice cream, feeling instantly nostalgic, but finds the tiny black spoon almost comical – this utensil used to feel adequate, had been the appropriate size for her hands. Now she feels silly using it, each bite of ice cream smaller than she'd like it to be. Upon encountering the first piece of gum, she does not remember to spit it out. Instead, the piece is accidentally ingested. She smiles; never in her childhood had this happened, and she laughs at herself now for being so mindless. She wonders if it had been because of her size back then. The piece would have felt much larger; she wonders if it had been due to her mother's careful attention and care. She touches her belly, a belly evident of six months of pregnancy underneath her black coat. After four miscarriages, Jillian had almost stopped trying, but she knows this one will stay. She is curious of the sex of the baby, but has decided to wait. It will be more of a surprise that way, she always tells herself, although she secretly wishes for a girl but does not admit this to her husband who, she is sure, wishes for a boy. She wonders what the baby's favorite ice cream flavor will be, what memories of her the child would grow up to keep forever. She begins to weep at the thought of her mother gone, never getting to know her first grandchild.

**TONY HUA**  
**FOUR POEMS**



**THE VERNAL POOL**

**ISSUE ONE, FALL 2014**

## PAYING THE PIED PIPER

“By a piper, clothed in many kinds of colours,  
130 children born in Hamelin were seduced,  
and lost at the place of execution near the hill.”

--Lueneburg manuscript

Children hid behind their mothers' dresses,  
as the piper played his flute.  
The children did not want him,  
this man with the  
toothbrush moustache,  
and a crackling voice  
that the adults loved to hear.

But fathers urged their children on,  
pushing them towards the piper.  
*Do not be afraid.*  
*This man is a rat catcher.*  
*He will catch all the rats in Germany.*  
The children obeyed,  
following the piper as they  
marched from Munich to Berlin.

With his seductive promises



of food and automobiles,  
the piper soon had the children hailing:  
*Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil!*  
And before long, they became  
his puppets, his executioners.

Then the piper vanished;  
the spell on the parents released.  
*My God! What have we done?*  
And the bodies of the children  
lay in snow-covered ditches,  
their faces, a shade whiter than ash.

## THE LIFE OF SEIKILOS

“While you live, shine,  
don't suffer anything at all;  
life exists only a short while,  
and time demands its toll.  
From Seikilos to Euterpe”  
-Epitaph on a Greek grave

Did you herd sheep,  
the flock grazing as you sat  
under a tree, telling the tale  
of Odysseus evading the cyclops,  
while your grandchildren listened?

Were you a soldier  
on Alexander's campaign, sympathizing  
with an elephant away from home,  
your wife and children eating dinner  
while your chair sat empty?

Were you a blacksmith,  
molten bronze poured into clay,  
as you scratched your beard  
before counting the day's earnings,  
your unborn child in her womb?

Did you sail the Mediterranean,  
praying to Hermes for fortune  
or cursing Poseidon as waves  
battered your ship? In your mind,  
her hands wrapped around your chest.

Were you a bard,  
playing a harp or lyre  
to seduce Euterpe  
as the boar roasted  
on the evening fire?

Or were you reared a farmer,  
a child living in a hut  
with rows of olive trees  
on gentle slopes, the sun  
laying down to rest?

## ODE TO THE ONION

Forget  
the apple.  
Onion,  
great seducer,  
it was you  
who tempted  
Eve.

Onion,  
when  
in the heat  
of flames  
sheds that  
ivory coat,  
revealing  
the opaque  
skin,  
you promise  
carnal desires.

Sometimes,  
Onion,

you are  
the wingman  
for an otherwise  
timid item,  
like plain  
boring  
chicken.

You will  
guide  
and reveal  
the flavors  
of our shy  
friend,  
who in gratitude,  
will take the  
center stage  
and forget  
about you.

Onion,  
guest of honor,  
you are welcomed  
at every party.  
Although you  
frequently prefer

to remain out  
of the spotlight,  
Onion,  
we know  
you are there,  
hiding  
in the soup  
or  
behind  
curtains  
of noodles.  
Your presence  
is expected.  
Without you,  
the party  
has  
no appetite.

Onion,  
sometimes  
you punish me  
for my indulgence.  
You leave  
in me,  
a familiar

hidden from  
my eyes  
and ears.  
I would be  
embarrassed  
by my peers,  
by a prank  
you played  
on me,  
but I know  
you tease,  
and you are  
never harmful.  
We will  
have a laugh  
over our next  
encounter,  
and all  
will be  
forgiven.

I endure  
your abuses,  
Onion.  
Though I

may shed  
tears,  
you will  
reward me  
with your  
sweet flavor.  
And when  
we are done,  
the vestigial  
nectar from  
your stay  
will remind me  
of you.



## CABBAGE SOUP

Cubes of pork bathe in hot water  
while I pull apart cabbage leaves.  
In another pot, mung bean noodles rest  
in a gentle simmer.

As I wash the cabbage leaves,  
the hum of steaming water in a pot  
comforts me. I drain the noodles  
and prod the pork with my chopsticks.

My chopsticks are like wands of incense.  
At their tips, white smoke leaves a  
swaying trail into the air.  
I place the cabbage leaves in,  
and sit, waiting for the soup to boil.

Today is the New Year. I am alone.  
A bowl of cabbage soup sits untouched,  
its warmth fleeting in cold solitude.

**JESSICA ALCOTT**  
**THREE POEMS**



**THE VERNAL POOL**

**ISSUE ONE, FALL 2014**

## THE PEA GARDEN

Sixty days after planting  
sugar peas

I cut the thin  
umbilical cord of

vines, the pods  
collapsing into my palm.

Sixty days ago,  
these peas were no

more than a bundle  
of cells,

tiny suns  
each with their

own heartbeat,  
straining out of

their stringy  
skins.

Now, the pods lie on  
my kitchen floor.

Breathless and cold,  
shriveled.

This line  
between continuous

growth and  
sudden decay

is thin as the dirt  
lining the

crease of my thumbs,  
a reminder

of what I have  
done.

Gathering the pods  
in my hands,

I bury them in the  
trash, below

chicken carcasses,  
next to the

veined leaves and  
roots

the remains of a  
ruined garden.

## TWILIGHT IN THE ORCHARD

The ground is littered  
with ant bodies.

It is nearly twilight.

Crickets strum their legs.

Around me, darkness blooms.

## SHEARING ALPACAS

They drag the alpaca across  
foxtails and yellowing  
grass,

pinning it to  
the ground with  
metal clamps.

*Tie a cloth around the head, so it  
can't see,* the man says.

Shears run down  
the body.

Strips of fiber peel back,  
revealing pale skin,  
grey and veined.

A knee shoved behind  
the ear, the body  
flipped over.

Clumps of knotted fiber curl  
around pronged hooves.  
It should be thin,  
cloud-like.

Boney head held  
high, the alpaca  
leaps back  
to the others.

Its coat lies  
discarded,  
exoskeleton of  
fiber and weeds.



**EMMA TKACHUK  
DEATH DEPRIVED**



**THE VERNAL POOL**

**ISSUE ONE, FALL 2014**

Summer is a cauldron: hot, dry, depressing. Huck Taft is a lonely man, and this year's summer does not look very promising for him; in fact, this day does not feel promising at all. Although his loneliness often forces him to fall into deep swings of depression, Huck is not a reclusive man. He wakes early in the morning when it is cool and reads yesterday's newspaper on his front porch. He waves when the insomniac pregnant women power walk past his home and through the street, and they wave back, most of them, most of the time. This morning is no different, although it feels unusually exciting and at the same time frightening. Huck folds the day-old newspaper hot-dog-style and crosses his lawn to stretch his legs. An unusual feeling overwhelms the friendly, naturally somber man. A sudden spasm stops Huck in his place. He freezes, alarmed and afraid, and grips his back before the world turns white. The lawn begins to spin, and the sky follows suit. Huck hears a thumping increasing in speed and his hands feel clammy. He lies on the perfectly maintained grass and turns his gaze towards his right hand. He moves his thumb from the small finger to the index finger – feeling the cool moisture. He doesn't remember what happens next.

Huck lives in an established neighborhood with doctors, lawyers, entrepreneurs. Most of his neighbors are friendly, simple people (just like him), but others not so much. Doctor Gladden, a general surgeon and a busy man, is one of the friendly ones. He usually leaves to go to the hospital just in time to wave Huck goodbye before Huck goes inside for breakfast.

Today is no different. Doctor Gladden holds a briefcase in one hand and car keys in the other. He steps out of his house and, before turning towards Huck's home, inhales the fresh cool breeze, but that breeze is forgotten when Doctor Gladden dashes across his driveway towards the collapsed man. He dials 911 and tells the dispatcher that Huck probably has had a heart attack. The dispatcher says that an ambulance is on the way and begins to talk Doctor Gladden through the act of performing CPR, but the doctor's phone is already resting on the grass and his palms are on Huck's chest.

Doctor Gladden finally hears sirens in the distance and a sense of relief overwhelms him, not because he does not know what to do, or because he is in shock, but because Huck is most likely dead and stopping chest compressions even on a corpse does not seem like the right thing to do. The paramedics take over. And, long before the pregnant women have the chance to power walk back towards Huck's home, the street is cleared. Doctor Gladden is on his way to the hospital to do rounds and then start the three cases he has scheduled: one hernia, one gallbladder, one spectacularly diseased pancreas. The paramedics rush Huck to the emergency room. The hospital is only 10 minutes away, but Huck is not dead.

When Huck arrives to the emergency room his condition improves; he is conscious and speaking. Doctor Pagnol, a vascular surgeon, is on call for trauma. While the lead paramedic, Steve, briefs Doctor Pagnol, the doctor moves Huck's already-cut-shirt and exposes a rigid pulsating abdomen. This is all he needs to see. Doctor Pagnol obtains informed con-

sent from Huck and tells a nurse to notify Huck's family (but there is no family) and rushes Huck to OR #1. While operating room technicians prepare Huck's abdomen for a large incision, and the anesthesiologist for sedation, Doctor Pagnol is putting on a surgical mask, loops, and rubs his hands with the scrub brush oozing with orange antimicrobial soap. He turns the faucet off with his foot and reaches for the sterile towel. He pushes the operating room door with his back, a nurse dresses him in a sterile gown and surgical gloves, and Huck is ready for surgery.

When the operating room team hooks Huck to the monitors, Huck's heart makes a few irregular sounds and the waves on the screen turn into a long steady line. The nurse calls a code blue, and the anesthesiologist whispers, "I think he might die."

*Not on my shift.* Huck hears an unfamiliar voice. *Not on my shift.* The words echo in Huck's mind. They are never spoken, but he hears them very clearly.

The surgeon artfully lifts the scalpel from the sterile blue-clothed table and makes a large vertical incision in the center of Huck's abdomen. It is a rapid movement, and a rapid set of techniques follow.

While Huck sat reading his newspaper this morning, he could not have anticipated that he would be lying on a cold operating room table. Not on the same day, because he did not feel the pain. The largest artery in his body ruptured, an aneurysm undetected.

Doctor Pagnol clamps the distal and proximal ends of the aorta and begins to suture in a synthetic graft to repair the ruptured

vessel. He only has five minutes before Huck's brain is deprived of oxygen. Huck is surprisingly stable, his vital signs are normal. The surgeon is finishing the last two stitches and unclamps the aorta to evaluate the perfusion – the surgery is going well. Huck remains stable and Doctor Pagnol is ready to close the abdomen. Doctor Gladden enters the room.

“About done here?” he asks. “What a bloody mess! Was this a trauma case from last night?”

“No, this is the guy from this morning, paramedics thought that he had a heart attack – they found him collapsed on his lawn – but he ruptured his abdominal aorta,” Doctor Pagnol answers over the mask.

Doctor Gladden freezes in place. He stands still for one moment and then carefully steps closer to the patient. Astounded, he says, “He’s my neighbor. *I* found him on his lawn. *I* was the one who thought that he had a heart attack.”

“Well, he tolerated the procedure very well actually for his condition. It could have been much worse.” Doctor Pagnol closes the abdomen, steps away from the table, removes the bloody gown, and sits in front of a dictating computer. “It won’t be long,” he tells Doctor Gladden. “You can start your hernia soon.”

A nurse wheels Huck to a recovery room and monitors him periodically. The anesthesiologist visits Huck's room as well, and then the vascular surgeon enters. Huck is opening his eyes. He lifts his eyelids but they fall back down. He tries again – a little more success, wait, wait! – and he sees darkness. Huck makes a third attempt. He does not see a spinning sky

or spinning grass; the image is stationary. It's blurry. He hears a series of beeps; they are not his heart, not only his pulse. He also hears unusually rhythmic breathing, no, a pumping sound followed by a heavy exhale like a respirator. He hears footsteps, voices, ringing phone. He hears his name, faintly and loudly, "Mister Taft." His eyes collapse.

He opens his eyes again, slowly, forcefully. The strange place is peaceful now. The voices are quieter, and the noises are subtle. He still hears a rhythmic, computerized heart rate, but this time it is only one, only his own. His heart sounds different from when he last heard it. Huck feels a pause in his life and in this room. He did not die, *not on his shift*, someone fought for him. He doesn't know who found him, or who brought him to the hospital, or who took care of him. All he knows is that someone did not let him die. Someone fought. For the first time in a long while, Huck does not feel alone – he feels cared for even if those who care are strangers.

A soft knock on the door jolts Huck's attention. A nurse comes in. "How are you feeling, Mister Taft?" Huck manages to nod and offers the pretty young blonde a crooked smile. He wants to know what happened, but he does not have the strength to ask. "You collapsed at home, but you are all right now. Doctor Pagnol will come see you shortly."

The nurse checks his IV bag and asks if he is in any pain. He is not. Pain is the last thing he feels. He feels alive, and for the first time it is a good feeling, a feeling so good that no other word can describe it better. Huck closes his eyes for a moment and when he opens them a familiar man stands in

front of his bed, although he has not seen him before.

“Mister Taft, I am Doctor Pagnol. You collapsed at home this morning and the paramedics brought you to the hospital. You had an abdominal aortic aneurysm which ruptured. I was able to insert a synthetic graft to repair the vessel. Surgery went very well and without complications,” the doctor gently speaks.

Huck lifts his hand towards the doctor’s direction, his chest begins to tighten, and he feels a knot forming in the base of his throat. Huck fights it. “Thank you,” he says, “thank you.”

Huck does not have family, so he calls a taxi when he is finally discharged. He doesn’t mind the sudden shock of heat that hits his face when the pretty nurse wheels him to the front of the hospital where his taxi is waiting. He smiles. This year’s summer, although scorching hot, seems promising. His routine only changes slightly. He still reads the newspaper in front of his house, but it is not yesterday’s paper; it is today’s.

