



**2021**

**PENN CW**

**HONORS**

**THESIS**

**READING**

**Wednesday**

**April 28**

**5:00 pm ET**

YouTube Livestream link:

<https://youtu.be/z7cxMVACgmc>

*Sponsored by*  
**Penn Creative Writing Program**  
*Hosted by*  
**Kelly Writers House**

**PROGGRAM**

## WELCOME

Welcome to our annual celebration of graduating seniors who have earned Honors for their thesis projects – long-form creative literary works in poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, screenwriting, songwriting, and mixed genres that serve as the capstones to their time at Penn as writers.

We had another full roster of absolutely amazing honors theses this year (22!), and we are so proud of everyone. Congratulations to **Ania Alberski, Nikita Bastin, Anjali Berdia, Simone Burde, Dylan Cook, Eliana Doft, Sophia DuRose, Sarah Goldfarb, Yonatan Gutenmacher, John (Jack) Kiyonaga, Rachel Kulik, Elizabeth (Lizzy) Lemieux, Kelly Liu, Misha McDaniel, Kelsey Padilla, Seung Won Park, James Peterson, Sofia Rabaté, Lauren Reiss, Isabella Simonetti, Ana West, and Margaret Zhang.**

Please enjoy this live reading of excerpts from these theses.

## ORDER OF READINGS

Students will be introduced by their advisors and will then read a brief excerpt from their theses. Abstracts of each project are attached.

**Sarah Goldfarb**, screenplay  
“A Lady With”  
Advisor: Scott Burkhardt

**Sophia DuRose**, poetry  
“NFT (Non-Fungible Text)”  
Advisor: Simone White

**Ania Alberski**, YA/MG science fiction  
“Mother Will Not Help You Now, Book One: As Blades Grow from Trash”  
Advisor: Jeff Johnson

**Anjali Berdia**, nonfiction (journalism)  
“Spilling into Politics: How the Fossil Fuel Industry Affects Local Legislation”  
Advisor: Kristen Martin

**Dylan Cook**, fiction (short stories)  
“Down the Shore: A Novella in Stories”  
Advisor: Karen Rile



**Simone Burde**, YA Fiction / screenwriting  
“Some Sort of Something”  
Advisor: Kathy De Marco Van Cleve

**Eliana Doft**, nonfiction (memoir)  
“Is Your Suffering Dear to You?”  
Advisor: Carmen Maria Machado

**Yonatan Gutenmacher**, fiction (novel)  
“disorder”  
Advisor: Max Apple

**John (Jack) Kiyonaga**, fiction (short stories)  
“Always We Begin Again”  
Advisor: Deborah Burnham

**Nikita Bastin**, poetry  
“Family House”  
Advisor: Rachel Zolf

**Rachel Kulik**, poetry  
“What Once Was Shore”  
Advisor: Ron Silliman

**Elizabeth (Lizzy) Lemieux**, fiction (short stories, magical realism)  
“Two Paradises and Other Stories”  
Advisor: Karen Rile

**Kelly Liu**, fiction (sci-fi / fantasy)  
“2046”  
Advisor: Carmen Maria Machado

**Misha McDaniel**, fiction (fantasy)  
“Finding Solstice”  
Advisor: Carmen Maria Machado



**Kelsey Padilla**, multi: nonfiction / fiction / drama

“Facing the Red Rocks: Exploring Generational Trauma in the ‘Heart of Indian Country’”

Advisor: Taije Silverman

**Seung Won Park**, nonfiction (essays) / songwriting

“Return to Sender: Letters I Can Never Write You”

Advisor: Anthony DeCurtis

**Sofia Rabaté**, fiction (short stories)

“Screens: A Short Story Collection”

Advisor: Max Apple

**Lauren Reiss**, nonfiction (memoir)

“A Hundred Moments: Family Stories of Survival”

Advisor: Weike Wang

**Isabella Simonetti**, nonfiction (memoir)

“Eating My Rats: A memoir on growing up without a mother”

Advisor: Jamie-Lee Josselyn

**Ana West**, fiction (short stories)

“You Can Be Better”

Advisor: Max Apple

**Margaret Zhang**, fiction (speculative)

“All That Was Missing: Reconstructing Intimacies ‘Truer than the Truth’  
through Strange and Fantastical Worlds”

Advisor: Carmen Maria Machado



## ABSTRACTS

### *Mother Will Not Help You Now, Book One: As Blades Grow from Trash*

By Ania Alberski

Abstract: Everything changed in the year 2939 when the humans initiated their own destruction sequence. After millennia of enduring violence, greed, and manipulation, the planet turned her back on them and began The Transformation. She drained Her oceans, crumbled Her mountains, and sent Her children to the stars. She endured the pain so that they would finally learn their lesson. She rebooted all of humanity, wiped everything off of her surface to start anew. Now, She must recover with the help of the trained humanoids in the RED District—a model of communal living and service to “Relieve Earth’s Disaster.”

One lone child survived the reboot and she is determined to uncover the secrets kept by Mother Earth in RED. All roles are reversed when Milenka embarks on a journey to rediscover her lost kin, alongside the arduous task of becoming a teenager. She will persevere through restless lonely nights, travel hundreds of miles, and climb the tallest mountains. She will also fail. . . a lot. Mistakes will help Milenka to learn about the dangers of anthropocentrism, the threat of climate change, and the complications of colonization. Young readers are invited to consider an inverted immigration experience—one in which homogeneity is ridiculed and “home” is never quite found. Milenka’s narrative will present not only mirrors, windows, and sliding doors (Bishop), but also a portal through which YA/MG readers can recognize the conventional mistakes of our current lived experience.

### *FAMILY HOUSE*

By Nikita Bastin

Abstract: Family House tackles the racialized womanhood that my life enacts. Grappling with these primary threads of my life turns to investigative work as I work through the family and cultural histories that have composed much of my being. In examining cultural histories, I observe how the Sri Lankan Civil War has taken its toll on the Tamilian people and in examining my family histories, I explore the origins and effects of my movement disorder, an illness intimately connected to my anxieties as a Tamilian-American and as a woman. In addition, my relationship with my mother is an underlying theme of the collection—this was a bit of a revelation for me, as through reading my poems, I realized how much of my relationship with myself is shaped by my relationship with her. My project culminates in an excavation of the self.

### *Spilling into Politics: How the Fossil Fuel Industry Affects Local Legislation*

By Anjali Berdia

Abstract: In a three-part, journalism series, my thesis “Spilling into Politics: How the Fossil Fuel Industry Affects Local Legislation,” dives into how fossil fuel interests have influenced energy legislation in Pennsylvania. Building on research I’ve completed over the past few years, I set out to answer these broad questions: How did climate change become a polarizing, partisan issue that affects policy down to the state level? What is the climate skepticism movement, and how does it relate to Pennsylvania joining the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI)? My first article provides the historical context for these questions, my second illustrates climate skepticism at work in a local legislation hearing, and my third demonstrates how fossil fuel interests dominate the narrative around RGGI. As a whole, my series sets out to hold the fossil fuel industry accountable for thwarting climate legislation, and spread awareness on how climate misinformation persists in America.



***Some Sort of Something***

By Simone Burde

Abstract: *Some Sort of Something* is a young adult (YA) novella and an adapted screenplay of that novella set just before and then during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Some Sort of Something* follows the lives of Sasha and Nate, high school seniors who meet and decide to embark on a romantic relationship just before COVID-19 is declared a pandemic. Beginning a relationship and dealing with first love during a global health crisis, Sasha and Nate represent how two different people handle the virus and the conflicts it highlights and causes. *Some Sort of Something* looks at how the pandemic magnifies existing fears and perspectives, and the role love plays in bringing people together when the world forces us apart.

***Down the Shore***

By Dylan Cook

Abstract: *Down the Shore* is a collection of linked stories. While each story can be read as an isolated piece, there are larger narrative threads that only become apparent when the stories are considered in context. There are five central characters that appear in the collection: Maureen, her ex-husband Lou, her current husband Irv, her daughter Scarlett, and Scarlett's once-boyfriend Matt. The stories are spread out over several decades, but they are united by a common setting on the New Jersey shore. The Jersey shore remains the same over the years, but how the characters perceive it changes as they are molded by their experiences. Ultimately, *Down the Shore* aims to show how dramatically people can change while still retaining their most fundamental qualities.

***Is Your Suffering Dear to You?***

By Eliana Doft

Abstract: *Is Your Suffering Dear to You?* is a collection of three personal essays: "Is Your Suffering Dear to You?", "The Queen Grew Exceedingly Distressed," and "Banish it, Quash it." Each essay begins with one or two Talmud passages that reference mental health and suffering that are used as prompts for Doft's exploration about her mental health and her Jewish identity. Her aim is to place her experiences with anxiety within the broader context of Jewish history. Her essays intersperse personal narratives with stories of Jewish people ranging from biblical figures to her contemporary friends and family in a format that mimics a cross between a therapy session and the Talmud itself.

***NFT (Non-Fungible Text)***

By Sophia DuRose

Abstract: This poetic project explores the construction of meaning at the intersection of humor, identity, and meme culture, deploying hyperlinks, gifs, and pictures as a rhetorical and structural strategy with which to highlight disparities in access, internet anxieties, and marginalizing algorithms. It is an attempt to dismantle elitist canon formation in experimental poetry, begging the reader to ask where poetry is found, what it looks like, and who can participate? It explores the unique happenings of a particular feminine perspective in a style meant to emulate the unpredictable possibilities of online communications. The project is contingent upon internet linkages, hinting at the subversion of print culture, moving toward the digital urgency that the COVID-19 pandemic has made so painfully present.



***A Lady With***

By Sarah Goldfarb

Abstract: In a dystopian future, the government has banned any creative works of art, literature, and/or film through a series of legislations deemed the 'Articles of Appropriate Culture.' Under the guise of promoting patriotism, loyalty, and obedience, disciplines defined by clear-cut answers and rational thinking are glorified while activities that encourage free thinking or invite unbounded interpretation are made illegal. Society is divided between the impoverished scrounge and the wealthy gentry. This extreme socioeconomic gap was originally brought about by rapid technological advancements that infiltrated and attacked the blue-collar job market. Laila Inev, born to a scrounge prostitute, has since married into gentry society and exists in the upscale, manicured world of South Gentry. After finding the personal notebook of scrounge resistance artist, Will Meyerson, Laila reconnects with a part of her past she's spent years suppressing. As she grows more estranged from her own family and the empty South Gentry world, Laila discovers the true nature of her loyalties and catalyzes Will's revolutionary group to stage a drastic civil protest at South Gentry's posh Highland Country Club.

***disorder***

By Yonatan Gutenmacher

Abstract: *disorder* is a novel that explores the ways in which an eating disorder can rip apart a stable life, a strong family unit, a successful career, and relationships that extend several degrees away from the individual suffering with mental illness. In other words, *disorder* is interested in the double meaning of the word "disorder" in the phrase "eating disorder" – how a physical and mental malfunctioning can create social disarray and family upheaval. The story follows the life of Noah, a first-year college student, as his mother struggles with obsessive-compulsive disorder, anorexia nervosa and body dysmorphia. The novel's style, inspired by hyper-realistic contemporary writers Rachel Cusk and Sally Rooney, focuses largely on conversations between Noah and his close friends and family. The work submitted in this thesis is just the beginning of a complete novel, which I expect to reach double the length of this current draft.

***Always We Begin Again***

By Jack Kiyonaga

Abstract: In this project, I explore different forms of narration and style through eight short stories. Short stories, for me, became the perfect units of revelation--thinly edged objects through which meaning could reflect and refract. This is my first complete collection of work. And maybe the best framework for understanding this project is that I strove for honesty, a sense of truth in the maze of fiction. Stories, words, hold real power, real beauty. They can create swirling worlds of inhibition; they can convey our confinement and simultaneously our tangible joy at the truth that this life is our life. And all the possibilities it could become.

***What Once Was Shore***

By Rachel Kulik

Abstract: The city, like language, is pervasive and open-ended, misleading and factual, and yet structured, defined, and physical, all at once. What Once Was Shore seizes the coastal, immigrant parts of Southern Brooklyn to ask – how can poetry investigate and memorialize our shifting neighborhoods? This work grapples with disentangling the tension between poetry's willingness to investigate without telos and my urge to explore heritage in the urban landscape. Through spillage of words and white space, this project is concerned with poetry's circuitous nature and resulting resistance to closure. Patterns of layering and false senses of order serve to examine the unfinished nature of home-growing amidst the arbitrariness of place, movement, and time. It sits in directionlessness and discovery, search and speculation. Carrying a hope to move forward through inevitable change and a reverence for safeguarding through reuse, construction, and constraint, this work ponders the possibility of home and legacy through language.



*Two Paradises and Other Stories*

By Lizzy Lemieux

Abstract: *Two Paradises and Other Stories* is a short story collection that, building upon queer and gender theory, spans the genres of historical fiction, magical realism, amatory fiction, high fantasy, and realism. "Two Paradises" is a female-led Western and rape-revenge fantasy. "X" is a hyperreal narrative centering around content moderators at an unnamed social media company. "Loaves" is an exploration of mother-daughter relationships and intergenerational trauma through a magical realist framework. "Isabeau the Incorruptible" is a retelling of Aphra Behn's "The History of the Nun" in the tradition of the lesbian vampire novel. "The Bedroom Culture" is a magical realist response to the sociological study of teenage girls. And, finally, "Delivery" is a realist short story which follows two young women as they navigate internet-facilitated sex-work. The stories within this collection are united thematically around the idea that trauma, the impetus for bad behavior, creates alterity.

*2046*

By Kelly C. Liu

Abstract: The thesis I am submitting for consideration to the Department of English consists of two parts: a novel excerpt titled *2046* followed by a critical commentary that provides methodological background and philosophical, psychological, and aesthetic contextualization to the work. Set in the year 2027, *2046* is a science fiction story that explores the concepts of nostalgia, love, and loss, as characters negotiate with traveling to the fantastical realm of 2046, a place in which one is able to reunite with a resurrected love one. Premised upon Wong Kar-wai's film *2046*, in which the protagonist pens an eponymous novel during the course of the movie, my novel seeks to utilize both Kar-wai's cinematic oeuvre and my own intellectual and creative influences to portray the face of desire in a futuristic age. As my critical commentary will elucidate, these influences involve psychoanalytic theory, aesthetic theory, and political theory.

*Finding Solstice*

By Misha McDaniel

Abstract: *Finding Solstice* follows the story of Zawni, a young kiva, someone who can manipulate, conjure, and destroy. Zawni lives in a world in which those born with magic, kiva, are controlled by those who learn magic, sand, through a hereditary enchantment called the soul-tether. This "tethering" limits the power and potential of the kiva, effectively enslaving them through a tampering of the soul, and can only be undone by death—either the death of the tethered themselves or the death of those who have given them their soul-state. Zawni's story takes place over an era after a world-destroying event called the Great Tethering but only a day after a rebellion has occurred, a rebellion that has claimed the lives of her own parents, resulting in her freedom, and a rebellion that threatens to destroy the social order. Zawni struggles with her own newfound power and potential as well as the nuances of knowledge/history production, the importance of collective memory, and the often unseen violence of generational oppression and inherited trauma.

*Facing the Red Rocks: Exploring Generational Trauma in the 'Heart of Indian Country'*

By Kelsey Padilla

Abstract: This project will be a collection of creative nonfiction short stories. These stories will aim to illuminate and examine the people of the Navajo Nation reservation and the reservation town that lies at its center, Gallup, New Mexico. Focusing particularly on intergenerational trauma and intergenerational racism, I would like to confront the relationship between the Navajo people and the white and Hispanic communities that live in the town and outside of it. I will use a combination of journalistic and creative methods to complete this project, drawing on my own experiences growing up in the town and interviews with current and past residents of the town. Preferably these residents will have a variety of different backgrounds, and the people that I have in mind or that I have already completed interviews with include former police officers, Navajo matriarchs, and white and Native business owners.



***Screens: A Short Story Collection***

By Sofia Rabaté

Advisor: Max Apple

Abstract: *Screens: A Short Story Collection* is a collection of six stories that is inspired by the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic, but more generally, the alienation of modern life. Beyond the immediate context of the pandemic, the collection grapples with the phenomenon of “cyberchondria,” a form of hypochondria based on web searches. It is inspired by modernist writers and recent minimalist works, exploring characters who find themselves unable to connect with others. The stories center around various sites of isolation, including home, work, and school, all featuring unnamed female characters who speak in first person. This formal choice lets the reader put on these stories like a mask and experience the strangeness of femininity regardless of their identity. This collection features a sparse, deadpan style that demands reader participation. In the second half of the collection, quotation marks disappear, an experiment that challenges the boundaries between narration and dialogue.

***Eating My Rats: A memoir on growing up without a mother***

By Isabella Simonetti

Abstract: My mother was diagnosed with breast cancer when I was three years old, and died when I was nine. What outlives the rawness of the day, hour, and minute my mother died are the ways in which I am forced to relive her loss as past memories resurface in the present. My time at Penn, in particular, has made me think a lot about my mom. Being a college student is like sitting in a waiting room before it is time for adulthood. It is a space to sift through interests and identities, to form meaningful connections, to worry, to blunder, and to grow.

My honors thesis, a single, longform memoir, meditates on my experience at Penn, and what it means to become a woman while reconciling with my childhood. Whether it is failing a midterm or falling in love, when I experience a milestone, my mother’s absence informs how I process it. My story pulls away from clichés surrounding growing up because of how urgent my past is, and how it shapes my present.

***You Can Be Better***

By Ana West

Abstract: *You Can Be Better* is a collection of eight short stories that explore the themes of complacency, choice and growth. Characters confront moral dilemmas in college dorm rooms and airports, on reality television show’s and stranger’s porches. A central theme of the collection is the difficulty of making the right decision, or knowing what it is at all; often characters fail to live up to a discernible moral standard. Nevertheless, the tone the collection attempts to strike is one of hard-won hope, with the possibility of healing and redemption present even in ostensibly unhappy endings. The title is both a reprimand and a promise.

***All That Was Missing: Reconstructing Intimacies “Truer than the Truth” through Strange and Fantastical Worlds***

By Margaret Zhang

Abstract: I have always found human connection to be inherently otherworldly, specifically in how moments of intimacy are misremembered. The process of re-remembering and rewriting a memory raises an important question about truth: is objective truth important at all, or is the rewritten memory of an event “truer than the truth”? In these five short stories, I explore this question by rewriting moments in my own life in the way my memory has altered them: I follow a man who processes a recent breakup by going on a date with a mind reader, a troublemaker whose mother gives birth to a fire truck, a group of strangers who play video games as their peers disappear into thin air, a group of vacationing friends who forget they’re inside a simulated reality, and a boarding school student who comes face to face with a monster at a music festival.

