



**The University of Pennsylvania
2025 Creative Writing Program Honors Thesis Abstracts**

Katie Bartlett, “Wonderland’s Last Ride”

Advisor: Lise Funderburg

This reported non-fiction work examines ongoing debates in Ocean City, New Jersey, surrounding the closure of the historic Wonderland Amusement Park and the proposed plan to replace the park with a luxury hotel. Through interviews with community members, visitors, and external experts, the piece delves into the strong ties, emotions, and stories that undergird the movement devoted to preserving the park. It also explores the rationale and arguments adopted by the modernizing forces pushing Ocean City to change.

“Wonderland’s Last Ride” highlights the tensions between tradition and progress, thereby shedding light on the broader questions of how communities navigate change while holding onto their identities.

Samantha Bohn, “Everyday Emotion”

Advisor: Taije Silverman

“Everyday Emotion” is a collection of poems and vignettes relating the emotional character of everyday moments and ordinary things. It is grounded in affect theory, which engages non-linguistic elements of experience to contextualize emotion and thought, especially feelings conveyed through text. Drawing on details captured through careful observation; the ethos of authors such as Sandra Cisneros and Richard Hugo; the formal practices of authors such as Frank O'Hara, Ross Gay, and Elizabeth Bishop; and theoretical scholarship from Kathleen Stewart, the collection centers on lived experience and memory. It aims to engage thoughtfully and meaningfully with the everyday, capturing inputs from the seen and unseen which contribute to the experience of a moment.

Josephine Buccini, “A Little Bit of Everything”

Advisor: Anthony DeCurtis

“A Little Bit of Everything” is a collection of essays, each about a piece of art. I use my relationship with and the story of each artwork as the lens through which to capture my personal experiences, telling a different story of my family or my own life in each essay. The artworks I have chosen are: the Dawes song “A Little Bit of Everything,” the film *Titanic*, iPhone sunset photographs, a painting by my roommate Olivia, a painting I made of my

grandmother's house, *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* by Edgar Degas, the Netflix show *Queer Eye*, and the film *The Virgin Suicides*.

Lila Dubois, "Sleep for Lou"

Advisor: Lise Funderburg

Set during her study abroad in Paris, this memoir project follows Lila's semester through a bizarre and important reckoning with trauma. Reality smeared by insomnia, a breakup, ill-timed flashbacks, and a gut full of Carrefour wine and éclair cream, the narrative plays both sardonic and desperately hopeful, a young woman stuck between a moment and a world that continues to unfold. Embracing the strange and dreamlike, this nonfiction work plays with the relationship between trauma and the breakdown of the real into the surreal; how freeing to write the absurdity of it all!

Jake Falconer, "Bastard (Bloodline)"

Advisor: Kathy DeMarco Van Cleve

"Bastard (Bloodline)" is a feature-length screenplay that started with the premise of "what if a child abandoned at birth were to return and assassinate their parent?" The film combines pulp horror with Hollywood satire to create a cult satire discussing the current trends and culture in the industry. The film follows Sarah Mercer, the less-famous daughter of a megastar actress, who has to find a new role quickly after she quits mid-shooting a terrible romance film. Along with her boyfriend David and her anxious assistant Aly, the group get caught up in a plot of revenge, murder, and studio filmmaking on a long-lost friend's private island.

Dylan Fritz, "Open stitch" (Thesis Prize Winner)

Advisor: Michelle Taransky

"Open stitch" is an act of translation and ekphrasis between poetry and fiber arts, exploring the two art forms as procedural aids to memory. It examines the complex poetics of knitting, crochet, and weaving, as well as the domestic spaces they inhabit. Ultimately, it aims to weave together a speaker through invented forms, tracking the ways in which principles of fiber arts might physically shape and inform its poems. This collection is an acknowledgment of the incomplete, borrowing the "open stitch" as a concept from knitting in which a row of stitches is kept "open" before being closed by the next row. "Open stitch" is an ode to what is ready to unravel, to what comes next.

Zelda Godsey-Kellogg, "Camp"

Advisor: Piyali Bhattacharya

"Camp" is a novella composed of six distinct chapters. Every chapter is told from a different character's perspective. The last chapter is an amalgamation of multiple characters' perspectives. A brief description of the plot: Anticipating the 2008 Recession, Reggie establishes "Camp" in the forests of southern Minnesota. Operating under the ruse of a rehab program, Reggie convinces his friends Jazz & Chuck to join him. He also brings his son, Igor. Reggie is attempting to produce a square waveform. His theory is that if we can experience something impossible within our bodies, the brain will automatically

rewrite itself. After six years, Reggie finally cracks the code & successfully produces an impossible sound, with escalating consequences.

David Hess-Dunlop, “Fantastic Disability”

Advisor: Abbey Mei Otis

“Fantastic Disability” is a collection of three short stories, inspired by Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Speculative literature. These stories are written for a young adult audience with the goal of representing theories about mental disabilities, as outlined by research in the field of Disability Studies, in an accessible manner. The representations of disability are also informed by the author’s experiences of living with ADHD. In addition to being informative about the struggles of having a mental disability, this thesis also aims to capture and celebrate the joy which comes from experiencing the world uniquely.

Chloe Hunt, “I Want to See You”

Advisor: Melissa Jensen

“I Want to See You” is a novella that centers on three themes: memory, grief, and trauma. The plot follows Dorothy, a 28-year-old writer living in New York City, who returns to her hometown in rural North Carolina following the death of her mother. Upon arriving, Dorothy grapples with an emerging severance between herself and her two childhood best friends; she also grapples with seeing Akil, the seemingly perfect boy-next-door who sexually assaulted her. Inspired by a rich tradition of contemporary literature on adolescence, trauma, and grief, this project delves headfirst into how we experience memories we wanted to forget, as well as the limits of narration and expression.

Cathy Li, “Growing Pains, Greta Gerwig, and the Loneliness of the Modern Young Woman”

Advisor: Anthony DeCurtis

“Growing Pains, Greta Gerwig, and the Loneliness of the Modern Young Woman” is a long-form essay that parses loneliness as it impacts intimacy, estrangement, isolation, and desire. It focuses on three Greta Gerwig films, unofficially dubbed her “young-adult trilogy,” *Frances Ha*, *Mistress America*, and *Lady Bird*, while exploring the narrator’s coming-of-age story, investigating the realities of growing up, friendship fallouts, and the solitary nature of city-dwelling. Ultimately the project portrays loneliness as a complex, personal amalgamation of emotions that requires interior examination, a “reporting from the inside,” that the current journalistic discourse on “the loneliness epidemic” falls short of doing. The piece breaks up the pathological analysis of “loneliness” by pairing film criticism with reflections on how loneliness feels, rather than an abstract analysis of what it does.

Anusha Mathur, “Spruce & 38th”

Advisor: Gabrielle Hamilton

“Spruce & 38th” examines food cart culture as a living archive of community and transformation in University City, Philadelphia. Through a series of profiles of food cart

owners at the intersection of Spruce and 38th Streets, I explore how these vendors navigate the precarity of labor while building complex networks of care, identity, and resistance in a rapidly changing landscape. Drawing on in-depth interviews, observation, and narrative journalism, my series explores how these people transform their tiny 10 x 7-foot structures into sites of memory, cultural expression, economic survival, and connection. These profiles challenge dominant assumptions about immigrant labor, entrepreneurship, and food culture by highlighting how food carts operate both within and against the pressures of urban redevelopment and regulation. Rather than romanticizing resilience, the project attends to the emotional and bodily toll of food cart work, and the fierce strategies that vendors use to survive, adapt, and build community.

Margarita Matta, “Cowboy is a Common Language”

Advisor: Anthony DeCurtis

This thesis investigates the increasing prominence of Brazilian bull riders in the American professional rodeo circuit, with a focus on the Professional Bull Riders (PBR) league. Drawing from personal experience, research, and interviews, it explores how Brazilian riders have not only integrated into what many presume as a traditionally American cultural arena but now dominate it. The role of shared cowboy values, such as Christianity, respect for livestock, and ranching traditions, fosters a sense of transnational belonging by creating a cultural common ground. Furthermore, it considers the significance of Decatur, Texas, as a community hub for relocated Brazilian riders and a site of cultural adaptation and mutual support. Ultimately, this thesis aims to situate Brazilian bull riders within a broader conversation on identity, cultural hybridity, and contemporary rodeo demographics.

Tess O’Brien, “Boys Club”

Advisor: Melissa Jensen

When her sister Ada runs away with her British boyfriend, Friday St. James doesn’t think anything of it. As the daughters of a conservative political lobbyist and an oil heiress, the St. James girls are used to living in a gilded cage. But Friday realizes the severity of her sister’s desperation when she receives word that Ada has mysteriously disappeared on the grounds of her boyfriend’s elite all-boys academy, the illustrious Patrikus School, and nobody seems to be looking for her. With no one to turn to and an impossible mystery to solve, Friday will have to decide what’s worth more: the truth, or her life.

Julia Rotgin, “Stumped”

Advisor: Kathy DeMarco Van Cleve

In 2041, a fully privatized Central Park only grants access to those who live within its 4-mile radius. When a vigilante group begins removing trees from the park overnight and leaving them on the public sidewalk in order to promote access to the commons, tree activist Ellie is challenged to reconcile her need to save the trees with the community-oriented beliefs of her boyfriend. “Stumped” is a story of learning to empathize across perspectives, written for the screen. It can be categorized within family drama, climate fiction, speculative fiction, and dystopian genres.

Keemia Sarafpour, “Another Death” (Thesis Prize Winner)

Advisor: Fatemeh Shams

“Another Death” is a screenplay for an experimental film exploring the relationship between an artist and their homeland. Is an artist’s homeland inherently present in their art? To what extent does assimilation become erasure? How does an artist represent their homeland if they can no longer return to it? As an aspiring Iranian-American filmmaker, this thesis reflects the questions I’ve asked myself time and time again. I aim to convey the inherent dilemma of being an Iranian artist: how does one accept the contradictory nature of one’s art as the very thing that can both represent their homeland and banish them from it?

Wahid Sarwar, “Lágrimas”

Advisor: Kathy DeMarco Van Cleve

“Lágrimas” is a coming-of-age, non-linear drama that unfolds across two interwoven narratives over the span of eight months. It follows a seventeen-year-old struggling with the sudden loss of his father, sinking into a deep depression that distances him from those he loves. When an unexpected opportunity arises to spend the summer in Portugal, he embarks on a journey of self-discovery. A meditation on transnational identity, memory, and familial history, “Lágrimas” captures the human experience of making mistakes, growing from them, and finding solace in the echoes of the past.

Jillian Troth, “A Form That Pains”

Advisor: Julia Bloch

In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry claims that our understanding of each other’s pain suffers at the hand of the pain metaphor. This thesis is a collection of serial poems in conversation with this text, among other sources. These poems probe the potentials of utilizing experimental poetry to revise a tradition of pain language that commonly relies upon external associations rather than direct experience. Focused on fragmentation and rejection of the pain metaphor, these poems explore themes of multiplicity, irrationality, collective voice, the knowledge of the body, atemporality, and visibility to pose more accurate ways to convey the experience of pain.

Elise Wallen-Friedman, “Neighborhood Watch and Other Stories”

Advisor: Karen Rile

“Neighborhood Watch and Other Stories” is a collection of short stories done in pastiche, where each story emulates the form, genre, or style of a specific author. The title piece, “Neighborhood Watch,” recounts one day in a small community through vignettes of neighbors’ lives, mirroring Steven Millhauser’s novella *Enchanted Night*. “How to Wait for Good News” is a second person narrative after the work of Lorrie Moore. Finally, with influence from George Saunders, “Dream Floor” introduces readers to a dystopian world and its approach to disability and human experimentation.