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Vagabondage

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VAGABONDAGE

ANDREA LORA CASTILLO

Master's Program in Creative Writing

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2022

DEDICATION

“My ambition was to live like music.”

-- Mary Gaitskill

For my parents and Dan.

VAGABONDAGE

by

ANDREA LORA CASTILLO, B.A

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Creative Writing

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CRITICAL PREFACE

Prior to my decision to follow a non-linear poetic form to *Vagabondage*, I began this project in 2011 as a series of interconnected short-stories, each with its own linear narrative structure, narrated from the first-person point of view of the three main characters: Jilly Moreno, James Ewing, and Michael Sackett. The inspiration for this novel, and many of its pivotal scenes, came to me as a result of my own personal experience spending ten days in New York City as part of an undergraduate English course offered at UTEP, *New York Through The Literary Imagination*, taught by Dr. Ezra Cappell. This course's goal was to provide students with the immersive experience of reading literature produced by New Yorkers such as Langston Hughes, Mary Gaitskill, Gary Steingart, Allen Ginsberg, etc. while simultaneously visiting the areas of the city where these influential writers wrote, lived, and even the public spaces that feature heavily in their work as setting for scene. We visited Harlem, Greenwich Village, the Red Hook neighborhood in lower Brooklyn and various other literary-rich locations across the five boroughs. While I did gain valuable knowledge from our required group walking tours lead by doctoral candidates in History, much of the dreaming process of my novel occurred during solo walking trips through Manhattan and Brooklyn neighborhoods.

I imagine that this dream-walking evokes the spirit of literary icons and city- poets such as Frank O'Hara, Federico Garcia Lorca, Walt Whitman, and Susan Sontag. Even now, several years later, *Vagabondage* complete, I think back upon my walks through these New York City neighborhoods and I feel transported once more. I'm reminded, specifically, of the smells: garbage, exhaust fumes, vomit, fresh food from immigrant-

owned restaurants— the sounds: car horns, traffic, chatter, ecstatic whoops and laughter, music emanating from hole-in-the-wall bars— the sights: bodies walking together, stopping for no one, nothing, not even for the legion of speeding cars or futile stop lights flashing red handprints, century-old trees, their branches dying or dead, some reaching out to others as if in solidarity or pleading sustenance. As writers, we have been trained to tune-in to our sense of sight to set our scenes, our sense of smell for immersion. As poets, we are trained to listen to the music made by the world around us, for the world’s musicians are us all, and our poetry must echo the booming collective. As an artist, I believe it impossible to create without first fine-tuning our ability to disappear. For *Vagabondage* in particular, the process of my own effacement allowed me to become conscious of the minutia, the fragments of life, of existence, that bind us all. Awareness begets embodiment. Embodiment begets *feeling*.

As a writer and reader of literature, my strongest skill has always been to feel and make connections. In fact, Walt Whitman taught me this. In “Song of Myself,” Whitman writes, “To elaborate is no avail, learn’d and unlearn’d feel that it is so.” While feelings are, by nature, fleeting, evoked by a familiar scent or through the vibrations of song— poets, writers, and artists are burdened by the realm of the physical. It is our duty to transform feeling into object, an impossibility at first glance. But, here, if I may turn to Barthes, we may perhaps begin to interpret as tangible the utmost intangible.

Contemplating the totality of music and its criticism, Barthes asks us, “How, then, does language manage when it has to interpret music? Alas, it seems, very badly” (179). After concluding that because of language’s inability to interpret “the imaginary,”

Barthes suggests, music, when interpretation is attempted, becomes reduced to an adjective. I believe Barthes views the adjective as a reductive because music is fundamentally not linguistic, therefore, to assert linguistic signifiers upon it, like adjectives, not only do we fail to fully interpret the entirety of a particular piece of music, but we also, by default, erase “the imaginary.”

I understand “the grain,” a term he borrowed from Kristeva, to be what Barthes deemed as “the imaginary.” Although by no means is this a complete definition—nor is it even a satisfyingly concrete definition— the grain can be found in the spaces between music, language, and the body. It resides in friction. It is the frustrating void resulting from language’s failure to accurately describe meaning gained from a composition of music. The frustration allows for discourse to occur, a permission akin to a happy accident, as discourse leads to connection and stimulation. Once stimulated, the artist is driven to create.

Of course, when speaking of discourse as a motivator for creative production, it is imperative to turn to Bakhtin who asserts that verbal discourse functions as a social phenomenon; therefore, form and content in discourse are one in the same. Moreover, he argues, that stylistics is not necessarily concerned with “living” conversation but with the historical record, or ideology, created by it. This friction between stylistics and ideology and their perhaps impossible coexistence leads a determination of the necessity of a common, yet impossible, unitary language—one must be acknowledged and applied for true discourse to occur.

My novel grapples with the friction of form and content through each of my characters who do their own unique “writing” of the novel. My protagonist Jilly who, at the novel’s opening, learns her older brother has been killed in Afghanistan while on duty in the Army as a Sargent. Her brother Paris was a Beatles fan. He called himself Sgt. Paris. His character, although dead, shows up in flashbacks and letters. Jilly hated the Beatles—she still hates them, even more after she finds out about Paris’ death. She writes her short, crafted (oftentimes witty and poetic) thoughts on post-its and on her body. As the novel continues, years pass. Throughout this time, Jilly is still grieving. Her husband James has been using her as an involuntary model for his photography—taking photographs of her during serious states of depression, during states where she’s gone so far as to become catatonic—a work which later gets hung in New York City’s Museum of Modern Art. This is the beginning of Jilly’s accidental modeling career and James’ pop stardom as a cult photographer. In the photos, Jilly is both subject and object, yet unwilling to be both.

During this conflict, Jilly begins an affair with Michael, a singer in a rock band and James’ friend. For Jilly and Michael, it isn’t just an affair; they fall in love—or some version of love for both.

Moreover, my novel is concerned with itself as an object. It is, as Hutcheon asserts, a narcissistic narrative—a self-reflective novel, especially in terms of what she deems as the mimesis of process. This, Hutcheon suggests, requires that the reader “be conscious of the work, the actual construction, that he too is undertaking, for it is the reader who, in Ingarden’s terms, “concretizes” the work of art and gives it life.” The act

of “writing” as an object is shown through the various objects inserted throughout. For instance, I insert a Wikipedia page written about James. I included this object because I felt it was important at that point in the novel to allow the readers time to digest how important James is as an artistic figure in the world of the novel. This Wikipedia page also speaks to identity. I think it’s an interesting point to question identity in terms of a Wikipedia entry written by a seemingly “objective” conglomerate of anonymous sources. Is the entry accurate? Is this history how James would view himself? Further, Wikipedia is an accessible and “objective” source of information on the internet, and often, the first source of information when Googling something; therefore, it is the “first impression” of the subject, and first impressions can often be false or misconstrued.

The photographs, or ekphrasis, also serve as objects in the novel which would cause the readers to question identity, in this case, Jilly’s identity. Similar to the Wikipedia entry, these photographs attempt to create an objective identity of the subject, yet the photo only captures one particular moment in the subject’s life—a moment which is also layered with James’ point of view. The ekphrasis is written completely in James’ point of view and any perspective on Jilly given to the reader is filtered through not only James’ point of view, but also, Jilly as an object because of her photographic representation.

Sontag notes that the photograph provides us with a sense of power and knowledge. I feel as though this is an apt definition of how the ekphrasis in my novel function. The ekphrasis photographs in my novel serve as an illustration of this idea in two ways, the first being an illustration of the power of James’ point of view. In a sense,

because the ekphrasis are written in James' point of view, he has control over Jilly's image; therefore, what the reader knows about Jilly in the moment of the ekphrasis comes from the way James has shaped her image. The second is the knowledge of the reader. As the novel progresses, what the reader knows about the characters, Jilly in particular, becomes shaped by the sections that are told in close third person point of view with a focus on Jilly; therefore, the reader's understanding of Jilly becomes altered, and in a sense, she is once again re-written and objectified.

Furthermore, Sontag suggests that to take a photo is to assign the subject a moment of fame. This literally happens to Jilly in the novel. Fame is something Jilly must contend with as a result of James' photographs. Rather than see herself through the lens of another, she re-writes herself into her version.

Inspired by Bakhtin's work, I refer to *Vagabondage* as a novel of convocation, or *una novela de convocatoria*. En Español, the verb, *convocar* means to call together, to convene, to convoke, to summon. *Una convocatoria*, para mi, is equivalent to a meeting of the minds, a sharing of ideas and experiences—personally, socially, and most importantly, politically. This act of discourse, especially where narrative structure is concerned, leads me to a question of identity.

As a writer, I'm concerned with identity. I believe identity consists of several parts: how we present as a being in the world, how we connect to others, and how we connect to our inner selves. Some questions concerning identity that my novel presents are: What does it mean to be a writer? If I identify as a writer, is that all encompassing of everything I am and can produce, not only as an artist, but as a global citizen, as a living

being? Further, how do my characters identify? How do they mold and construct (or deconstruct) their identities? What happens when a close relationship is formed or broken? More, how does this question of identity apply to the narrative structure overall?

I tried to address these questions through an application of a multi-modal literary form. Rather than divide my novel into chapters, each character speaking his or her own version of truth, I chose to unify their voices, applying, where appropriate, traditional close third-person point of view as well as a mimicry of their chosen artistic forms of expression. Through its non-linear structure, my thesis project will attempt to blend the forms of narrative prose and lyricism. This novel, as I currently envision it, will largely explore themes and subjects related to grief and its propensity for re-shaping identity. I'm also particularly interested in exploring these themes in relation to a young Mexican-American woman from El Paso, Texas, who now lives in cosmopolitan New York City—a city that, despite its history of immigration and cosmopolitanism, the dominant literary and artistic perspective is largely depicted from the white male experience.

I intend to comment on this through the exploration of the contemporary experience of a young Mexican-American woman, who, already grappling with a hybrid ethnic existence, is further fractured by the sudden death of her brother, a Sergeant in the United States Army killed in Afghanistan during an incident of friendly-fire. My goal for this novel is to access grief and its consequences to the mind as a fundamental fabric of human existence and connection. A fundamental aspect of this assessment comes through an exploration of human connection through music and space. I believe this experimental

form is the best way to discuss the grief because, like the grieving process, the form is fractured and a bit dissociated.

The story will feature three main characters: Jilly Moreno Ewing (the protagonist), her husband James Ewing, and her lover, Michael Sackett. Through its non-linear structure, the novel will explore poignant moments from Jilly's childhood alongside her present experience as she attempts to cope with the loss of her brother.

Meanwhile, James exploits Jilly's grief and depression by taking artistic photographs of Jilly and selling them to art galleries and museums. Eventually, Jilly meets Michael, the lead singer and guitar player in a rock band and James' long-time friend. He and Jilly begin an affair almost immediately. James, seeing artistic opportunity in Jilly and Michael's relationship, permits the affair in order to prolong his fame as a photographer. Through her relationship with Michael, Jilly eventually embraces her Mexican-American identity and accepts Paris' death by discovering her own passion for his favorite band, The Beatles—a band who, earlier, she hated.

Inspired by Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and other experimental texts, I decided to perform my own experiment with a combination of experimental forms and the traditional linear narrative to tell my story. This experiment consists of inserting objects to break the more traditional narrative form. However, even within the “traditional” narrative forms, there are scenes that consist of mostly dialogue. I do this to draw attention to the “objectiveness” of the narrative's reality. For example, a scene that consists of mostly dialogue is when Jilly and Michael are talking and teasing each other at Concordia Cemetery. I feel as though showing their conversation through dialogue

might display a truer portrait of their relationship. Slowing the scene down with narrative commentary would eliminate the scene's objectivity—not only the objective reality of Jilly and Michael's relationship, but also the overall consciousness of the novel as an object.

I was also inspired by other writers and hope that my novel follows in the tradition of Mary Gaitskill's *Bad Behavior* and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From The Goon Squad*. I chose these two writers because I admire their work in terms of both form and content. Mary Gaitskill's work has influenced me significantly as a writer in terms of content. The first time I read her work, I felt like I had permission to write characters who aren't perfect, who are even unlikeable to the reader. I also felt that sexuality was something I could finally write about because of the way Gaitskill approaches it—unflinching yet graceful.

I was inspired by Jennifer Egan's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *A Visit From the Goon Squad* as well. There is a section near the end of the novel that is written using Power Point slides from the first-person point of view of a teenage girl. I feel as though my work in this novel follows this tradition through the inclusion of the ekphrasis and the Wikipedia entries.

In further discussion of the novel as object, in constructing the novel from its beginnings, all I could see were fragments and pictures—not necessarily always of scene, but of form—how the story looked in my head. Previously, I tried too hard to “translate” this into a linear narrative. I felt a little bit the way that John Lennon felt in “Strawberry Fields Forever.” The song attempts to construct identity yet acknowledges that the

construction is not always fixed and not everyone can understand the language one uses to articulate his/her identity. This interpretation of the song recalls us back to Bakhtin's suggestion that a common unitary language must exist before a common understanding before identity can occur. This idea is crucial to my thesis project, and, a discussion of "Strawberry Fields Forever" might be useful because the song and the place in New York City's Central Park show up through lyrics written on Post-Its as Jilly wrestles with identity, loss, perception of herself as others see her, etc.

Vagabondage is part a love letter to the Beatles and part an experiment in music, space, and form, as identity. I feel as though this experimentation may lead me to future projects where I explore these themes further. Additionally, *Vagabondage* is also a love letter to my own grief. When I began this project years ago, I had just lost my grandpa, and now, as I am finishing it, I've just lost my grandma. In a way, my novel's beginning and end are sandwiched by the loss of two very important people in my life. The acceptance of loss is a process. Similarly, I need to let go of this novel and finally allow it to exist in world where it is up for interpretation. I'm letting go, and I am giving it to you.

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VAGABONDAGE

Twenty minutes before her grandmother's phone call, Jilly had been naked in bed with James.

A Nikon digital camera around his neck, James hooked his arm around Jilly's waist and shoved her gently into a spoon. But still, she lay asleep.

Jilly stirred, startled, when James traced her continents—the dark brown birthmarks above her breasts. His touch was warm, his fingers soft and smooth. Jilly eased into his touch and felt comfortable, but when James drew his camera closer, she shuddered.

“Here you are only sleeping,” said James, “you can't keep an eye on the world when your eyes are closed, d'you know?”

Jilly sighed, pulling the covers up over her head. She was used to him saying weird shit like that to her, and she acted annoyed when really, it endeared him to her.

James ripped the covers away, and Jilly curled into herself, her eyes shut tight.

Giggling, she said, “Go away you fucking creep.”

But he crawled on top of her. “Come on,” he said.

And then he wrapped her long black hair around her neck and jerked.

Jilly turned her face to the side, burying her smile inside of a memory foam pillow.

When Jilly was seventeen, her older brother Paris walked in on her as she changed.

In only a bra, Jilly had been hopping into sweat pants when Paris opened her bedroom door and yelled, “Hey, wouldn’t it be cool to be a gypsy?”

“Get out shithead!”

“Put a shirt on, Jillian,” said Paris, crossing over: hallway Jilly’s bedroom.

Stiff, Jilly watched Paris stare from inside her bedroom, the door shadowing the hall outside.

“You’re not funny, dude.”

“Okay, I’m sorry,” said Paris. “Put your shirt on, Jills.” And he closed the door, leaving her.

Yeah, thought Jilly, maybe it *would* be cool to be a gypsy.

Shower water hits me alone my body
in one hand and a sharpie I snuck
in the other I want to write on myself
I want to draw tattoos not like the cholo
tattoos Paris and his boyfriends get but
words to cover my brown skin that say
for me I AM JILLIAN BUT I GO
BY JILLY and no one can tell me no
and stop that little girl malcreada alone
my body in one hand and I'm drawing
words with the other hand the blackness
of the Sharpie ink is darker than my skin
but the black words run with the water
down the drain run like they're grossed out
by me black ink isn't permanent like it says
on the marker my body in one hand lies
in the other hand lies run down the drain
I'm too bored to chase them now I'm picking
at the lunars I have on my face
I have lunars on my legs
I have lunars on my arms
The moon isn't black
it's blue and sometimes
it's invisible
and sometimes
it's

James shook the headboard, his other hand still yanking Jilly's long hair.

“Answer me.”

Jilly caved to him, and they fucked, camera flashing, until the phone rang.

Jilly's grandmother sent her a package a few weeks after she'd called to say Paris had been killed in Afghanistan. Jilly felt dizzy, so she unwrapped the taped-up box watching blots that didn't fade—instead they synthesized into a purple hemisphere.

Package contents: various brochures on death and grief management. Composed, Jilly tore the brochures into confetti and tossed them above her.

She was a snowman in a globe.

After ripping up the brochures, Jilly took a bath. James followed, his Nikon draped around his neck. In the tub, Jilly was unresponsive to James' groping. He bound her ankles and wrists together with rags, photographed her, and put the picture on his Facebook fan page. Two weeks later, the Museum of Modern Art featured “Eleanor Rigby” in its Local Artist Series.

The camera's depth of field point: a bathroom window behind the tub / Sunlight etches the window's mirror image on the bathroom tile / Shadowed objects: a shower curtain pulled to the left, a pile of dirty laundry next to the curtain, the bathroom tile, the sink's front half—all at a slight blur / Selective focus: interior of the light beam—the subject inside a filled clawfoot tub: a bundle of brown limbs / The subject holds her hands over her reddened bottom lip, her wrists wrapped in a holey blue cloth plucked from the laundry pile / Knees drawn to her chest, shade the brown birthmark across her breasts / Long dark hair drawn over her right shoulder, split ends dipped inside the bathwater / The subject faces the tap, her dark eyes focus on a water droplet dangling off the spout.

James Asher Ewing
American, 1986-

Eleanor Rigby, 2016
Black and white print, 32x42

Courtesy of the artist, New York City
© James Ewing

It was raining that day—a year and a half before Eleanor Rigby was shot—and Martha wasn't at the Laundromat when Jilly walked in. Although it was early— 5 am—Martha was always there.

When Jilly first moved to Manhattan, she discovered that the apartment complex where she lived had the most disgusting laundry-room. There was a problem with their plumbing—and it was rat infested, most likely. Jilly didn't know about the rats for certain, but she complained to the super anyway, as if rats in New York City were of a concern to anyone but herself. Jilly learned this the hard way, having been accosted by a rat while being issued a ticket for public intoxication—all because of homesickness. It was warm for October that year—that time of year in New York City when the humidity begins to dry. It reminded her of El Paso, and if she held her breath and focused between buildings, she could reproduce the U.S/Mexico Border skyline—the shadows down the sides of the Franklin Mountains, the dry, khaki terrain and the determined city buildings rising from it like a coup. The visual made her want to have a six pack on her stoop, something she'd never done before—in El Paso nor in New York. Halfway in, she got caught by a cop who pronounced her last name *More-ray-no* then, halfway through writing her a citation, pepper-sprayed a rat the size of a new born baby. He seemed so bored of it all, Jilly remembered. Not one part of their exchange excited him.

She found Christopher Street Laundry one afternoon two years later—the one afternoon when she decided to skip out on her Literary Criticism senior seminar. Martha, a forty-six year old immigrant from the Dominican Republic, needed to practice her

English on someone. So, every Monday morning, Jilly did her laundry for free then bought Martha a Starbucks latte. For four years, Martha, the Christopher Street Laundry General Manager, was Jilly's only friend.

Jilly stood dripping in the doorway, wet laundry bag in hand. The white lights above and the open space made her anxious. And she was alone in the bright light of the room, the wall length windows behind her reflecting the darkness outside.

"Martha? Aquí estas? Es Jilly, Martha."

Jilly tried to count the number of washers and driers, but she couldn't focus.

"Martha, what the hell? Seriously," Jilly said again.

As she was about to leave, a man's voice—a British man's voice— from behind the counter said, "You need help?"

He was lanky in skinny blue jeans and he wore a white t-shirt under a heavy leather jacket.

He's hot, thought Jilly. But she let the thought run until it was no longer a thought.

His dark wavy hair flopped out of a gray Fedora, a red and yellow feather tucked in the brim. An anachronism, Jilly thought. She'd never had to use that word until now.

"Where's Martha?"

"Who?" he asked wiping his nose with his sleeve. He'd been doing a line of coke in the back. Jilly couldn't blame him— the sun hadn't even yet come up to wash out the rain.

"Martha. The woman who used to work here every morning."

“Oh, darling Spanish Martha? That right? She quit. Sorry love. But, need help figuring out the laundry, do you love? It’s quite easy, d’you know? I can show you. But it’s quite easy, d’you know?”

“Do you know it’s rude to be condescending?”

He laughed loud, showing his teeth. They were perfect white, straight, and natural. “Where did you hear that? Betty Friedan?”

Jilly wanted to laugh— he was funny— but she blinked it off. For a few seconds, she was present between her eyelashes and forgot the world. Then her nerves came back.

“What’s your name?” Jilly asked.

“James Ewing. What’s yours?”

That is the most British name ever, Jilly thought. More British than any of the Beatles names. Ugh. The fucking Beatles.

In his twenties, Paris would fly into rants about McCartney. “He’s just in it for the money,” he’d say, “Nothing but a god damn jingle writer. All his songs go:

boop boop

doodidy doo

Martha my dear

— oh you silly girl

Look what you’ve

duhhhhnnnee.”

Jilly smiled wide. “Jillian Moreno. But I go by Jilly, mostly.”

“I’ve never heard that name. It’s a bit weird, isn’t it? I don’t mean to offend you, love.”

“Which one?”

“What?”

“Which name is the weird one?”

Jilly finished her laundry as the sun rose between the high rises. She couldn’t get over seeing it that way.

“Hey, wanna have coffee with me? What time do you end your shift?” she asked James. He’d been hanging out behind the counter doing coke for an hour and a half while Jilly watched her laundry spin. He’d offered her some three times that night, but she always gave him the same response: “I’ve had some today already, thanks.” Jilly knew James didn’t believe her, but he never called her on the lie. The more this exchange happened—the futile offer, the blatant lie, the unacknowledged concord—the more attracted to James Jilly became.

“Sure,” said James, “I know a place by my place.”

James lead Jilly through the alley behind the laundromat, telling her it was easier than ebbing through snobs and fags on the Christopher Street sidewalk.

As they walked, Jilly watched her feet. Scattered across the gravel: broken glass, a dead pigeon, cigarette butts, and needles. She should've worn her boots instead of her new ballet flats.

Halfway through the alley, James started to laugh. Jilly looked up and saw him kicking a dumpster.

"D'you know, every time I see one of these, I'm always afraid someone's gonna pop out and scare me. Like a jack-in-a-can."

"Like Oscar the Grouch." Jilly felt a prick under her flat's sole. A broken bottle. It didn't penetrate.

"Is that some kind of American clown I don't know about yet?"

"Or something," Jilly said.

When Jilly looked up again, James had climbed inside the dumpster. What the fuck?

"Come get in with me," said James, "People throw away the most fascinating things."

"No."

"Fine," said James, "I'll just photograph it for you— wouldn't want you to get dirty, darling." He snapped a picture with his iPhone, then he took several more.

Jilly looked down at the glass under her feet. It was too dark to see through. Interrupted, she heard crunching from behind.

She turned around to see two guys and a girl standing side-by-side blocking the alley. They were probably still drunk from the night before and looking to start shit. Jilly felt a rush at the thought.

“Hey, what the fuck?” said one of the guys. He wore black framed glasses and a checkered shirt.

“The fuck you doing?” said the girl. Half of her head was shaved and the part with hair was dyed red and glittered against the sun rays that fell between the steps of a fire escape suspended above.

“Wait,” said the other guy— a chubby guy in a Dead Kennedys t-shirt, “Are you documentarians?”

“They are,” said the girl, “Look at them. They totally are. I mean, look how dedicated they are to their art. Like, who just climbs in a dumpster like that?”

“Homeless people?” Jilly answered.

The girl with the glittering hair called out to James, “Where can I get a copy of your work?”

“I saw a film crew under the GW yesterday. I bet that’s what’s going on.”

“Hey,” said the girl to Jilly, “Can we get a picture with you?”

James got his check from MoMA the Friday after Paris' funeral. Jilly had been sleeping on the couch when he came home—her fifth nap since morning.

She woke to James pulling the ends of her hair. “Look,” he said, fanning the check, “I’m rich now. We’ll go anywhere you want.”

Jilly drew her arms to her chest. “No one I think is in my tree.”

Sighing, James covered her with an afghan. “Go back to sleep.”

Present your presence, thought Jilly.

At a townhouse in Waterford, Ireland, where Michael, James' best friend had been living and recording an album with his band, photographs of Jilly were sprawled out on a coffee table. The three of them sat around it, a party in the background.

After James got his check from MoMA for Eleanor Rigby, Michael had offered to let James and Jilly stay in a room at his manager's townhouse—where he stayed too.

Michael, the lead singer and guitar player for Mistake The Enemy, wrote all the songs— but on the flight from JFK that morning, James told Jilly that Michael always makes sure to credit the band. All songs written and recorded as an ensemble. It says so on the backs of their albums.

“Michael's a social anarchist,” said James—proud as if saying it about himself. “He's from New Jersey, poor mate.” And he laughed. “He got the fuck out right quick. Soon as he could. He worked as a shipyard worker and landed in Blackpool for awhile, made his way to London, of course. Playing guitar for a quid here and there. Best guitar player I ever heard.”

Bullshit, thought Jilly. She'd been half listening to James talk through the flight for hours. Terrified that the plane would crack in half and pile drive into the ocean, she'd pictured herself unbuckling the belt around her waist then using her seat to drift to the safety of a beach. But—she'd rather use James. If it came down to it, she'd drown him to save herself—and she felt like shit for thinking it.

Be present, Jilly thought, staring into the coffee table.

She glanced down at the beer bottle between her legs and thought, jet-lag: what a sadistic little slut you are. I want you, beer, but I can't. Jet-lag and what if I vomit?

"They're great, right? The photos," James said to Michael.

Blonde haired, blue eyed, his skinny body inside a green sweater, Michael smelled like a man-- whiskey and cigarettes. Thick dark hair covered up the white of his skinny legs, poles for cargo-short flags.

As James showed off, Jilly watched Michael watching her instead.

"They're nice, man," Michael said, "Huge payout too, huh."

James laughed loud. "Yeah. We're uptown now. Not uptown-uptown, but further."

"Jesus Christ, Jimmy," said Jilly, "Do you have to be so fucking phony all the time?"

"How's that phony? It's true." James' frowned. Jilly was impressed by how earnestly he believed his own fuckery.

"She's got a point, man. You married someone with a brain this time."

Jilly finally drank from the beer bottle. She drank almost the entire bottle until she felt full. "You never told me you were married before."

"Don't worry about it," said James. "Michael is kidding."

Jilly finished off the rest of the beer and wiped her lipsticked mouth with the back of her hand. She studied the red smudge stamp— askew in its representation of her lips. Gross, she thought. Sticky.

Next to her, Michael smelled like cigarettes. Marlboro Reds, she thought.

Hardcore.

“Do you have any cigarettes? I like to smoke when I drink.” Jilly said to Michael.

He pulled out a Red from a fresh pack and offered it to her. “Sure.”

“Where’d you get those from?” asked James. “Shipping from the States is a bit expensive, isn’t it?”

Michael stood up. “We can’t smoke in here. It’s not my house, and I don’t want to be a dick.”

Jilly put the cigarette between her lips to taste the filter. “Being a dick would suck.”

Michael laughed. “Sure it would. Dicks fucking suck. I’ll give you a light outside.”

Alone on the back porch with Michael, Jilly sloped her finger across air, tracing imagined hills in the distance. Waterford was flat. Green, but fucking flat.

From the looks of it, the townhouse shared a yard with the neighborhood—the acres of field in front separated by uneven logs hammered into the grass. Someone must’ve had that job, but when? Before industry, obviously. Can traces of him be found via Google search—or would a pay service be required? If so, is there an express package? Just looking for one dude, thanks—not interested in the whole fucking lineage.

Between cigarette drags, Michael, in what Jilly recognized as a useless yet adorable attempt to impress her, had been talking about Joyce or Melville or one of those irrelevant fools, but stopped as he noticed Jilly's tracing.

Inside, the party raged. Right here, above them, stars poked holes in the black sky.

"Shit. I'm boring you," Michael said. He waited for Jilly to respond, but when she didn't speak or even feign a laugh the way he was used to, he laughed instead.

He noticed her lipstick— smudged from beer and cigarettes. She blinked a lot, mascara imprinting under her eyes. He wondered how long the marks had been there. She must've blinked after the first coat. She should probably sleep— he's made that flight before: JFK to London, London to Waterford— but Michael didn't want to let her go.

"Hey, where are you right now?" he asked.

Jilly smiled—her first in months. "The field. Out there." She pointed to the acres of tall green grass in the distance.

Michael turned toward the townhouse and locked eyes with James. Framed by the kitchen window, James lifted his eyebrows and smirked. Michael turned back to Jilly and asked, "Why?"

Right, thought Michael, James is a weird mother fucker. He felt sorry for Jilly. He didn't feel for the last Mrs. Ewing— Pam? Who cares— bitch was vapid as fuck. This one's empty inside— there's a difference.

"Wouldn't you want to be there?" Jilly asked.

"No." He looked back again at the window.

Now, James had his Nikon aimed. Photography. That's new, thought Michael.

He remembered the time— about five years ago in London— he tried to teach James how to play the guitar. After having drinks one afternoon, they walked down to a pawn shop near the flat Michael rented, and James bought a cheap acoustic without any strings.

After Michael strung it for him—using leftover nylon— James said, “I think I’m really more of a bass player, d’you know what I mean?”

“Fine,” Michael told him— and he kept the guitar. It never leaves him.

Michael turned back to Jilly. “I’d rather you be here than over there.”

Jilly locked her fingers around his. “You can come with me if you want.”

Michael rubbed Jilly’s thumb with his pointer. Although it was May, the night was cold— humid, too.

“Are you a Beatles fan,” asked Jilly.

An Oak caught her attention as she asked. She felt stupid for asking about the Beatles— all uncalled for like that—but asking while focused on the Oak gave her peace. The sagging decaying branches, the thickness of the upturned roots, the green-brown-green in the leaves—it was like staring into a multiverse.

Michael glanced at the party then turned back. “Who isn’t,” he said, calm but off-guard and tugging the hem on Jilly’s dress— a heeding tug, no room for interpretation.

“Yeah,” Jilly said, “who isn’t.” She wanted to let him, so she should.

Michael rubbed the inside of Jilly’s thigh, hooking his finger around her underwear.

As it was happening, Jilly couldn't help but make shapes out of the clouds in the sky.

In El Paso, Texas. Scenic Drive.

Jilly sits in the passenger seat of Paris' car. She's 12 years old, and he, 18. The Beatles' *White Album* cassette tape plays, annoying yet soothing Jilly. The Beatles mean Paris.

"What are we doing here? This is boring just looking at clouds," says Jilly.

"Look at the city," says Paris. "It's more fun to look at. Look at the cars driving by, all tiny on those roads. See?"

"What are we *doing* here?" Jilly asked again.

"Where do you think everyone is going right now? Imagine their lives. Close your eyes."

Jilly did as she was told. She closed her eyes and imagined cars carrying families going home from the mall or the movies—places she wished she were right now instead of waiting inside the car for something she wasn't sure. The mall was such a fun place to go with Paris. They'd spend hours there without supervision, going to Claire's and Spencer's, getting their pictures taken at Image Shots, looking through CDs at Sam Goody. The mall was a place she would rather be. Here, at Scenic Drive, she was weirded out. Why would you sit in a car just to look down at where you live? When she grows older, she appreciates it more. It's the best spot to smoke weed and watch the city lights. But like people, cities grow up, and their memories grow, carrying with them all the feelings from before, too. What was once strange becomes home.

At that moment, a car pulled up next to them. The driver and Paris acknowledged each other. Paris told Jilly he would be right back. Jilly rolled her eyes. Paris got out of

the car and into the passenger seat of the other next to them. The driver and Paris exchanged money and a bag of what Jilly now knows was weed.

She watched her brother roll a joint, light it, and blow clouds of smoke right out the window.

Camera's depth of field: the moon raised above a lush green pasture, the backyard of an Irish townhouse lean and blue / In medium frame: the backs of Subject 1 (Michael) and Subject 2 (Jilly) / They sit nestled together, boundary-less—Jilly's brown skin against Michael's pale, pale against brown / Michael's left hand settles into the grass beside him for support / His right arm across her legs, he hides his hand inside her blue dress / Sharp focus: Jilly's face tucked within the cusp of Michael's neck / Her eyes shut, lids lined in black, purpled with veins / Michael's razor-edged hair brushes the bridge of her black-and-white-head pricked nose / Jilly bites down hard against his shoulder— red bite marks left.

James Asher Ewing
American, 1986-

Happiness Is A Warm Gun, 2016
Color Print, 24x42

Courtesy of the artist, New York City
© James Ewing

Michael and Jilly sat side by side, wrapped in each other.

“You must be racked. The trip.” Michael said, kissing her bare shoulders.

“Nah not really. I don’t feel like sleeping.”

“We could sneak into my room— if you want.”

Jilly laughed, but without a smile. “My brother just died. Did James tell you?”

“Oh. No, he didn’t. Shit. Sorry. That sucks, man. I don’t know what to say. What happened?”

Jilly ripped grass from the ground and rolled the shreds into a ball. She played with it between her fingers, weaving it in and out— back and forth.

“The Army. I mean— I don’t really know what happened. Like, they told my grandma, and then my grandma called me about it like four days after the fact.”

“Maybe she was trying to protect you.”

“Maybe she was being a colossal cunt.”

“Or that. Cunt grandma,” said Michael.

Jilly noticed that Michael had been tapping on the thighs of his holey jeans. “From what I heard,” she said, “it sounded like an accident, but I don’t really believe it.”

“Why not?”

“I dunno. He was a shit-starter— always trying to prove himself.”

“I can get that. Some of us can’t help but give a fuck.”

“That will get you killed.”

“It’s easier not to give a fuck, I get it.”

“I give a fuck.”

“I never said you didn’t.”

“Oh.”

The sun plumed at the bottom of the sky and Jilly realized how tired she was getting. She’d been awake for thirty-six hours. She was starting to feel like Jesus, her mind rambling, her body giving out. She wondered how many women had sat in her place. She imagined the field bare— no modern townhouse built, no roads to repair and conserve.

Jilly laughed at herself. Fuck, was she finally losing it? Had she lost it already and now, after the loss, was she distanced from every haver to have ever been possessed? Brainwashed, even, to believe anything else transcended beyond tangible having? Was this what it was like to let a plant die on your windowsill because you alone (and we you are all alone, or so all are told) have consciousness and desires and obligations and interests outside of yourself and the plant—all abstractions, by the way, that the plant, despite its own sophisticated system of roots, photosynthesis, and particular decorative windowsill placement, your shared devour of oxygen during the night, a partnership of experience fueled by water, which is perhaps, the only thing you two really do have in common (but don’t we all?). You and the plant breathe, together, alone, at night—you with your lungs and the plant through a complex process due to its absence of lungs.

Wait, Jilly thought, am I the haver now instead of the loser?

“What was your brother’s name?” asked Michael.

“What?” asked Jilly. Presence, no. Fuck it. “Can I have another cigarette?”

Michael tossed her the pack, and before taking a drag off a fresh-lit Red, Jilly said, “Paris.”

Michael smiled.

An hour later, Michael decided that Jilly had been awake too long. His arm around her waist, he led her up the stairs to the back bedroom where he’d been sleeping since he flew in. They walked in from outside, went through the kitchen, into the living room, and up the narrow wooden stairs.

“She’s not a groupie. It’s not like that,” Michael thought.

Inside the bedroom, Jilly plopped herself down on the mattress in the center of the empty room. The solid blue and white sheets smelled like sweat and perfume. She wrapped her arms around a drool-stained pillow. Still, she allowed it to conform against her shape.

Jilly closed her eyes but didn’t sleep. Before her: a solid black circle against a vivid orange background:

She wanted to hold it there— to see if she could make the black disappear. She tried to focus, but in the silence, she questioned whether Michael had stayed.

Then, she heard James’ voice in the hallway and started to drift off.

Jilly hoped she didn’t dream that night— or any night after— but the black circles that, before, had seemed so definite inside, had been absorbed into the blaze.

As she watched the two colors, swirl, multiply into greens and purples, then fog—tarnishing into a night sky— she knew she'd lost control already.

Three months later, Jilly waited for Michael's plane to arrive at Sunny's in Red Hook. She told Michael over the phone that she would meet him at JFK when he landed in the city, but she hadn't yet been that far out of Manhattan on her own. She'd have to take a cab—and although James had offered her money to pay the driver, she was stubborn.

At Sunny's Jilly sat at a booth in front of a three-panel bay window wrapping and un-wrapping her dirty hair into a bun, a fountain pen jammed inside holding it all together. Every few minutes, she'd down nearly a third of her beer then mess up her hair. Each time she'd pull at the fountain pen to loosen her hair, individual strands would rip out.

Looking out the window—waiting for Michael—Jilly blocked out her own reflection, passing it to stare at the street in the foreground instead. Medusa, thought Jilly wrapping her hair around the pen again. I look like fucking Medusa right now. Gross.

Jilly hadn't seen Michael since she and James had left Waterford, and she wondered if he'd be the same. She tried to picture him in her mind—she even closed her eyes and finished off her beer—but all she saw was a blur of blonde hair

and white skin. And gold.

He wore a crucifix on a gold chain around his neck. He never took it off—even in the shower. When Jilly asked him where he'd gotten it, he said it had belonged to his great-grandmother, and that just because he didn't believe in God or Jesus, it didn't mean he couldn't hang on to the necklace. He loved his great-grandmother—even though she died before he was born. This made sense to Jilly. Beautiful, precarious, sense.

Michael showed up after Jilly finished her third beer—right as the sun began its slant into dusk—carrying no luggage, just his guitar case.

Jilly smiled when she saw him, but then looked away. She let out a burp and said, “You need to catch up, fuck face.”

“I drank on the plane,” Michael said. “Are you drunk?”

“Kind of. How was your flight?”

“Fine. I slept. I had a weird dream.”

“Tell me.” Jilly said.

“I dreamt that I was a captain of a ship. A wooden ship. And it was like the 19th century or some shit and I was on this great expedition. I could see the waves in the ocean—oh it was raining, and it was night—I forgot that part. And the ship approached a wharf, kind of like in England where the beaches have this crescent moon shaped alcove in front of a rocky mountain—”

“I've never been to England.”

“I’ll take you one day. So I was on this great expedition, right. Except— I was a woman. And I had long dark hair—kind of like yours now that I think of it. I guess I was thinking about you a lot.”

“How flattering.”

“And this guy, the navigator, he came down from the tower and kissed me. And at this point, I was fully conscious that I was in a woman’s body, but I was still me. You know how you have those weird displacing moments, right?”

“No, I have no idea what that means,” Jilly said.

“Well, it was like that. And I said, dude what the fuck are you doing? I mean, I could even feel his saliva on my lips.”

“It could’ve been rain.”

“What?” said Michael.

“Didn’t you say it was raining? Or did I tune out?”

“Yeah. I didn’t think about that. Good point, man. But then—okay, so you know how sometimes you’re in a dream, but then you get whisked away to another place and another dream entirely?”

Jilly didn’t answer. There was a short tick of silence.

“Well, that happened,” said Michael. “So, this time, I’m sitting in the shower. I’m me again in my own body. It’s some random shower. Probably some hotel room shower I’ve internalized because everything’s off-white and beige. Shower curtain, soap, washcloth—off white, beige, bland. But, okay this is weird, but the same guy from before—the navigator— that’s what they’re called right? The guy who gives directions

on the ship?”

“It sounds right,” said Jilly.

“He’s standing under the shower head. He pulls me up and wraps his arms around me and just holds me close to his chest. And I feel completely serene. I’m not confused or weirded out. It’s like I forgot I had just been inside this other reality, and now I’m just chill with this other naked dude in a shower.”

Jilly looks down at her empty glass. “Is that it?”

“Yeah. I woke up after that. Fucking bizarre or what, man?”

“What did he look like?”

Michael thinks awhile, peering off to the left. “Old. I don’t mean like an old man. I just mean—he looked old. Victorian, I don’t know.”

Jilly couldn’t help herself. She laughed. “What does that mean? Like Mr. Darcy? *He looked Victorian*. That could mean ten hundred thousand things.” She kept laughing, enjoying the beer on her breath unmasked by her laugh.

Michael laughed too. “You shit.”

They both laughed until it stopped being funny.

Jilly avoided Michael’s gaze, but it was impossible. She had already been branded.

“It’s no secret that you’re smarter than me,” said Michael, “don’t play games.”

“What games?” asked Jilly.

Michael laughed a little, embarrassed. Jilly had never felt this kind of power, the kind of power she'd always craved. But she didn't want it. She didn't want Michael to have it over her either. She wanted the power to rest between them always, like a bloated belly. She wanted to share the shrink and swell for infinity.

"The games you play when you let me figure out how stupid I sound, or how I'm not using my words correctly," said Michael. He stopped looking Jilly in the eyes.

Jilly let the silence distend.

"But that's why I like you so much, I think. I figure shit out because of you," said Michael, looking at her again.

"Oh, that's such a fucking cop-out. Such a fucking clichéd response," said Jilly.

"Maybe I am a cliché," said Michael, "I never said I wasn't."

Jilly laughed. "Maybe so am I."

"Maybe you are, man. Who am I to tell you what you are? And who are you to tell me what you should and shouldn't mean to me?"

"Fair point," said Jilly.

"Yeah, check and mate."

Jilly rolled her eyes. "You're totally getting on my nerves now. I have a hard time believing you didn't say that just to fuck with me." And then she laughed.

"Good," said Michael, "it'll remind you that I'm human. And it'll remind you that you're not always as right as you think you are."

“Wait,” said Jilly, “So were you fucking with me or is that just something you say?”

“Mr. Rochester—not Mr. Darcy. That’s what I meant by Victorian.”

Taken aback, Jilly smiled. “Honestly, I couldn’t tell you a Mr. Darcy from a Mr. Rochester even if my life depended on it.”

“Your life will never depend on that.”

“How do you know so much about books? In the whole time we’ve been together I haven’t once had a conversation about music with the musician,” said Jilly.

“Maybe I’m not the cliché,” said Michael, “Baby, it’s you. *Sha la la la la...*”

December 1, 2015

Hey Jills, how are you? How's school? Have you given any thought to visiting grandma during Christmas break? I might get leave. If I do we'll go see grandma together, yes? Bring your fish and chips boyfriend. Pos fuck it, I don't care. Will the Laundromat give him vacation? I'm not judging. (Ok, yes I am. Hahaha. He works at a Laundromat. Hahaha. But seriously, he works at a fucking Laundromat. Wait, wait, don't tell me—he's trying to be an actor, too. Sorry again, I'm open-minded, I swear. Bohemian freeloaders are people too.)

By the way, thanks for the link to the YouTube of John and Yoko on Dick Cavett. I've seen it before—but I'm glad you discovered it. Makes me feel like I've done a proper job with you (for once). Here, let me return the favor. Watch this, tell me what you think:

(part 1) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2jKFZVIQv0>

(part 2) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6ne1qDt8rU>

You asked about the weather. It's cold, but not freezing. Afghanistan reminds me a little of El Paso. In high school, friends and I would drive out to the desert when it got cold and we'd all get wasted around these pathetic bon-fires. I don't know where that memory came from. It's nice to go back there from time to time, though. Back to a place where you didn't have to grow to love people and then they're gone. Back then, if someone disappeared behind a dune, I knew they were just getting a blowjob or smoking a joint they didn't want to share. I haven't yet lost anyone this time, but I'm waiting for it. You don't want to look people in the eye and think, "Well, I'm sending you out to do this simple task, and you might not come back—but that's just life right now." Pos fuck it. I don't mean to get all philosophical on you. You've got enough to deal with living in NYC and going to school (and dating some British dude) and all that.

*Think about visiting grandma, ok? Like I said, I might get leave.
Sgt. Paris*

Despite the humidity, Brooklyn's air felt crisper than Manhattan's, more accessible in a way that Jilly couldn't articulate into thoughts. The sky seemed wider, the stars closer, and the emerald shrubs that lined the doorway arches of brownstones gave Jilly a sense of peace, she decided, that was welcoming in a way Manhattan wasn't. Only at night. During the day, Brooklyn's inhabitants buzzed around, masquerading as over-educated, perpetually bored, hippie salesmen.

As a Literature student, Jilly read novels which told the story of Brooklyn as a slum where immigrants, all but officially exiled from Manhattan, made their homes, cultivated businesses, and grew families. These novels about Eastern European immigrants were among the few she placed at the top of her bookshelf because dust reached them less frequently if placed there. Although she cherished these novels, she never read anything about the beginnings of Spanish Harlem—specifically when, if, Mexican Immigrants reached New York City. It wasn't a project she was ready to go digging through the National Archives just yet. Still, why, in present day New York, did Brooklyn *feel* so comfortable at night yet so uncomfortable during the day?

Had Michael not laughed at her for having to use the MTA app to find their way back to the subway, Jilly might've missed the moment for awe in the present. His laughter, an invitation to abandon her multitask of meditation and navigation, pissed her off enough to penetrate her insecurities about being a New York transplant having to use apps to get around New York City, the unfortunate date of her birth that placed her in the

category of “millennial who can’t function without an iPhone appendage,” and the guilt she felt over how her posture reflected her need for her phone, and come to think of it, how her fingers ached from texting so much. Yet Michael’s jest was delicate, as though granting her insecurities, but simultaneously mediating a call and response between Jilly and Brooklyn. A gentler, more cautious: whisper and acknowledge.

Brooklyn was quiet at night save for the buzzing of overhead power lines. They walked—down the middle of the street— for ten blocks before deciding on a direction.

Jilly wanted to get on the D by the cemetery, but Michael said it would be easier to just catch the 4 from Brooklyn Heights to South Station, then take the 2 all the way to 86th and Broadway—but Jilly got so frustrated by this having to change trains shit. At the intersection of Van Brunt and Seabring, she stopped, sitting in protest, her legs crossed in front of her.

Michael looked down at her, the front strands of his long blonde hair unraveling. He fastened his hair back behind his ears then sat down in the street next to Jilly. Settling his head in the burrow between her neck and shoulder he said, “If I’d met you today, I’d have sat with you here in this spot all night long. But right now I want you to move your fucking body because you’re trying to manipulate me by showing me your spoiled self.”

Jilly smiled. She beat him in a race to the train station.

Waiting for the 2 at South Station, Michael and Jilly held hands in silence at the edge of the subway platform. Bored, Jilly spied on rats. She watched them, one by one—brown, fat, cruddy—whisk themselves, squeaking, from under the platform to scavenge between the tracks. When one returned, another made haste. Michael might appreciate the rats’ attention to rhythm, thought Jilly, but she decided to keep it for herself instead.

Two weeks later, a warehouse party raged on the Lower East Side behind the Urban Outfitters. James’ agent had rented the space to exhibit a new addition to his photo installation. It began as a hipster artsyficial show, boring for the first couple of hours, but then as the night grew, the party inside swelled and amplified into a rage. Outside—Jilly, drunk, her back against a brick wall, scanned the alley left to right and right to left and over again. Bobbing between her lipstick lips, a smoking American Spirit—the first from a new pack.

She wore the gold dress James had bought. He told her he’d seen it in the window of a shop in China Town the day Michael left for Albuquerque, the first stop on his North American tour.

“Ay, make sure you get that one. I’ve dreamt about it, d’you know?” James said. And with his heel, he slid his credit card across the wood floor in their loft. It landed at her bare feet.



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James A. Ewing (photographer)

This article is about artist and photographer James Asher Ewing. For other uses, see James Asher, James Ewing (disambiguation).

This article has multiple issues. Please help improve it or discuss these issues on the talk page.

James Asher Ewing (born June 23, 1986 in London, England) is a cult photographer who rose to fame via portrait installation *Vagabondage*. The installation features his wife, Jillian Moreno-Ewing, exhibiting a range of human emotion while passively positioned. Ewing's fanbase is drawn in large part to this element of juxtaposition, arguing that Ewing's work transcends pornography as it aligns itself with the work of other experimental artistic photographers (see *Hannah Höch*, *Robert Mapplethorpe*, *Jean-Michel Basquiat*) thereby inserting itself into more mainstream conversations concerning censorship, sexuality, popular culture, etc.

Born June 23, 1986
London, England

Occupation Artist
Photographer

Years Active 2014- Present

Genres Kink
BDSM
Pulp
Experimental

Biography

Born and raised in Hackney, (North Eastern London, Middlesex county) James Asher Ewing studied painting at London's Slade School of Fine Art, but dropped out during his third semester instead. Of this, he told *Vice Magazine*'s Brooke Cummings, "There were just too many phonies, too many egos to compete with who stifled me, wouldn't help me grow. They just couldn't."²

Ewing relocated to Manhattan in 2011. No stranger to the working class, he supported his artistic experimentation by taking odd jobs, oftentimes perusing ads on Craigslist. In 2013, he met his future wife, Jillian Moreno³, and along with singer/songwriter Michael Sackett they began an artistic cooperative, which would eventually lead them to high status within underground art circles.

Major Works

Exhibits: The Museum of Modern Art
Vagabondage:

Individual Portraits:

"Eleanor Rigby," 2016
"Happiness Is A Warm Gun," 2016
"Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown)," 2016
"She Said, She Said," 2016

On the Beatles as Major Influence

When asked about his use of Beatles songs during an interview with *Copious Magazine*, Ewing stated, "Who better to steal from than The Beatles."⁴

James' party bored Jilly and she didn't feel like talking to people she didn't know or like, so she decided to hang out in the alley behind the club. Stepping outside, the air was crisp and quiet, except for the bass thumps and vibrations from inside.

No cats in the alley, Jilly noticed. She wanted to play with one— let it paw her boot strings. Maybe she could hold it. Even ask for a cuddle.

From her left, a man's voice said, "Salut, quoi de neuf. Can you light my cigarette for me? My lighter. Misplaced. Lost." He had a shaggy mop over green eyes and a pale face. Drugged, likely. Jilly tried to figure out what he was on, but really, it could've been anything. Everything looks like everything now, obliterating any colloquial discernment of "the junkie."

Jilly looked through her saddle blanket tote bag and pulled out a cheap lighter buried at the bottom— one of Michael's.

He'd thrown it in there the day before he left. They'd ridden the carousel in Central Park that day. Afterwards, they bought slices of jicama and ate them while Michael read the first half of *the Catcher in the Rye* out loud— essential reading for a kid, he'd said. Jilly had never read it. Instead, she read *Are You There God, It's Me Margaret* over and over until the dog eared pages ripped off. But when Michael read this book, he read it with a kind of intensity Jilly couldn't identify. She might've felt it within herself at some point, but she couldn't be sure, so she just listened to Michael's voice read the rhythm of the words. She hoped he'd shut up soon and fuck her in public, but as time passed,

Michael's voice faded into Holden's and Jilly felt placidity. When Michael grew tired, he handed her the book. She finished the novel while Michael lay asleep in the grass beside her. There was some poetry in that, she thought as she watched him sleep. But she didn't write anything down or even think about it too much, because, really, what was so special about her boyfriend falling asleep in the grass?

"Yeah." Jilly said. And she walked forward to hand him Michael's lighter.

"Why are you alone? It doesn't make sense."

"What if I said it's because I'm selling something? Waitin' around. I'm the man, man."

"I still can't make sense."

"Tu m'fait chier," Jilly said, "but maybe if I knew your name you'd seem less annoying to me."

"How do you speak French?"

"How do you speak English?" Jilly said.

"Badly, can you tell?"

Jilly stubbed out her own cigarette and checked her phone. Michael had been in Albuquerque for a day and he hadn't called or texted yet. James had warned her that Michael has a bad ghosting habit, but James can go fuck himself— Jilly knew what she was getting into. Nobody understood Michael like she did— James, least of all— no matter what he thinks. Jilly and Michael are one soul that walk the earth.

“Party’s shit, you think?”

“Tell me your name. Or fuck off.” Jilly said.

He inhaled his cigarette and said, “Henri.” Smoke funneled out of his nose and mouth when he spoke, and Jilly remembered the fog above the beach in Galveston. She shook it off real quick.

“Finally, fuck.” Then she kissed him, rolling her tongue across his lips.

Henri pushed her away. “Get off me, crazy bitch.”

Jilly straightened her dress and put another cigarette in her mouth.

“Thank you for the lighter. But girls like you are dangerous.”

“Je m’en fou.”

Henri laughed, “You speak French as bad as my English. Je suis un bon garçon. Understand?”

“Chinga tu madre, pues, garçon. I’m going back inside— where my husband’s at. He’s the photographer. You know, the famous one that the whole fucking party’s for.”

“You’re Jilly Ewing?”

Jilly couldn’t decide which of her last names she hated more. Ewing or Moreno— her maiden. Ugh, she was a wife. Did she even love James just a little bit? Did he even love her?

“Duh. I took four fucking semesters of French, okay. Fuck you. I know what the fuck I’m saying.”

“Pardon. Je ne sais pas. I couldn’t recognize you. Probably this street light makes it different.”

“Right. Well, I bet.”

Jilly walked back to the party. She didn’t remember to ask for Michael’s lighter.

After two more weeks, Michael still hadn’t returned from the tour. He was in California, maybe, to play some shows. Despondent and mad, Jilly sat on the wood floor in her bedroom sliding her inked-up fingers over cracks in the panels. Several scribbled on Post-Its lay scattered around her.

Some panels were a lighter shade of wood than others. The timber that floored this bedroom—did it come from the same tree? Which tree was it? Did it take a forest to structure the floors of the entire apartment building? If so, Jilly hoped the timber in the building had related genomes. The forest— once alive and important to the atmosphere, sunrays, moonlight rippling through with firm principle— might now feel a pretense of its former existence, at least. She couldn’t conceive of her home as necropolis.

But really, Jilly knew the wood flooring in her bedroom—and throughout the entire apartment building—was mass-produced and factory engineered, finishing slopped on, whooshed dry, then shrink wrapped and sold by the pound.

Nobody lumbered a single tree in a forest. No hands caressed an aging trunk and apologized. This fact seemed out of place considering how many hands labored to build

her bedroom—all the bedrooms. The apartment building. The bodega below. The street. The sidewalk. Central Park West and the park entrance at Strawberry Fields. Hands all over everything she knew. The Upper West Side wasn't her aesthetic, but it was someone's.

Jilly fingered the deepest crack in the darkest panel. "I'm sorry," she said, "I'm so sorry for your loss."

"What's that, love? What'd you say?" James asked from the living room.

Jilly stood, wanting to see the panels in whole. If she treated it like an optical illusion, something not immediately visible would appear. She tried to focus on the deep crack—waiting for it to blur then disappear— but the sound of boots clomping across the living room floor distracted her. She recognized the heaviness of the clomp and the soft drag of trailing plastic-tipped laces. The boots—they were Michael's.

Because she asked him to, Michael had removed his boots on 72nd and handed them to Jilly before he left for Albuquerque. They'd been waiting in front of the apartment building together at noon for Michael's cab to JFK—and when Jilly asked him, he humored her. By this point, Jilly knew she could ask Michael for a piece of the sky and he'd deliver. Nothing surprised him. She loved him for that.

"They're disgusting, are you sure?" said Michael.

"Just do it, okay?"

The herding lunch hour crowd parted while he slid his boots off toe to heel and landed on the pavement with a clunk. Jilly watched Michael through the crowd.

Michael picked up his boots and threw them at Jilly's feet. Before she could grab them, wanting to poke her nose inside for a whiff, Anna, the older woman who lived in the apartment above Jilly and James—the one who always stomped the ceiling when Jilly turned up the stereo too loud—came out from the apartment building front door. The door caught Michael's boot and jammed.

"You hippies! Jesus Christ."

"Go die you crusty hag," said Jilly.

Michael smiled. "I'm sorry about that. I didn't see you coming." He kicked his boots away from the door, and Anna moved passed.

Jilly said to Michael, "Seriously?"

"Don't worry about it, man. She's just some nut," Michael said.

Nudged, shoved, smashed, they kissed for a long while on 72nd, and when Michael finally got into a cab, Jilly couldn't take her eyes off Michael's toes poking through sock holes. She didn't want to forget the image.

James entered the bedroom, Michael's grimy boots on his feet. Not her aesthetic, but someone's, thought Jilly. And not James' either. It was like listening to a Beatles record. Jilly recoiled at the memories of herself as a child, her hair in a long braid, forced

to listen to *Magical Mystery Tour* as Paris drove her to school in their grandmother's old Toyota. Paris chain smoking, Jilly, nine years old, once asked, "Can't we listen to rap? Don't you have anything that isn't the Beatles?" She didn't remember her brother's reply, and she focused hard trying to hear his voice in her head. If she heard him, he wasn't dead. He's only dead if I forget him, Jilly said out loud to Paris, but knew she spoke only to herself and the cool wood beneath her.

"What'd you say? I didn't hear you," said James, walking into their bedroom. He stopped at the doorway, stepping on some of the Post-its. "Jillian. What the fuck, darling?"

The subject (my wife)— backlit before a floor length window in the background— has been caught mid-madness / Scribbled Post-Its lay scattered across our wooden floor / Still, she keeps pose—arms, blotted with black ink, extended to her sides, bent at the elbow, freshly made-up face, black dress / Red lined-lips purse; cat-lined mascaraed eyes avoid me / Phlegmatic, she gazes at the ground / This candid capture in our bedroom, a testament of witness— I do solemnly swear / Over my field of vision, sunlight swarms in— a deluge of light holds and protects her / Isn't that good?

James Asher Ewing
American, 1986-

Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown), 2016
Color Print, 24x36 mm

Courtesy of the artist, New York City
© James Asher Ewing

It's getting hard to be someone
but it all works out It doesn't
matter much to me

Things I Need:
to read
jar of Heavy Filler
tampons (the Pearl kind)
sunglasses (Jackie O)

Pyres
Stake
Paper
Furniture
Cabins
lodges
Aesthetic pleasure

Things to do with/ tell Michael
when he gets back:
That I'm reading again
We gotta go to the beach
See what he thinks about this
weird knot in my neck
I'm writing or at least thinking
about writing

The whole of the hole can never
be holed
Hold up in the hole and be
whole
Be holed

Always no sometimes think its
me but you know I know when
it's a dream living is easy with
eyes closed misunderstanding
all you see

God dammit Paris you asshole I
fucking hate John Lennon. Why
does he make so much fucking
sense now? And why am I
asking you anyway you dead
piece of shit?

Three weeks later, James convinced Michael to let he and Jilly come on tour with him, and they flew to Denver to meet him. Jilly had never been to Colorado before, and she wasn't sure what to pack, so she packed a lot of black.

When they arrived in Denver and checked into their hotel room, James wanted to fuck. Jilly wasn't into it. He grabbed her by the waist and tried to kiss her mouth.

"No, you creep," she told him.

"Mad I'm not Michael?" James asked.

Jilly was thrown off by the tease. It wasn't odd to her that James allowed her to see Michael. Maybe James lived vicariously through her in that way. Michael was hot shit. Everyone wanted him.

"Yes," Jilly said with a smile.

"Asshole," James said.

Mistake the Enemy was playing at 11pm that night. Jilly was ecstatic. She couldn't remember the last time she went to a concert. It made her feel like a teenager. In all the happiness to see Michael, she couldn't help but think about Paris. Would he like Michael more than James? Would he like the music? Or would he think they're both the same? Would anyone be good enough for her in Paris' eyes? Jilly didn't care. She loved Michael. And James. She needed them both to forget her brother for even just a little bit.

Matching Doc Martens Boots
Matching tattoos (our names:
Michael on me and Jilly on him)
Best friends necklaces (I'll take
the Friends)

No one I think is in my tree
I mean it must be high or low

I want to get high but I'm solo

That is you can't you know tune in
but it's alright It doesn't matter
much to me
Let me take you down...

What was the last thing Paris saw
before he died? Was it pitch-black
or did he meet God? I wish I could
write to him and that he would
write back. I wish he'd be right
back. I miss you brother and I love
you brother. Wish you could meet
Michael.

Can Michael play Strawberry
Fields Forever on the guitar? I
bet he can/does it all the time

The more I think about this
song the more and more I grow
to Love John Lennon
The other Beatles still suck

List of snacks:
Cherry Greek Yogurts
Cheese Sticks
Chocolate Rice Cakes
Chile Limon Hot Cheetos

People started to fill the venue, and it was getting hot. Jilly and James stood by the bar, hand in hand, ready to drink. Jilly was ready to see Michael. She searched for him in the crowd, nervous and excited. Why hadn't he texted? What was he doing? He knew she and James had flown in to see him. Was he not happy to see her? No, he loved her.

"Have a drink, love," said James. He handed over a beer bottle and Jilly grabbed it with hunger. She drank nearly half before stopping.

Michael texted Jilly fifteen minutes later. "Where are you, babe?"

She responded immediately, "Here. Where are you?"

"If that's Michael, tell him I want a refund," said James.

Jilly ignored him and stared at her phone, waiting for Michael to reply. He didn't reply for ten whole minutes. In that time, Jilly finished her beer and half of another. When Michael finally replied, Jilly waited seven minutes to check the message. It was her way of punishing Michael for ignoring her for so long.

Michael's text said, "I'm here too. I'll find you."

Jilly replied, "We're at the bar."

Michael replied, "Never would've guessed."

Jilly rolled her eyes and smiled. She didn't send a text back. Instead, she decided to nurse another beer while waiting. And he found her, just like he said he would.

Seeing Michael on stage was a rush unlike any other Jilly had ever experienced. In these moments, she forgot her fractured, grieving mind. It was as though she were re-born, and he was some kind of god on stage, front and center behind a microphone and his guitar. Even though James was beside her, all she saw was Michael. She loved the songs and the way he looked while singing, his blond hair stuck to his face with sweat, his ripped green and red striped sweater holding his body inside. The way Michael carried himself on stage, as though being there was perfectly natural, it reminded her of watching The Beatles with Paris. She never really paid attention to the Beatles. They were always just Paris' thing, but she remembered the hours he tortured her with their music and videos of their performances. They were all so natural, as though they belonged on stage together forever—always playing, never stopping, always being admired. Forever. That's how long Jilly wanted to stay in this moment. It amused her to think that even in her grief for Paris, she could still connect with him through Michael.

Beside her, James' camera flashed.

After the show, Jilly and James met up with Michael at a bar. The three of them drank until they were more than drunk. It was a good time, and neither one of them wanted to leave, but Michael had to catch a plane.

"I'll meet you in El Paso in two weeks," he said to Jilly. "Show me around your town."

Concordia Cemetery, El Paso, Texas

Jilly and Michael sit Indian-style on the dirt in front of John Wesley Hardin's wrought-iron fenced grave. They should be sitting on the rock wall at the new Buffalo Soldier Memorial.

[In another novel, Jilly and Michael would comment on the memorial's hygiene and search for the graves of the more than forty dead Buffalo Soldiers, whose circumstances led them to this honorable mention in this particular document during this particular moment in time—a moment which is as fleeting as this black text, which, if you're quick, will not register as letters that morph into words, but rather, as vague, images that, when you think about it, will never manifest in the precise way I'll want them to.]

"I don't like being in one place because I feel like I'm everywhere at once", Jilly said to Michael.

"Do you feel like you're out of touch with reality? I don't mean to sound weird or anything, but your statement caught me off guard."

"No. I don't feel out of touch. I feel too in tune."

"This is another serious question, okay? Don't hate me," Michael said.

"Do you always have to preface yourself?"

"No. Just with you."

"I make you insecure."

“Not insecure. Unsure. Like everything isn’t as blueprint as everyone made it out like before me.”

“Ask your question.”

“Oh. I almost forgot I had one. Are you on drugs?”

“Should I be? I mean, are you offering?” Jilly meant this as a joke, but part of her hoped he’d brought some weed.

“No. Yeah. Wait. Let me ask you this: Do you take any medications?”

“Not anymore.”

“What did you take them for?”

“Depression, anxiety, ADHD, PTSD, bad dreams.”

“Bad dreams? Is that a clinical term?”

“Oh my god. Fuck you.”

“Did you self-medicate your bad dreams? “

“They’re called Night Terrors. I got put on the green pills for those, except I couldn’t swallow them without gagging and I’d wake up feeling like hundreds of tiny pebbles were trying to push through the back of my head towards the light of day.”

“That’s fucked up. Jesus. Why are you so fucked up?”

“You could’ve prefaced that one, you know.”

“You told me not to. Did you forget?”

“I should have.”

“Remember to forget. I’ll remind you,” said Michael.

“Thanks. My memory is shit.”

“I’ll be yours,” said Michael.

“You said that like you believe it.”

“Facts don’t need belief.”

“Did you catch a train to the wrong century?” said Jilly.

“It’s a shame that wit goes to waste.”

“It doesn’t. Some things get written down.”

“Where?” said Michael.

“Erasable places. Like in my breath on a mirror. Or on my skin with markers. Or pieces of paper with ripped, ugly edges, so I’m forced to throw them away after I’m done.”

“What? Why? What’s the point?”

“Why do you record your music? You obviously don’t give a shit about being financially stable. If you did, you’d join a boy band instead of trying to sell yourself as *Kurt Cobain: The Remix*.”

“Uh. Ok, I’m done asking you questions.”

“No, really. Tell me. Why do you record? Why do you go on tour? Why do you play shows?”

“Because I have to.”

“Do you love it?”

“No.”

“Bullshit. How do you do all that and not love it?” said Jilly.

“I told you. I have to.”

“Nobody *has* to do anything. Don’t try to sell me that shit.”

“You have the money for it.”

“Bum”, said Jilly.

“Lush.”

“Jetsetter.”

“Waif,” said Michael.

“Pilgrim.”

“Vacationist.”

“Day-tripper.”

“Stranger.”

“Romantic,” said Jilly.

“Gypsy.”

“You said you *have to* record. You *have to* play shows. You *have to* be a rock ’n’ roll messiah like it was written in the stars. That shit doesn’t seduce me. I’m not your groupie, Michael.”

“You fucking Vampira, can you at least ask me like you actually care and not like you’re planning your next fucked-up punch-line?”

“I really want to know. Please tell me why you *have to*. ”

“Because if I don’t, I won’t know who I am. It’s like... a diary. I want people to know I existed,” said Michael.

“Legacy is important to you?” said Jilly.

“Yeah, I guess so. Why do you write poetry just to throw it away?” said Michael.

Does Michael feel in his bones
that I dream about him and that
they're nightmares?

I have pleasant dreams about
James

Always no sometimes think it's me
But you know I know when it's a
dream
I think I know I mean a yes
But it's all wrong
That is I think I disagree

What is Paris' favorite Beatles
song? I regret so much that I never
asked him. Maybe he could explain
Strawberry Fields better than
Google

Stella Artois
Modelo
Corona
Brooklyn Lager
Necessary Evil

Places I want to go with
Michael:
England
Home
Russia
Colorado
Romania
Paris

I do love the Beatles and I wish I
could tell my dead brother

“I never said it was poetry,” said Jilly, though she thought about what she’d just said.

Was it poetry? She’d never thought of herself as an artist—not the way James was an artist. No, definitely not. He was the artist—she, the art. But who gets to decide? Onlookers? James? Herself? Was she ascribing this arbitrary label upon herself—a label she hated, by the way. And yet, here was Michael calling her a poet. The maker not the made.

The sun above them, hot and high, was like an annoying third-party. Jilly thought she should’ve worn sunscreen—she’d forgotten how invasive it was back home. She pushed her sunglasses higher on her nose and tried to recover her train of thought, but crows on a telephone wire near the highway squawked a song, and she got hooked on trying to drown out the sounds of the road so she could keep up with the melody. One by one, though, they flew away, taking their song with them.

“It is if you think that deeply about it. And are consistent in destroying it,” said Michael.

“Says who?”

“Me. Tell me about your art. Why do you do what you do?” said Michael.

“I just have to. If I don’t, I won’t know who I am.”

“Are you in the words or the blank spots?” said Michael.

“Both.”

“Tell me about one piece of writing you wish you’d kept.”

“I wish I made copies of the letters I wrote to Paris.”

January 24, 2016

Paris,

Sorry I couldn't come down for Christmas break. Did you and grandma have a good time? I know she's probably gonna be mad at me for a while, but you? I hope you're not mad. At least not too much. If you're reading this, I know you've forgiven me.

I've been thinking about you and El Paso a lot. It's a little sad how you say Afghanistan reminds you of home. You go across the world and still end up in a place that reminds you of home—a place you left. New York City is the opposite of El Paso. I say that and yet I think about home every day. I guess no matter where you go, you just can't escape where you come from. If you end up comparing your past to your present, then what becomes of your future?

Anyway, I watched those YouTube videos you sent me. I'm kinda down with Yoko. I think she has a unique style to her. It was annoying how douchebag John Lennon kept talking over her. Men still do that kind of shit nowadays. Maybe that's why sometimes she preferred to sit in silence alone next to him—like in the Let It Be footage. Have you seen that? The video popped up on my feed and I watched about an hour and a half the other night before I fell asleep. I dunno man. I like Yoko more than I like the Beatles. She just sat there next to John minding her own business, reading the newspaper or sewing or just jamming out. When you think about it, John was pretty lucky to have a woman who supported him so wholeheartedly and the other Beatles were probably just jealous. Not to say that they didn't have women who were supportive. It's just—there's a chemistry to John and Yoko. They feed off each other's energy, and I think that's beautiful. Some creative men need a muse, I guess.

But how can you tell if you're a muse or a "use"? If I asked Yoko, do you think she'd give me the answer? I think she's got a Twitter. I might write to her.

Take care of yourself, brother. Miss you.

*Love,
Jilly*

“Where are they now?” said Michael.

“He threw them away.”

“So they wouldn’t weigh him down?”

“No.”

“Why then?”

“Paris put up fronts. He didn’t want anyone to really know him. Not even me.”

“But you got closest, didn’t you?”

“Probably not. He lived his life in secrets. Like you do.”

“Did he tell you any?”

“He told me less than what I heard.”

“What’d you hear?”

“The wall separating our bedrooms was pretty thin. I used to try to stay up at night to wait for sound.”

“What kind of sound?”

“There was this game I used to play with myself. I’d try to guess what was being whispered and by whom. Paris had a distinct voice, flat, an out of tune baritone. But his whispers sounded like any other asshole’s whispers. I couldn’t tell the difference between his voice or any of the people he’d bring home.”

Jilly felt uncomfortable by the memory: Paris bringing boys home and banging them in his room. She heard everything, every moan, every giggle. It wasn’t the fact that they were boys that bothered her; it was the pleasure.

“So?”

“What do you mean *so*?”

Michael broke eye contact and sighed long and hard, his breath falling into silence. He looked to the left toward the highway. The sun was setting, he thought.

Where are the living? “So his voice was different. And?”

“And he was in love,” said Jilly.

“And you were, what, jealous?”

“Of course I was.”

“Wow, that’s honest.”

“I’m always honest with you.”

“And I’m always honest with you too,” said Michael.

“Selectively.”

“That’s not fair.”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

“How long’s it been since you’ve seen your brother?”

“Are you trying to piss me off?”

“I just want to know why you brought me here instead of the cemetery where your brother’s buried.”

“It’s a military cemetery.”

“And?”

“It has no history. No ghosts. It’s too clean.”

“Well, that’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“It’s true, though.”

“Be real with me, Jilly, please.”

“Fine, truth time. This is the only place I feel loved. When I was a kid, this was the only place I felt like I fit in. A place where the rules were broken before they were written. I never came here with Paris. I came here alone. I wanted to be alone with all the ghosts, broken bottles, and trash.”

“You’re not garbage, Jilly. But you’re not clean either,” said Michael. He took a long breath. “But I can see why you come here. You’re in good company with ghosts.” And he hugged her tight until she could barely breathe.

After spending time at Concordia Cemetery, Jilly decided to show Michael Scenic Drive. When they arrived at sundown, Michael was immediately taken—not just with the beauty of the skyline, but with the atmosphere: the time of day, the air, the mountains behind them. They sat together in a rental Honda, windows down, watching the clouds. Michael pulled a joint from his bag and lit it. Jilly laughed.

“What’s so funny?” said Michael.

“My brother used to do the same thing.”

“I understand why you wanted to show me this place.”

“I never really paid attention, you know. To El Paso. It was always somewhere I wanted to leave. But here I am now, and I won’t lie, I feel weird in my stomach. Being back here makes me feel weird but coming back here with you is different.”

“It’s like you never left, isn’t it?” Michael passed the joint to Jilly.

“No, it’s like I’m here for the first time all over again.”

Michael smiled. It was at this moment that he fell in love with Jilly. He wanted to hold her and keep her for himself, always. What would James think about that?

The weed made Jilly emotional. She heard Beatles songs in her head, and a memory overtook her.

Fifteen-year-old Jilly sat cross legged in the middle of her bedroom, the walls covered in band posters and photographs. She wrote poems in a composition notebook, not caring if any of the words made sense. Her heart was heavy, and she didn't know why. Maybe it was loneliness or boredom, she couldn't be sure. She wanted things she wasn't even conscious of yet and wouldn't be until years later, so she wrote in her composition book until her hand hurt.

Another memory interrupted the first. Paris and Jilly holding hands, dancing to Beatles songs in their grandmother's living room. Jilly was eight years old and laughing, her polka-dot dress fanning out around her hips. She had her hair in a braid, and when Paris spun her, it bounced twice across her shoulder. They danced and danced until the cassette tape stopped.

"What are you thinking about?" Michael asked Jilly, breaking her memory.

"I'm just thinking about who I used to be when I was a kid."

"Oh, I would've loved to have known you when you were that age," said Michael.

Jilly laughed a little. She was starting to come out of her weed haze. "You'd have liked me then," she said.

"I like you just fine now," said Michael.

James had a show at MOMA and Jilly had to be back in town for that, though she didn't want to go— he was showing the photographs he took of her. She wanted to stay in El Paso— home— with Michael. She wanted to be everywhere and onlywhere with Michael, but James' show was an obligation, and she had to obey.



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James A. Ewing (photographer)

This article is about artist and photographer James Asher Ewing. For other uses, see James Asher, James Ewing (disambiguation).

This article has multiple issues. Please help improve it or discuss these issues on the talk page.

James Asher Ewing (born June 23, 1986 in London, England) is a cult photographer who rose to fame via portrait installation *Vagabondage*. The installation features his wife and muse, Jillian Moreno-Ewing, exhibiting a range of human emotion while passively positioned. Ewing's fanbase is drawn in large part to this element of juxtaposition, arguing that Ewing's work transcends pornography as it aligns itself with the work of other experimental artistic photographers (see *Hannah Höch*, *Robert Mapplethorpe*, *Jean-Michel Basquiat*) thereby inserting itself into more mainstream conversations concerning censorship, sexuality, popular culture, etc.

Born June 23, 1986
London, England

Occupation Artist
Photographer

Years Active 2014- Present

Genres Kink
BDSM
Pulp
Experimental

Biography

Born and raised in Hackney, (North Eastern London, Middlesex county) James Asher Ewing studied painting at London's Slade School of Fine Art, but decided the school was "undeserving." Of this, he told *Vice Magazine*'s Brooke Cummings, "There were just too many phonies, too many egos to compete with who stifled me, wouldn't help me grow. They just couldn't."² Classmates have disagreed, stating that he was the actual phony.

Ewing relocated to Manhattan in 2011. No stranger to the working class, he supported his artistic experimentation by taking odd jobs, oftentimes perusing ads on Craigslist. In 2013, he met his future wife and muse, Jillian Moreno³, and along with singer/songwriter [Michael Sackett](#) they began an artistic cooperative, which would eventually lead them to high status within underground art circles.

Major Works

Exhibits: The Museum of Modern Art

Vagabondage:

Individual Portraits:

"Eleanor Rigby," 2016

"Happiness Is A Warm Gun," 2016

"Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown)," 2016

Personal Life

Ewing and his model/wife Jillian are engaged in a polyamorous relationship with singer/songwriter [Michael Sackett](#). The three have been together since 2016.

~~The camera's depth of field point: a bathroom window behind the tub / Sunlight etches the window's mirror image on the bathroom tile / Shadowed objects: a shower curtain pulled to the left, a pile of dirty laundry next to the curtain, the bathroom tile, the sink's front half—all at a slight blur / Selective focus: interior of the light beam—the subject inside a filled clawfoot tub: a bundle of brown limbs / The subject holds her hands over her reddened bottom lip, her wrists wrapped in a holey blue cloth plucked from the laundry pile / Knees drawn to her chest, shade the brown birthmark across her breasts / Long dark hair drawn over her right shoulder, split ends dipped inside the bathwater / The subject faces the tap, her dark eyes focus on a water droplet dangling off the spout.—~~

Jilly Moreno Ewing
American, 1987-

Eleanor Rigby, 2016
Black and white print, 32x42

Courtesy of the artist, New York City
© Jilly Moreno Ewing

~~Camera's depth of field: the moon raised above a lush green pasture, the backyard of an Irish townhouse lean and blue / In medium frame: the backs of Subject 1 (Michael) and Subject 2 (Jilly) / They sit nestled together, boundary less—Jilly's brown skin against Michael's pale, pale against brown / Michael's left hand settles into the grass beside him for support / His right arm across her legs, he hides his hand inside her blue dress / Sharp focus: Jilly's face tucked within the cusp of Michael's neck / Her eyes shut, lids lined in black, purpled with veins / Michael's razor-edged hair brushes the bridge of her black and white head pricked nose / Jilly bites down hard against his shoulder—red bite marks left.~~

Jilly Moreno Ewing
American, 1987-

Happiness Is A Warm Gun, 2016
Color Print, 24x42

Courtesy of the artist, New York City
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~~The subject (my wife) — backlit before a floor length window in the background — has been caught mid madness / Scribbled Post Its lay scattered across our wooden floor / Still, she keeps pose — arms, blotted with black ink, extended to her sides, bent at the elbow, freshly made up face, black dress / Red lined lips purse; cat lined mascaraed eyes avoid me / Phlegmatic, she gazes at the ground / This candid capture in our bedroom, a testament of witness — I do solemnly swear / Over my field of vision, sunlight swarms in — a deluge of light holds and protects her / Isn't that good?~~

Jilly Moreno Ewing
American, 1987-

Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown), 2016
Color Print, 24x36 mm

Courtesy of the artist, New York City
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When Jilly gets to MOMA, she gazes at the photos of her. Are they her? Is that how she appears to the outside world—the world beyond she and James. Is this how Michael sees her? How embarrassing if these photos were her true form. Instead of accepting their representation, she made one of her own. This representation was what she needed to feel whole in herself. She wasn't a model, she wasn't a groupie—she was a whole and complete human being who needed not to be defined by others and their ascriptions, but only of what she herself defined. She could carry the memories of others she loved, and they would make a part of the whole—the Beatles, cameras, guitars, Scenic Drive, clouds—but she was her whole person.

A word cloud of terms related to the film 'Garbage'. The words are arranged in a circular pattern, with 'garbage' being the largest and most central word. Other prominent words include 'camera', 'memory', 'owned', 'artist', 'atlas', 'sex-kitten', 'complete', 'mute', 'model', 'Michael', 'human', 'lens', 'beer', 'alcoholic', 'homemaker', 'ghosts', 'Paris', 'gaze', 'whole', 'wife', 'objectified', 'Lennon', 'James', 'defined', 'letters', 'representation', 'own', 'hole', 'clouds', 'girlfriend', and 'groupie'. The words are in various sizes and orientations, creating a dynamic and visually engaging composition.

VITA

Andrea Lora Castillo holds a Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing with a minor in English and American Literature from the University of Texas at El Paso. She has poetry published in the Rio Grande Review and online. As a Graduate Teaching Assistant, Andrea taught Rhetoric and Writing Courses at UTEP, and as a full-time faculty member of Southwest University, Andrea taught English, Business Communication, and Psychology courses. Currently, Andrea resides in El Paso, Texas where she will graduate from UTEP with her Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing.

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