

# UC Merced

## The Vernal Pool

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# THE VERNAL POOL

ISSUE FOUR  
SPRING 2016



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# THE VERNAL POOL ISSUE FOUR

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**JOSEPH F. GARVIN  
NOT A LIGHT POEM**



**THE VERNAL POOL  
ISSUE FOUR, SPRING 2016**

## **Not a Light Poem**

From a dirty window inside a mansion, the plane took off.  
Contained in a box with a light on top, the pilot steered upward  
to escape.

The light of the plane and the light of the box battled each other.  
Passengers (fish) and pilot (also a fish) alike pained by the light.

They escaped their world into the next. They wanted to explore  
the world, knowing the box made them blind. Now they suffer  
the pain of sight.

**NICK LEE**  
**DEAR MR. COMMA**



**THE VERNAL POOL**  
**ISSUE FOUR, SPRING 2016**



5200 North Lake Road  
Merced, CA 95343  
15 December 2015

Mr. Comma Rule  
Head Chair, Department of Grammar and English  
Georgetown University  
3700 O St. NW  
Washington, DC 20057

Dear Mr. Comma:

Let's make things clear—you seem unimportant to me. Do I need to pause when I use you? Why should you be important to me? When I write, you become this barrier preventing me from saying things immediately and the sentences seem to string on forever. So what is it about you that's so important? Tell me Mr. Comma, tell me!

Come by anytime Mr. Comma and explain this to me. Let's argue about why you don't seem important, but I assure you won't win. And when you lose you'll realize how ridiculous, dumb, and even heinous your ideas are. Stop torturing us already Mr. Comma, you don't deserve to have a spot in the Grammatical Rule Hall of Fame. Dr. Period, the greatest grammatical genius, is the one deserving of a spot. I actually spoke to him recently and he said he hates your ink. But I tried to defend you. Here's how our conversation went:

“Mr. Comma is a loser. He doesn’t even have a PhD. He’s a short stop. He neither rolls with the flow nor stops in order to pop. What ridiculous fool just stops for a brief moment?”

“Dr. Period, I understand that Mr. Comma doesn’t come to a full-stop, but he means well. He wants to have us stop briefly but to keep that ball rolling. Please Dr. Period, reconsider your comments.”

“Ha! Mr. Comma is a ridiculous tool. I would slash his curve and make him a line. He would be living with the dashes and hyphens. That’s how those “other” two came to be. They were slashed and became nothing but lines. No one knows who they are now. That’ll happen to Mr. Comma if he doesn’t change his way.”

After my attempted defense Mr. Comma, I wrote to you. But your response was so absurd. You make these comma rules, yet you don’t even use them correctly. And when you do, it annoys the crap out of me. Look at what you wrote to me:

Hello, my Dear Nick, it seems that you sent your response, and I hated it because I have no intentions on changing my ways, except for a price, that is I can’t remove my rules or my ways, simply because what I think is more important than what you think.

What an absurd way to reply to someone who’s trying to help. You refuse to allow someone to help you. I should call Dr. Period and tell him that he was right, and that you Mr. Comma have to

go. Not only this, but your ideology is spreading like wildfire. Your commas are blinding people. You have your damn commas on the eyes of letters like “don’t, can’t, and won’t.” They can’t see Mr. Comma. You’ve blinded them all from this world.

I don’t think we’re in Liberal, Kansas anymore—you know where Dorothy from the *Wizard of Oz* is from—because the crapper is about to get well ... crappier. Anyways, when I first came across you as a young child I didn’t even know you existed. I thought you were a myth but everyone kept telling me that you had some sort of magical effect on people and writing. Yet, with about 7,300,000,000 people in this world do you really expect me to believe that you can affect all of them. Pathetic Mr. Comma, just pathetic. Honestly, who in their right mind would use a line that’s curved in their writing? You make us stop, but *nooo* it’s not even a full stop. It’s a quick stop, a short stop—this isn’t baseball you know. Go back to the DMV and wait in those terrible lines, and maybe you’ll actually get your license to be a period. That’s right, a period. You should learn to drive the sentences more because a period does. Heck, your great Uncle Semicolon knows how to drive a sentence. Oh, did I say too much? Well suck it up!

I don’t understand you Mr. Comma. You either separate families or come in between something where you’re just not needed. You’re like a virus that places itself in an environment; no one wants to come near you. Maybe a better comparison is that one creepy door-to-door salesperson who just won’t leave unless you buy their broken product. You come in between words like “cat, dog, and bed” or in between two independent sentences like “he

understood commas, but hated them at the same time.” You place your little curves in between each words and sentences. You make a list that’s nice and orderly. Well Mr. Comma, what if they don’t want to be nice and orderly? Who are you, Jolly Old Saint Nicholas? Are you making your list, checking it twice, only to realize everyone is naughty and not nice? Did you come from a dysfunctional family? We have places you can go to get help. Hey, I don’t think you came from a dysfunctional family. You’re just plain evil. You make short sentences longer, long sentences even longer, and you make two sentences come together. Not only are you trying to separate families, but you’re forcing words, phrases, and sentences into arranged marriages. Well up yours Mr. Comma! You force two sentences into a marriage by adding your idiotic curve, then you drag a poor defenseless conjunction into the field. Those poor defenseless conjunctions, how dare you. No more Mr. Comma, no more.

You torture us Mr. Comma. We’re not at Guantanamo Bay! Quit drowning us; STOP WITH YOUR INHUMANE TREATMENT. We just want to stop and catch our breath for once. Your counterargument is that commas give us that pause. Does it really? Really Mr. Comma, does it? Picture this, in the real world people don’t stop at your designated times when they speak. When we speak from the heart Mr. Comma, we don’t stop. Imagine you’re on the podium giving an unprecedented speech. You have your speech in hand and ready to go, but of course since you’re a Department Head you’re probably great at public speaking, but even if you’re not let’s assume you are. You’re not

directly reading the speech. What does this mean Mr. Comma? It means you can pause whenever you want to without a damn comma to indicate the pause. That's the thing you don't need commas to tell yourself when to catch a breath, because you're not huffing and puffing, trying to blow a damn house down. You're speaking from the heart, speaking about something passionate, you're just speaking. Even if commas are present in the speech, you don't need them. Your ridiculous ideas are just ridiculous. You can't force your ideologies down our throats! That's right Mr. Comma, your comma usage is an ideology and I don't think other ideologues are going to like you.

Writing this letter, I suddenly realized that you deserve no place in history. And you certainly deserve no place in the writing process or the writing world. This is everyone's world, not just yours. Your kingdom will fall and you will crumble. *DOWN WITH COMMAS!*

Always Hating Your Guts,

Nick Lee

**BELINDA CELINA GARCIA  
HE CALLED ME FAT**



**THE VERNAL POOL  
ISSUE FOUR, SPRING 2016**

My little sister came from school  
with crestfallen cheeks  
and droopy eyes.  
No gummy giggles, no cookie cuddles,  
no sprinkled stories;  
nothing but bewildered hesitation.

After an hour  
I lifted her to her bed.  
She was as light as her empty smile.  
When she finally spoke, her words  
poured; and I was not prepared.

Among her six-year-old  
broken syllables  
I pieced the words  
*He-called-me-fat*  
and sunk in her sobs.

*He called me fat*  
acidly ran down my throat,  
*He called me fat*

clenched my lungs,  
*He called me fat*  
plucked my heartstrings.

But it wasn't the comment  
or the words; it was the sound.  
Her voice echoed a resounding  
familiarity that demanded instant comfort;  
so I fed her sweet compliments.  
I fed her flattery treats.

She smiled through her red eyes,  
but my candied compliments  
wouldn't last.

I knew because my mother fed me  
those same sweets when I clung to her.



**MONICA PERALES**  
**MY FATHER**



**THE VERNAL POOL**

**ISSUE FOUR, SPRING 2016**

## Getting juice

had never been a problem before.

My dad liked to spoil me and my mother,  
so the kitchen renovation landed us with two refrigerators.

One was inside, one was outside.

One was for food, one was for his juice.

It was easier for him to refill his cup while he was working.

It was harder for me to go outside for a cup of juice every day.

With my eyes on my ripped, stringy shoelaces covered in dirt,  
I went outside and grabbed the grimy door handle to the refrigerator.

I tried to keep my tangled hair in my face.

It was easier not to see.

I didn't see the vein bulging out of the skin on his neck  
when he screamed at my mother,

I didn't see the thick, angry shards of glass  
displayed almost artfully across the kitchen floor,

I didn't see the soft, long strands of my mother's hair  
wrapped around his arm,

or her legs thrashing wildly, desperately,  
as he dragged her to their bedroom . . .

Empty cup in hand,  
I lifted my head to find Agua de Sandia (watermelon flavored water):  
sweet, tangy, deep pink, disgusting.  
I rolled my eyes and saw something  
I shouldn't have.

A boy not that much older than me, maybe 16,  
my father standing in front of him with a grin of approval and respect  
and a gun that I had only seen in movies.

*Had it always been in the backyard --  
where I liked to watch my dad work?*

It took both hands to hold; the boy saw me and grinned.  
I almost cried for him.

My father looked up, and  
I lunged for the Agua de Sandia -- my favorite drink --  
in that moment.  
I returned to the large, gray couch in our living room,  
and pulled my knees up to my chin.

And it was on that dirty old couch a week later,  
that I was told to put shoes on and go outside by a police officer.  
My bother held our Rottweiler back by his silver choke chain.

I briefly wondered if they would find anything, but one look at my father and  
his kind, cooperative manipulation,  
And I knew -- they wouldn't find anything -- because  
I didn't see  
Anything.

**KENNEDY GLYN SMITH  
TWO POEMS**



**THE VERNAL POOL**

**ISSUE FOUR, SPRING 2015**

## **Door to the Ocean**

I found a door to the ocean.

The tall wood smelled of the sea.

The hole from which my eye had pressed  
sent salty water that raised my chest.

The waves that crash, burn, and swell  
repeat their cycle all too well.

I found the door to the ocean.

The tall wood smelled of the sea,

But I have yet to find the key.

## **Oil Painting**

Paint until the shadowy hours  
when blues and blacks fade.  
They say their prayers to die a little,  
as red takes the day.  
Draw the sun.  
Sketch the moon,  
Choosing colors to blur the two.  
Spill yellows of different hues.  
Smudge in the purest white.  
As we open eyes to morning light,  
try our hardest to recall,  
we have not painted a single color at all.

**MONICA PERALES**  
**161ST STREET**



**THE VERNAL POOL**  
**ISSUE FOUR, SPRING 2016**



My story begins with a small white two bedroom, one bath property with thick curtains that were never closed and a huge tree in the front yard, its branches twisting and hanging, untamed. It belonged to my grandparents. When I was four years old, my grandpa used to pick me up from school a few blocks away. He made me two boiled eggs and gave me an old man cookie that crumbled at the fingertips, tasted like butter, and came from a blue tin container. Then, he would sit on the couch protected with a plastic slip cover that squeaked whenever I tried to sit on it, across the dusty television set with crooked wires spewing out of the top, and hunch over an unfinished puzzle that was spread across his glass coffee table.

I would sit across him on rough red carpet with my legs in criss-cross apple sauce style and watch. When I would start telling him stories I made up, he would yell, "Cállate!" But, the only way I would stop was when he'd offer to let me help him with his puzzles.

Every so often I would start babbling again, but another, "Cállate!" and I would be quiet. It was on this same couch three years later that my grandpa passed away. At his funeral, in small heeled shoes, white floral socks that tickled my ankles and a braid that was wound so tight my head hurt, I refused to approach his shiny blue coffin that he was "sleeping" in. I was scared.

I moved into that house with my whole family-three brothers, one sister, and my parents-when I was in middle school. My dad put a green swing up with a rough yellow-brown rope that hurt my palms when I gripped it too tight. My brother got a pure bred Rottweiler for free-a gift from an acquaintance. The guy who gave it to him was sure he would be rewarded with acknowledgment when my brother got out of prison. What he didn't know was my brother was so deathly afraid of dogs that he kicked them out of spite with a grim face and bunched up eye

brows. So, it became my dog. I named him Monster. He had a MySpace page. He rarely updated his status.

In the front yard, my siblings got drunk and faded. They sat at a grimy white table that was so shaky, we were all prepared for it to collapse at any time in the pale brown dirt. It was always covered in cigarette butts, beer bottles, and bottle caps. It was even scratched up from keys and switchblades that belonged to my brothers and their friends.

In the back yard, my brother stood up all night with his friends. He lived in the back room that my father had built to connect to our house illegally. He sat on a scratched up white bucket with a flashlight and a half empty Corona with a lime slice shoved down the bottle at his side. In one hand, he had a disposable phone. In the other, he had a thick wad of cash that only ever grew until his wallet couldn't close. His friends leaned against the posts of that half constructed room, some lingered by my small curtain-less window. Not one dared to look in.

In the laundry room, a pathetic slab of concrete outside our creaky kitchen door, I helped my mom empty the clothes when she couldn't hold it all at once. She left the dryer door open one day, and it swung back and forth, banging and clanking against the spare pots and pans that were used to catch the streams of rain that escaped through the thin piece of wood that made up the ceiling. I reached in to check for calf high white socks and plaid boxers that she couldn't carry with the comforter. My fingers wrapped around something hard and long and cold. I put one hand on top of the gritty surface of the dryer and pulled with my bottom lip between two teeth. When I stood up, my arm was pulled down by a thick black gun. I put it back, and ducked into the hallway. My mom returned with the large white sheet from her bed, the edges stretching out from her arms, caressing her cheeks. When she came out of the laundry room, the sheet

was balled up in her hands. I took a step forward, but pulled back as I watched her rub the sides of the gun clean. I decided not to care because my fingerprints were gone.

In the kitchen, my mom made cakes while sobbing after a beating. She was barefoot, her small burgundy colored toe nails pressed against the grimy tiled floor that wasn't covered in thick shards of glass. Her legs had large red blotches and dirt filled scrapes. Her hair was curly and tangled, hanging in crumpled portions that my father had gripped and yanked. The dishes were overflowing from the sink, and the part of counter top she was leaning on had chips in the granite that wasn't covered in all his shit. Her arms shook as she took her fork and swirled the pink cake batter around in a deep yellow-green Tupperware bowl that had dents in it. Snot ran down her nose. She took shallow gasps of air. Her tears streamed down her face in large trails of sorrow. Low whimpers fell from her lips. She didn't look at me.

In the living room, I sat on a gray couch that sunk under my weight and smelled like my brother's hats-heavy cologne, sweat, and anger. I turned the page of the book in my lap and hummed without rhythm while my mother screamed at my father in their bedroom. He was supposed to go to prison today, which sucked. I hated when he left. He was lying down in calf high white socks, plaid shorts, and a blue muscle shirt I got him for his birthday. Something thudded, something else crashed. I hummed louder, turned another page. Their bedroom door swung in, and my father stomped out in his Nike's. He ran a dirty hand down his face, smoothing his mustache down. A tight lipped smile, a small wave at me, and a "Bye," echoed with care throughout the room. I waved. I said bye. That was the last time I ever wanted my father to come back home.

In the bathroom, I had to put my feet up against the wall when I went pee. My eyes darted back and forth on the rough

brown squares of tile that unevenly coated the floor. Large rats with long wiry tails poked their pointy noses out of small holes in the walls. Some squeaked in through the gaps of the large piece of wood that we dragged back and forth as a makeshift door to cover us from the view of the hallway. I started walking across the street to my Tía's every day at 6:30 in the morning to use her shower.

In my room, I slept under four blankets in a muscle shirt and sleeping shorts. I was woken up at 3:30 in the morning one night by my mother twisting my bent door knob and swinging the door open. I blinked at her. "Get up." I got up. She looked me up and down and shook her head. "Put some clothes on. There are four cop cars parked across the street. Fuckers are gonna raid us tonight." She left. I pulled pants and a sweater on. I could see my brothers running back and forth outside next to my window but I lay back on my bed, eyes on my bumpy ceiling, listening to a rat breathing heavily in my closet. I needed to be able to deny it. And if I didn't see anything, I could. The cops never raided. I never went back to sleep.

In the driveway, I sat in the backseat of my sister's car. My mom went in the house to go pee before we left. 10 minutes later, my sister ran in after her. 5 minutes later, my sister ran out and jumped over the rusty white steel fence. She turned to look back when she got across the street. My brother followed her with a gun kept low beside his jeans pocket. My legs got sweaty against the beige leather seats. He saw me. He came to my window and slammed the gun against the glass once. Twice. He stared at me. I stared back. He ran back in the house when a cop turned the corner, and my mom and sister ran to the car. We were gone before the cop could ask what had happened.

A week later, the S.W.A.T. team stormed my house. They took my dog. They took my brother. I never saw Monster again.

I have seen my brother exactly one time since then. I have seen the house multiple times. It is remodeled now, and the tree is gone, but when I look at it, I don't see what everyone else sees. I don't see the clean, freshly painted house with a white picket fence and a green front yard with pretty curtains hanging in the windows. I see a rusty old white gate that was permanently locked on one side, a tree that looked like it should have died with my grandfather, a front yard that was nothing but dirt. I see my bedroom door that was split in two, a large hole torn in the center, my books thrown on the floor, pages torn, my broken mirror, my mattress across the room, my clothes hanging from open drawers that the cops didn't bother to close. I see the boarded up windows, the crooked screens, the broken window panes. I see the wood door that smashed my finger and earned me two old man cookies when I was five left wide open from when the S.W.A.T. team threw a flashbang grenade to stun my brother for detainment. And sometimes, only sometimes, I see a younger version of myself standing in the window with tight clothes, thin eyebrows, large hoop earrings, and my hair cropped short, looking out, waiting, on 161st street.

