

Recent UHCWP Alumni on the Rise!

We love to celebrate the accomplishments of our literary family. Two former MFA students—**Conor Bracken** in Poetry, **Thea Lim** in Fiction—have recently raked in the accolades, complete with fancy publishing deals. We had a chance to talk them and see how their experiences at UH squared up.



Alumni Profile

Conor Bracken's (MFA Poetry, 2015) chapbook *Henry Kissinger, Mon Amour* was selected as winner of the 2017 Frost Place Chapbook Competition.

For how long did this manuscript percolate?

I started working on poems for something that looked like Henry about four years ago. As the son of a diplomat, I've had a weird taste in my mouth about US neo-imperialism and performances of masculinity since the early 90's.

Did you get support from specific people at UH?

From a lot of them, actually. I received encouragement from Kevin Prufer and Roberto Tejada on specific poems, and workshop comments from a slew of friends and workshop peers. Katie Condon, Austin Tremblay, and Kalen Rowe were instrumental in a lot of big tinkers.

What was your favorite part of being the poetry editor at *Gulf Coast*?

The power trip, obviously. No, not really. My favorite part (which is hard to locate, there's so much about GC to love and be awed by) was the community of it: spending time with thoughtful, humorous people really taking apart incredible poems to see how they work. It was like being with a bunch of Swiss watchmakers, but with kolaches and ink.

If Henry Kissinger was a dog, which kind would he be?

The dog days of summer. Henry's more of a mood, a pall swinging slow over the horizon, than a thing with legs (unless it's a bipod).

A Short History Of Operation Condor

Previously, on "Days of my Sphere of Imperial Influence" I was necking with Henry Kissinger. We were standing on the roof of a teetering glass building in which two thousand companies daily outdid each other in bilking the system that protected them from the masses we could see from our perch setting little fires on the serrated green horizon.

We fed each other delicacies with dirty hands—
dulce de leche under our nails, beefy
sinews between our teeth. We flossed
with the flags of every country but our own.
We bought islands we couldn't even stripmine.
We were white and alive and in love
with the little pulse in each other's wrist
that went give and take and give and take
and take take take take take take take. Take
my hand, said Henry. He was standing
on the grey parapet of my soul. I couldn't tell
if the heat I felt was the chlorine he'd poured
into my ditchwater eyes or the masses
combining their cookfires. I gave him my hand
and from each of the fingers he lopped off
with a damascene machete sprang
a smaller, whiter, shrieking hand.
They latched onto his and there we were:
together, doing what I called falling.
What he called curbstomping air.

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UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON

CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAM



Alumni Profile

Thea Lim's (MFA fiction, 2012) novel, *An Ocean of Minutes* is forthcoming from Touchstone / Simon & Schuster in Summer 2018.

For how long did this novel percolate?

Emotionally, 500 years. In actuality, six years.

Did you get support from specific people at UH?

This novel wouldn't exist without Mat Johnson, who was my thesis director, and who—either out of extreme generosity or madness—kept supporting me even after I graduated. Mat read new drafts, he Skyped with me, and he met with me whenever we were in the same place. It's hard to keep producing work once you're out of an MFA program and living without that shared belief in the impossible. The fact that Mat stuck with me kept the project alive. I've offered him my firstborn in exchange, but apparently he already has enough children. As if the luck of connecting with Mat wasn't enough, I still have notes and advice from Robert Boswell pinned to the wall next to my desk; they were trusty companions all the way through. And the first people to lay eyes on (a very early half-baked version of) the novel were Chitra Divakaruni and my workshop mates in her class. Their ideas shaped my direction in ways that still live on in the story, even after twenty-odd drafts.

What was your favorite part of being the nonfiction editor at *Gulf Coast*?

There's something heartening about being able to offer other writers publication, while you're struggling yourself to produce work fit for human consumption. We published some amazing essays, like Kristen Radtke's "A History of Rock" and Stephanie Harrison's "Toadal Chaos," that I still return to today, when I'm trying to work out storytelling problems. And it was such a thrill to work with all my co-editors: Jessica Wilbanks, Jameelah Lang, and Meggie Monahan.

What's noteworthy about Galveston in 1993?

My novel is set in an alternate past: in 1993 Galveston is being rebuilt as the new Acapulco by a migrant workforce trucked in from the past, after a pandemic lays waste to the South. But I was drawn to the Galveston of this universe as a setting, because it's such an evocative place. It's the edge of Texas, of America, and it smells like the inside of a seashell. The red rocks along the sea wall, those porches with blue-painted ceilings to ward off the haint, and that ferris wheel suspended right over the Gulf, hurricane belt be damned.

From *An Ocean Of Minutes*

September 1981

People wishing to time travel go to Houston Intercontinental Airport. At the orientation, the staff tell them that time travel is just like air travel, you even go to the same facility. People used to be apprehensive about airline travel too. But when you arrive at the airport, it is not the same at all. Before you can get within a mile of the terminals, you reach a bus stop moored at the edge of a vast concrete flat, where you must leave your vehicle and ascend a snaking trolley, like the ones they have at the zoo.

A quarantine taxi makes its way to that lone bus stop, the airport appearing through a million chain-link diamonds. The driver is encased in an oval of hermetically sealed Plexiglas. In the back seat, Frank is wearing a yellow hazmat suit. The colour marks him as infected.

Now is the time for last words, but Polly's got nothing. Frank keeps nodding off and then snapping awake, stiff-spined with terror, until he can locate her beside him. "We can still go back!" He has been saying this for days. Even in his sleep he carries on this argument, and when he opens his eyes, he moves seamlessly from a dream fight to a waking one. Already his voice is far off, sealed away inside his suit.

She pulls his forehead to her cheek, but his mask stops her short. They can only get within three inches of each other. The suit rubs against the vinyl car seat and makes a funny, crude noise, but they don't laugh. Polly would like to breathe in the smell of Frank's skin one last time, a smell like salt cut with something sweet, like when it rains in the city. But all she gets is the dry smell of plastic.

Should you have queries or wish to support the CWP: cwp@uh.edu