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WE LIVE THROUGH TIME

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WE LIVE THROUGH TIME

Ryan O'Malley



I

Pinching a new coin stamped *1988*, I thought I could bargain with time. I whispered into it like a spell—*make July last forever*. And summer replied: if I gave myself to it, I'd always bear the ache of how fleeting it was. But for a Wyoming child of the high plains desert, three months of miracles could cure a restless heart. Maybe slashing hail would flood the dry creekbed at the end of my street, the deep hum of rapids summoning a rift between worlds.

I took summer's offer and jumped straight through, found myself pressed against the earth, carving my name into bald sandstone with bottleglass shattered by someone's old gun. I paced thin dirt-bike trails stitched with antelope tracks. Past the smiling heap of poached coyotes, past scraps of burned pornography in a kicked-over pit. All hidden from the highway among the tall silver sage. Its wet leaves perfuming the meadowlark's song, its clawing underbrush cloaking a coiled threat.

But no strike would follow, just a copy without the bite. There weren't any rattlesnakes up here. That was something to know at nine years old when sticking hands under every rock, climbing the bones of half-built houses, running home at full speed when mom's yell carried a short mile—always a pitch that meant *dinner* and *trouble*.

But that brittle rasp of insect wings stole my attention, *ripping and ripping and ripping* as it leapt to evade, like a yellow paper sun torn repeatedly in two. I matched its rhythm and quickly caught up. Now kicking and spitting tobacco juice in my palm; now dropped in a mason jar in the back of the garage. With a stick. Some plucked up lawn. Holes hammered in the lid with a ten-penny nail.

By morning I imagined myself as the grasshopper. A wonder kept too long, trapped in the simulation, breathing air fermented by the contour of the glass. So, we returned to our dusty gullies and golden frontiers, where the breeze carried a somber urgency—*run now while you can*. Because winter would soon turn the sun inside out, with a wind as cold and certain as Jupiter's eye. But summer stretched wide and boundless, forever changing shape. Always leaping forward, never landing long.



II

I entered college thinking summer would honour our deal, but it led me to South Dakota without mention. It wore another face, unfamiliar to the changing shape of my own. Its breath was damp in my clothes, murmuring promises of awe cloaked in heat.

I crossed where the Missouri River split the mountains from Midwest, an ice-carved line of force and withdrawal. It moved without hurry—stretching, yawning, rolling lazily over. I stomped its

undercut walls until they crumbled into shallows, balanced on half-submerged trees rocking on a snag, swam until I felt the pull of deep hidden currents, and buried my hands in ever shifting sand.

Seasons ran parallel across this snaking divide, but the eastern bank practiced a different magic: *every pressure to the earth would be answered above*. I saw a neon wake behind a rock thrown sidearm from the heavens, saw a hundred different sunsets sinking low and brimming red. I watched silken haze lift off seas of corn in the first light of the morning—to tower, crack and topple on the stillness of evening, wrapping twilight in heavy blankets of rain.

Then fall swung low like a sickle, bleeding trees of gold and vermillion, and threshing starved grasshoppers from parched and twisted stalks. A blizzard could follow without a hint of warning—violet lightning rupturing the blackest pitch of night. It would set winter into grey oblivion, where snow compressed to stone under immovable shadows and days would slowly forget their names. When spring parted lips to call them back, it did so with a bellow—that would set sirens wailing and shake branches from trees and tear farmland into dark spiraling clouds.

I learned to see these moments as form freed from surface, brought into being by taking something away. The matrix as a body etched, held and surrendered. The print not a clean reflection, but a spirit altered and returned.





III

Pressure and time creased two decades of teaching, with printmaking the alchemy of catch and release. Elements extracted from the ground are placed in the jar; transformed then freed back into the field, never to inhabit their original shape. I was allowed to keep summer in exchange for my lessons, now by contract, updated each spring. Signed, numbered and archived for the next twenty years—grasshoppers chewing along the margins.

I saw one skim the chromatic film of a foreign canal; another alight on my silver wedding band. Here crushed in my teeth with lime, smoke and ash; there hitting windshields speeding towards the ends of the map. Most often they cling high on spiced dune grass; bracing the tides on the south Texas shores. Or flushed, maimed and feverish by the blade of my mower, snatched up by grackles well-versed in my back-and-forth path.

I was warned this would all be fleeting, but I took summer's pact and ran—until distance lost all measure, until it was harder to hear that rattle in the brush. Months pile up and patterns repeat—June a gesture, July overlaid, August always misaligned. Repetition can leave an acrid taste; the insect disappeared from my hands.

Attending the loss of that contact and pressure, remnants of touch and release now obscured; in storm and in stillness, I turn to my lover—with ripples of togetherness drawing silt around our heels. We took a year to hold wonder between us and pondered time from the universe to the exhale of a breath. She drew ethereal pictures of expanding moments, while I carved an image from one block, with all the ages compressed.



IV

I imagined myself an all-mighty creator, able to give life to a flat formless world. I gouged plywood like wind cutting high desert prairies, like glaciers dividing alluvial fields. I reduced peaks, bluffs and canyons from buff-coloured badlands; each mark passed a season, each impression an era, every layer an eon delivered without name.

I focused on the power to turn paper to prism; beauty compacted under the pressure of my hand. Pulled from the block, the ink fractured light into pieces—hues cast from the surface of eroding plateaus. Set free of the strata, an image climbed from the horizon: legs kicking beneath patterned tagmata, antennae transmitting beyond knowable scale. I heard a promise echo through tessellated wings—multiplying and vibrating a familiar refrain.

We rose from the heat of the southern gulf border and floated above the great southern plains; glanced over pale ridges of snowy range summits, held aloft by winds of corporeality. We touched cerulean reflections of north coastal tidepools and flooded the creekbed with memory, drifting between transitional spaces; all possibilities embodied and dreamed.

We crossed the Pacific to arrive at Otago, along a pathway from the sea of impossible green. Here my eyes mistook Maungatua for Elk Mountain, who bends a Wyoming highway on an analogous plane. Overhead, an expanse of unfamiliar constellations, an inverted season, another mirrored world. I folded my grasshopper, turned it back to paper and glued it to a wall in a Vitruvian embrace. I left it to fade slowly in the mystery of ages, soon to leave nothing but hints of colour and a trace.



Ryan O'Malley is Professor of Art and Head of Printmaking at Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi, where he also serves as Graduate Coordinator. He earned a BFA from the University of South Dakota (2002) and an MFA from Louisiana State University (2005). With nearly 30 years as a printmaker and 20 as an educator, his work has been featured in numerous exhibitions, publications, and collections worldwide, including shows across the Americas, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. He is a frequent visiting artist at national and international institutions and is cited in *Printmaking: A Complete Guide to Materials and Process* (2nd ed.) by Fick and Grabowski.

This essay is based on his reduction woodcut, *…shaped by the will of the Universe*, his contribution to an evolving exhibition of works with his wife Cassie Normandy White entitled, *We live through time*.

He was an artist in residence at the Dunedin School of Art in May of 2025.