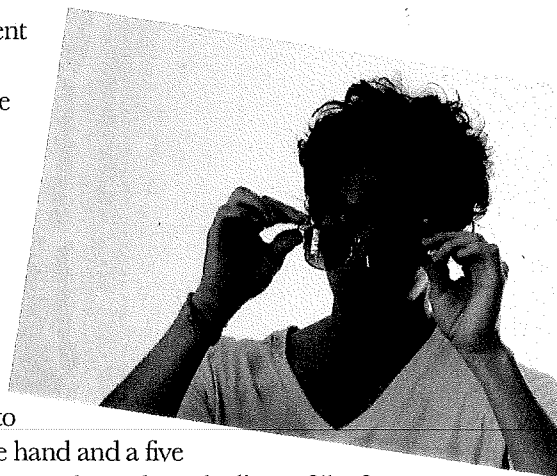


The Jimmy Gauntt Memorial Award

ANDREW RAMIREZ

2012 Award Recipient

What I remember most about my first year at USC was that I went into it with a lot of big and completely unreasonable plans. I had been informed by one campus tour guide or another that over the course of their undergraduate career, the average undergrad changes his or her major six-point-seven times. So there had to be something seriously stable about me then, right?—whose plan it was to be a full-blown English/Creative Writing major all four years running, writing that coming-of-age novel in between papers and required reading sometime by his sophomore year, publishing it somewhere inside senior year, and then it'd be easy, real easy—freaking *downhill*—as I would go on to garner any and all major critical recognition leading up to the weeks before graduation, cockily exiting USC, diploma in one hand and a five book contract with Knopf in the other—a hardback book jacket somewhere along the lines of “enfant terrible!”; “startling new voice...”; “[Ramirez is] a special kind of writer whose extraordinary talent may only be exceeded by a freakish potential.”



But then four years passed and so did none of that. Although I did manage to graduate, and before that, my sophomore year, managed a writing fellowship (greatly due to the razor sharp suggestions of my faculty mentor Dana Johnson—“I’m thinking maybe you *shouldn’t* use the f-word in your written proposal?”) and went home to El Paso, Texas to write that extra-special novel. But it was somewhere around that time, over the summer, that a few loose screws presented themselves and the wheels on the bus started to wobble. According to the *plan*, by the start of junior year I was supposed to be shopping that novel around to various major publishing houses—or at the very least be PRI-T damn close to being finished writing it. Instead, this is what I was: a twenty-year-old college junior with a half-done novel (and really you couldn’t call that first half *done* either), no idea what to do with it when (or if) I finished, and real bad constant headache. My girlfriend of the time (she was a beautiful girl who did one or two commercials for a Mexican TV station) had called it off two weeks before summer ended. And I knew it was because I had one hundred percent deteriorated into an anxious mess of stutters. I couldn’t focus on anything except how bad I was doing at everything. I probably came off as manic to the girlfriend (plus her father semi-hated me because I couldn’t speak Spanish), was way over-extended on the novel (I think I had just read Yates’ *Revolutionary Road* and I might have been going for something like that), and the next thing I knew I was staring out a window thirty-five thousand feet up on a plane back to L.A.—summer all worn out, over and done with, capiche—looking like the hunchback of Notre Dame with my overstuffed carryon slung over one shoulder but feeling even worse with that even uglier sense of defeat pushing like two invisible fingers at each temple. Even worse was that statistic ringing in my ears, spoken by the same high-pitched, pumped-up USC student tour guide whose face I’d lost the visual on but whose voice I’d been doomed to eternity with. Six-point-seven times! Six-point-seven times I was reassured I’d change my mind. Six-point-seven opportunities to try a new direction, draw a new line, restart some failed attempt and trade that old path for a new one. Shit, it occurred to me two years too late what college was all about. Exploration. Discovery. Go ahead and make a fool out of yourself with that Fine Arts/Theatre double major. Try your hand at computer science. That’s what the window of opportunity was there for, certainly, but had *my* window of opportunity—knee-deep into two years’ worth of college—shrunk down past the point of anything I could fit through? And had I really been stupid enough to let it diminish? Let it go from a window to something like a peephole, and now what else was there to do but touch an eye to the cold glass and see some fish-eyed possibility of what could have been?

Quarter life crisis #1: The road had officially narrowed. The life trajectory had officially not gone to plan. No one at the *New Yorker* even knew my name yet. So I did what any genius English major would do in a moment of utter crisis. I added a journalism minor.

And then junior year: real life drawing closer. That chunk of a novel collecting a second skin of dust in the hard drive. I applied for an advanced fiction workshop and didn't get in. Applied for a second writing fellowship and didn't get it, and instead, by the start of summer, found myself sailing over a big sheet of the Atlantic for a poetry maymester course in Paris. There, I tried a few different things out: tried my hand at Parisian brooding and over-intensity. Smoked too many Camels on the balcony. Felt equal parts encouraged and depressed in the late evening. Managed both profound inspiration and disheartenment in the same twenty-four hour period. Never got my hands on any authentic absinthe. Rode the metro at all hours of the night. Hummed the melody of "Break on Through" over the lizard king's modest grave at Père Lachaise. Got familiar with the open container policy. Took in some live jazz in an alleyway. Recited poetry by Denis Johnson at an open mike in Belleville. Felt truly romantic at an English pub in the sixth district. Felt truly artistic one morning with an espresso and a cigarette smoldering in an ashtray. Fell in love nine different times with nine different women in a single afternoon overlooking the Seine, but ultimately decided to go all in for a dark-haired American who worked at a bar. Read some Bukowski. Flicked more cigarettes over the balcony. Witnessed my heart stomped into umpteenth submission the night the bartender and I took two separate cabs home. More cigarettes over the balcony. Several museums but the sewer museum left the biggest impression. The idea of staying in Paris. The idea of Mont Saint-Michel. The idea of Versailles, Normandy, the June fourth D-Day anniversary and red light district's very own Dirty Dix, all wrapped into one. Another big plane filled with people. An intercom telling me something. That big ocean. Smoking in the glass encased smoking lounge at the airport in Washington Dulles. Staring through a tiny window all the way back down to where I came from.

But the fact that all of this led to an award is what really throws me for a loop—as if I'm being awarded for being a mess. And that out of all the truly brilliant English majors and all the truly brilliant words they'll write (half of which I'll have to look up) the honor has been somehow lost in the mail and dropped at my doorstep. I'll tell you this: I'm two parts immensely grateful and one part still trying to figure it all out. And now that I'm freshly graduated, there's still a big chunk missing from this story—what happened to senior year?—but I like it that way. I'm not going to rush it because I've got to take my time and I've never been very effective immediately after the fact anyway. Too recent is too difficult a thing for me and if something just happened, if senior year just happened, I'm more likely going to be caught playing catch-up than seen reveling in the "accomplishment." Like some incompetent archaeologist sweating over a huge taped-off sandbox, I'm just trying to piece together this rattle of bones into a feasible shape. I mean: What the hell is any of this anyway? All these voices going: senior year? What's next Mr. Ramirez? So you actually *still* want to be a writer, ey? Well, the way I see it, after spending four years at U.S.C., I'm most recently spending a couple hours at T.H.E.B.U.R.G.E.R.K.I.N.G.B.Y.M.Y.A.P.A.R.T.M.E.N.T., jotting notes for this very profile piece and noticing all the rest of the people that get here this early. A few construction workers. A couple kids gnawing at their breakfast sandwiches while mom stares motionlessly into a cup of coffee like there's a movie playing somewhere in there. Then there's the staff people with the nametags pinned on them. A mop making rounds on the tile floor. And at the very back, a regular looking guy in a blue shirt with his back turned to me, maybe a little lonely, maybe not, only when he turns, I swear, it's like his face was pared into eights and put back together all wrong, completely disfigured, and you wouldn't have ever known it if you only saw the back of his head for the rest of your life because he's got this baseball cap on and a thick head of black hair underneath, but my God, catch one glimpse of him and his one eye, all the rest of him covered in *The Hills Have Eyes* bulges and lumps of skin, all of it amazing, though, really, when the little bell tinks on the door and a young girl, can't be more than fifteen or sixteen, walks in with black hair down to her waist and she's got this searching look on her face, moving her eyes over the cafeteria, looking for something, I can't tell what, and then she happens to notice the same guy with the scary face, and she reacts, only I'm waiting for her to start screaming or something, run out of the place in total horror, and you know what she does? Instead she turns the lights way up with this thousand kilowatt smile and walks up to the man in the blue shirt and hugs him, I'm not kidding, puts both her hands in both his hands and starts talking to him, calling him father and he's calling her mija and not one person—not mom or the kids or the workers or the construction guys—seems to care when Beauty and the Beast get up and order a tray of food, that ugly monster face on full display, and maybe it's because it's only me that it matters to, my God maybe I'm the only one that cares because deep down I'm still hoping something else is coming through that door looking for me, and in the meantime, so what? I'm just having a real good time watching everyone else get at their burgers. ●

The Jimmy Gauntt Memorial Award

DIANA VADEN

2012 Award Recipient

If you had asked me four years ago if I considered myself a writer, I would have chuckled and looked at you sideways. *Me, a writer?* Don't get me wrong, I have always been a creative person — art is what I was and am still drawn to. I am passionate about storytelling but I had only tapped into that passion through theatre and dance. The idea of attempting to capture moments of the complex and brilliant human spirit through language and the written word was downright daunting. I was in need of some serious prompting in order to believe I could ever find a voice through writing.



Then freshman year rolled around and I found myself face to face with Professor Michelle Gordon in her office after a conference for my Arts and Letters course. And she said, “You really should consider English as one of your majors, Diana.” In that moment, neither chuckle nor sideways glance could refute that fact that she saw the potential in me that I was too afraid to recognize. She called my bluff and for that I am extremely thankful.

Ever since I took her advice, I've discovered that writing was a whole new playground for my expressive energy. Writing has allowed me to harness this creative sensation that I can only describe as a *rattling of the soul inside your bones*. The breakthrough happened during my second trip to Paris for the Maymester Poetry workshop with Professor Cecilia Woloch. On the first day of that trip, I sat in the taxi cab and it seemed as if the city rose up from the ground as a monument distantly painted in my memory. As I peered out of the window, I saw on my left the red windmill of La Moulin Rouge. Then we turned *a la gauche*...it was the street. Rue Lepic. The same street I had walked down during my first trip to Paris just before my freshman year of college. That descent from la Sacré-Coeur to the red-light district had inspired my first short story “Falling in Love with the Libertine Circus” in which I grappled with all of my burning questions about faith and the loss of innocence. And there I was four years later on that same street. For four weeks, I looked from a Montmartre apartment window down at Rue Lepic, being inspired to write some of my best poetry. It was no coincidence. I felt a sense of reassurance — *this is what you are meant to do*.

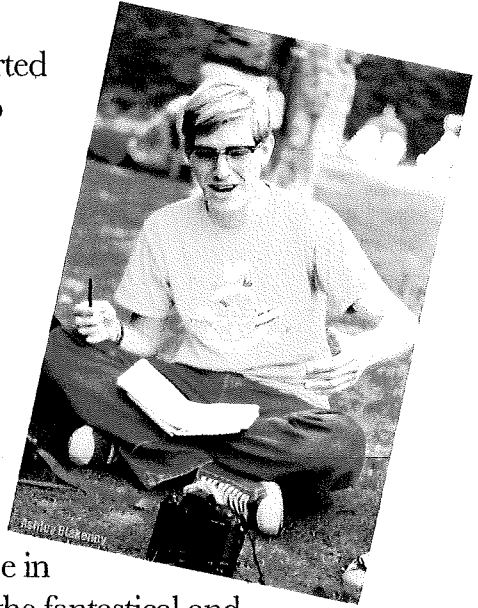
If I learned nothing else these past four years, I learned to never ignore those perfect promptings and that rattling inside my bones. Thank goodness I listened to Professor Gordon. I would have missed out on the most incredible soul-rattling experience. Now I'm determined to extend that experience into the *real world* — creating, writing, acting, and dancing like crazy — living as a starving artist in Los Angeles. As other artists can attest: when art is what I do, what else would you expect?

The Jimmy Gauntt Memorial Award

BILLY YOUNGBLOOD

2012 Award Recipient

I suppose I've been writing all my life. The process really started with my parents teaching me to read, and then proceeded to school recesses where I'd eschew the normal games and activities to craft and act out narratives of space battles and superheroes entirely within the confines of my own mind. Eventually I did get stuff on paper. Memorable early projects included an aborted attempt to adapt the board game risk into a novel, a grisly three-page account of the entire European Campaign from D-Day to Hitler's Bunker, and a frankly inane story about a bland office worker gaining superpowers from Krazy Glue.



For better or for worse, this kind of oddness has stuck with me in my fiction and my poetry. I've always been enamored with the fantastical and the strange. That's not to say I'm not trying to be serious, rather I think that, done properly, there's as much to be said about human nature in a story about Teddy Roosevelt encountering primal gods while on safari as there is in a story about a midlife crisis.

It's strange for me to think that my journey to a school like USC started with me running around on a playground making sound effects and waving my arms like an X-Wing. And yes, it took a somewhat improbable chain of events, including both my being practically press-ganged into declaring a major in creative writing at my first school, The University of Pittsburgh at Bradford, and nearly succumbing to a mysterious illness, for me to get to USC, but I'm not sure I'd have it any other way, because I feel profoundly lucky to be here. Many of my classmates and friends are writing some of the most amazing stuff I've ever read, and the teachers are all incredible and passionate about their work.

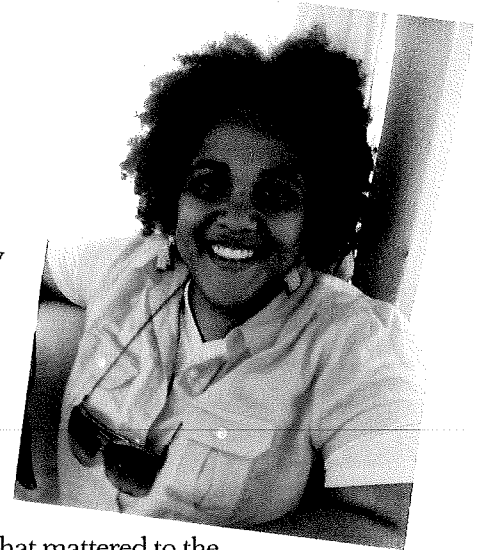
I'm hard-pressed to think of another undergraduate environment where I'd be happier. I've seen a single word choice in a student's story turn into a twenty minute discussion on psychological motivation. I've seen people experiment with form in ways I've never seen. I've worked tirelessly with friends to help establish a new literary magazine to publish student work. I've been inspired to write things I never would've thought myself capable of just a few years ago. I know a lot of people who are hesitant to commit to the idea of writing as an end in itself. Until recently I was one of them. But why not? I'm going to be a writer. I can't see myself being happy doing anything else. ●

The Jimmy Gauntt Memorial Award

SYDNI CHILES

2012 Award Recipient

Somehow, without knowing anything about architecture, computer imaging, or technical drafting, I managed to weasel my way into the University of Southern California's School of Architecture with a portfolio full of paintings, photographs, cartoon drawings, and poems. When I finally gathered the courage to share my portfolio with other students in my year, I was embarrassed by my lack of expertise and knowledge of the field. My peers dealt me a first taste of the reality of my ignorance and generally debilitating aloneness. Along with being accepted to the university, I was offered a Presidential scholarship that paid for all of my expenses and left me with a 3000-dollar refund at the end of the year. My mom thought that I was blessed with a fortune but I agreed with my peers: I didn't deserve it. When I graduated from high school I was number five in my class, graduating with honors and an international diploma. I had enough credits to start college at a sophomore level in science, math, and English. Unfortunately, none of that mattered to the school of architecture. None of my hard work had been transferred and none of my integrity as a student seemed to be translating either. I suddenly found myself trying to accomplish tasks that I didn't even have a foundation to understand. It was like jumping into the middle of the ocean without even knowing how to float. There was no time for me to relax. To stretch the analogy a bit further, I felt that I was swimming frantically in search of shore or shallow water, yet always swimming further out and finding it increasingly difficult to breathe. By the end of my second year, I had become a less than mediocre student. I lost my scholarship. I also lost faith in my life and my ability to succeed. I had an internship the following summer in Los Angeles. I was good enough at performing my tasks but I was unhappy and it showed all over my face and through my body language. A month into the job, my closest and most misunderstood cousin died. He was involved in a car accident on his way, walking, to buy a pack of cigarettes from the gas station. The road was dark and the driver was drunk. He may have been killed instantly and I sure hope so because the driver fled the scene and just moments later, another driver hit his body and dragged it about 100 feet before it was loosed from the truck. The news of my cousin was shattering. I quit my job and went back to Chicago. Once there, I sank into the lowest, most desperate depression of my life. I felt like rotting, fermented meat. At the start of my third year at University of Southern California, I was a body with a blank presence sitting in architecture studio. After failing to complete the first two assignments, my teacher told me that I should consider "wasting someone else's time." I stood up from his garlic breath and walked out of studio and into the crisis counselor's office on campus. She helped me realize that I was missing one component in my life that had always brought me comfort, peace, and understanding of the world: literature. Although I couldn't make it a major, I took on a creative writing minor and instantly felt its embrace, forging a community that I've come to rely on. Suddenly campus was alive with fantasy and material on which to write. Classes were no less hard but I was getting A's. I started to expand my mind with poems, musicals, plays, novels, and just about anything I could get in my hands. I don't know why I majored in architecture, but I know I needed the English department to unleash my passion. I am a thinker. I am an artist. I am a writer. For the rest of my life, no matter what I am, I will be changing the world through the literary arts. Much like Professor David Román, I believe small things like toolboxes can yield huge things like cityscapes. Five years ago, it wasn't in my plan, but here I am living in Los Angeles: writing a collection of poems about my cousin and soon to be a teacher to 7th grade students with Individualized Education Plans.



The Jimmy Gauntt Memorial Award

JULIA COOPERMAN

2012 Award Recipient

I entered the University of Southern California as a Neuroscience major, convinced that my interest in writing would only narrow my career options and isolate me from the social goings-on of undergrad. You probably know where this is going - "how wrong I was," et cetera. But after a childhood spent working on a Windows '95 PC with no dial-up connection, writing really did seem like an insular, hopeless hobby to me. What's more, I felt I had no right to call myself a writer. Barely published, with a healthy fear of workshops, I had yet to earn the title that the great authors I loved had worn with pride.



In spite of my neurotic fears, the siren song of the humanities proved irresistible. After a semester of struggling in biology classes, I gave up the study of brains, switched to English, and put my own gray matter to work. Joining the English department was one of the biggest and best decisions of my undergraduate career. In class, I read beloved (and not-yet-beloved, and not-so-beloved) texts and came up with punny titles for term papers. Outside of the classroom, I joined writing circles like The Loudest Voice, participated in and moderated discussions at the Undergraduate Writers' Conference, and became a co-president of the USC chapter of the Sigma Tau Delta English Honor Society. In my senior year, I completed an honors thesis on the chaperone in the late Victorian novel (think Maggie Smith) under the supervision of the incredible Dr. Kate Flint, and shared my work with T.C. Boyle's advanced writing workshop. I graduated in the spring with a new confidence in my writing and critical thinking abilities, as well as an unforgettable community of friends, drinking buddies, and mentors.

In the year ahead, I will lead a double life: Hollywood assistant by day, bleary-eyed writer by night. The following fall, I hope to attend graduate school in the United Kingdom, where I will probably study more literature and try out the whole 'expat American writer' thing. What comes next? Possibly a career in writing for TV and film, with a little bit of prose on the side - though you'll have to stay tuned to find out for sure. In the meantime, I will be proud to tell people I am an aspiring writer; I finally feel like I have earned the title.

The Jimmy Gauntt Memorial Award

AISHLIN CORTELL

2012 Award Recipient

When I was sixteen I left my hometown in rural upstate New York to study Creative Writing in Los Angeles, at USC. Even as living in LA gave me more inspiration for stories, my studies drew me away from creative writing and towards literary criticism and analysis. In my sophomore year, I took a general education class on Japanese literature and popular culture, taught by Anne McKnight (then part of USC's East Asian Languages and Cultures faculty). Professor McKnight encouraged me to read academic literary criticism and critical theory for the first time, and I found that this reading opened up exciting new ways of thinking for me. By the end of my sophomore year, I had changed from a Creative Writing major who resented having to take literature classes to a double major in English Literature and East Asian Languages and Cultures.



In my junior year, I studied abroad at Waseda University in Tokyo. While there, I stumbled across a group of inter-related topics that have fascinated me since and which I hope to go on to study in graduate school. All are part of what could be called Japanese 'girls' culture': light novels popular in girls' schools in the period before WWII, florid girls' comics from the 1970s, and an all-female musical theater called the Takarazuka Revue, which was founded in 1914 and is still going strong today. These art forms grew out of one another over the course of the past century and have occupied strange and contradictory positions in Japan, balanced precariously between mainstream acceptance and affiliation with marginalized subcultures. I plan to go on to a PhD program in Japanese Studies or Comparative Literature after spending another year or two teaching English in Japan, and hope that then I will have a chance to study the interactions between girls' novels, comics, and theater in more depth.

As an English major with an interest in non-literary arts, I'm grateful to see breadth of interests acknowledged in the JIMMY award. Seeing the impressive accomplishments of other award recipients and the alumnus in whose memory the award exists, I'm surprised and deeply honored to be among them. The JIMMY award also means a lot to me because it recognizes the importance of mentor relationships between faculty and undergraduates. After returning to USC for my senior year, I had the chance to take a class with one of my scholarly heroes, Professor Tania Modleski, who challenged me to pursue difficult and complex textual readings, and I completed a senior thesis under the infinitely generous and patient supervision of Professor Joseph Boone. It's clear to me that having supportive faculty mentors is the most important factor in academic success. Sitting down to dinner with the professors who guided me through my time as an undergraduate, my fellow students and their professors, and Jimmy Gauntt's parents at the JIMMY award dinner was one of the most emotional experiences I've had at USC and made me proud to be an English major. ●